

## Supporting the enforcers



The Marine Rescue Team of Nature Trust was alerted to the presence of a beached, dead loggerhead turtle at Little Armier Bay. The specimen was badly decomposed and showed signs of having swallowed a fishing line with hooks. MRT members recorded all data relevant to the beached specimen.

I am not one to pull any punches when it comes to rapping MEPA, but some incidents warrant a change of tack. The recent deplorable events at Mdina Road, Zebbug, where MEPA enforcement officers and police were attacked by persons intent on preventing the demolition of their illegal structures, must be condemned by all those who have the environment at heart.

Despite MEPA's heaving enforcement backlog, enforcement officers sometimes have to deal with unsavoury characters on their regular site visits. I add my voice to the chorus of admiration for all those involved in bringing about adherence to planning laws. No one should seek to gain political mileage from such events.

The authorities should not just pay lip service to MEPA's enforcement unit and to the police Administrative Law Enforcement (ALE) unit, by beefing such units adequately and proceed with long-overdue direct action (some cases date back to the early 1990s).

### Property prices

I tend to agree with Michael Falzon (MaltaToday, January 21) that the Church's Commission for Justice and Peace document on how property prices have soared has opened a veritable can of worms, but I beg to differ with his subsequent rationale.

His comments that banks do not give house loans with a repayment programme that is more than one fourth of a couple's joint income