

The green whistleblower



Wied il-Ghasel - despite claims by the advocates of the SME park that it has been damaged by industrial activity, the soil in what supposedly is the Burmarrad Country Park is highly fertile. More countryside down the drain?

The proposed SME park at Burmarrad would be an industrial park in the middle of vintage agricultural land.

I start this article with news of a further sacrificing of massive parcels of land through the SMEs (Micro Enterprises) Site Selection Exercise jointly conducted by MEPA and the government through the Parliamentary Secretary for Economic Services.

Through such an exercise, MEPA has earmarked over 282,000 m2 of land for such a development, aimed at creating enough industrial land to meet demand of many self-employed, lowering both the price of land and rent.

The story starts to get pear-shaped when one delves behind the headlines. Some 75,810 (or roughly 25 per cent) of all the land allocated for such SMEs will be carved out of arable land at T'Alla u Ommu, l/o Burmarrad, where the entire site has been peppered in the past five years with no fewer than 21 enforcement notices issued to check illegal extensions to batching plants, quarrying activities, etc.

Rather than mitigating the planning blunders of the past, where batching plants and boatyards were allowed to coexist with vineyards, the authorities now want to rubber-stamp a development which will further damage the valley (ironically called Wied il-Ghasel - a more appropriate name would be Wied l-Industrija).

In addition, if such proposals become a reality, this would be another shaming act for our enforcement machine, unable to enforce its will at Wied il-Ghasel and now having to savour the prospects of the Structure Plan, which had rightly labelled the land as forming part of the Burmarrad Country Park, being modified and tailor-made to suit those who flouted the law in the first place. This is truly a case of history turning 360 degrees when one also considers the Armier boathouses case.

Why bother then to meticulously revise the Structure Plan if it can be bypassed at the drop of a hat? The Parliamentary Secretary for Economic Services, Edwin Vassallo, justifies his proposals on numerous counts. Firstly, he claims that such SME zones are necessary since their operators, such as carpenters, mechanics, etc., must be sufficiently close to residential areas to be viable and that our North-West, North Harbours and Grand Harbour areas are deficient in such SMEs.

What rationale is there behind spreading industrial activity all around Malta rather than concentrating it in already urbanised areas? Do SME operators find it such an insurmountable hurdle to travel a few kilometres to work? (and after all, where in Malta is far from residential areas?)

Secondly, Mr Vassallo claims that the soil at Burmarrad is already compromised due to industrial activity, while independent analysis conducted at the laboratories of the Agriculture Department revealed a high phosphate content, a hallmark of a highly fertile soil. The proposed SME park would also impinge negatively on the Victoria Lines which dominate the skyline.

The SME proposals come against the backdrop of 30 per cent of our 14 industrial parks being vacant. This figure from the State of the Environment Report 2002 (which, if such proposals are accepted, would also become redundant like the Structure Plan) is highlighting the dire need to use our land resources more effectively.

With applications for 41 new hotels in the pipeline, with the highest level of urbanisation in Europe (a staggering 25 per cent compared to an EU average of 6-7 per cent), with an abnormally high population density and a healthy birth rate, we should be racking our brains on how we can fill every vacant nook and cranny on this island in the most efficient way possible.

Despite my criticism of the SME proposals for Burmarrad, I express my wholehearted support for economic initiative in this country and endorse plans to help SME operators. However, such economic initiatives should not come at the expense of our land resources and natural environment - the planned SMEs can easily be located in one of our industrial parks, which range from Hal Far to Xewkija in Gozo.

In this way, the government's efforts to promote sustainable development in our islands could also be embraced. One may rebut that SMEs are not compatible with the large enterprises (under the Malta Development Corporation) located within our industrial parks. So why not allocate areas within our same industrial parks which are tailor-made for SMEs (a sort of micropark system)?

Golden Bay Internet Café saga revisited

The Golden Bay saga was again revisited this month with Nature Trust ensuring that the blatant scourging of the dune did not go unnoticed. As evident from the accompanying pictures, the Internet Café operators did not have any qualms about making their way to their premises across the sandy beach on an offroad vehicle (ORV) and parking it just under the dune's fringes.

What boggles the mind is why the authorities are finding it so hard to relocate the Internet Café to the side of the beach, next to the other catering outlets, rather than letting it run riot with the dune's ecology and sand transport. Are the café operators such snobs to refuse being located with the other catering outlets? Or will they incur extra costs at having to shift their Internet facilities?

After all, the illegal flight of steps, demolished at public expense, has been duly rebuilt by the same operators who refuse to give up their privileged position beneath the dune. Such complacency by our authorities can only mock efforts to safeguard the dune at White Tower Bay or campaigns undertaken by schoolchildren to clean up other dune remnants, such as the one at Gnejna.

Dumping at Ta' Lambert and burning of Wied Rini

Nature Trust pursued its relentless defence of garigue habitat in our country by turning the spotlight on the plight of Ta' Lambert area, l/o Xewkija in Gozo, the site previously been earmarked for an airstrip.

Unfortunately, we must report the same old porridge here with dumping of building debris and soil on garigue, not far from the heliport. Such dumping forms part of an ingenious recent phenomenon of degrading public land for the interested parties, such as farmers, bird trappers or developers, to take possession of the land with claims that they aim to embellish the land.

Such a practice has already been documented at the coastal garigue at Ta' Cenc and can only be nipped in the bud through effective enforcement from the very start of dumping reports. Let's only augur that the Ta' Lambert area is given a facelift as had been done for the Gerzuma area in Bahrija, where the cleared garigue has been fenced off to aid its restoration.

Although only 0.73 per cent of our islands' surface is classified as watercourse habitat, several reports of environmental degradation, such as offroading, illegal building, vandalism, etc with respect to our valleys are received. This time, it was the turn of Wied Rini in Bahrija to run the gauntlet of misconceived farming practices which see its lush reeds being burnt to the detriment of freshwater flora and fauna.

In the same vein, Nature Trust also deplored the rampant building going on in Bahrija, even along the upper reaches of Wied Rini.

Silver linings

Nature Trust welcomes the prominence given to environmental issues in the government's last few budgets. The 2003 Budget witnessed the removal of tax on electric cars and their free access to Valletta, the elimination of VAT on recycled paper and bleach-free paper and the reduction of duty on biodegradable containers and energy-saving light bulb.

Nature Trust also welcomes the introduction of initiatives for the restoration of vacant, decrepit houses to encourage their marketing to address the problem of the 35,000 or so vacant buildings in our islands.

One must praise the removal of more than 10,000 steel drums and white goods from rubble walls by employees of the Manufacturing and Services Department and the parks and landscape conservation section, both in the Ministry of Resources and Infrastructure.

As a yardstick to measure the extent of the problem, one may refer to the fact that such eyesores were removed from various locations, including Zabbar, Kalkara, Zebbug, Siggiewi, Marsascala, Dingli, Mgarr and Ghaxaq, and that 20,000 other drums still await their pick-up. One must also praise the in-house development of a device to crush the drums.

To further belie all those who doubt the role played by environmental NGOs in this country, Parliamentary Secretary George Pullicino announced that Government was working with non-government organisations to appoint voluntary environmental wardens with a provisional budget of Lm15,000.

Such an initiative is an offshoot of proposals originally put forward by Nature Trust for the introduction of green wardens in this country. NT is encouraged by government efforts to fully involve NGOs in the implementation of environmental policies.

Finally, another positive development in the first half of December was the announcement by Mr Pullicino that Lm1.5 million were being allocated by MEPA for environmental initiatives, including new equipment for the monitoring of sea water and air quality, nitrates seeping into the water table and noise levels in different localities.

Accolades must also go to Marsascalea council for its interest in the introduction of ecowalks in the locality, such as at Il-Munxar near St Thomas Bay, and for the interest shown towards the management of il-Maghluq.

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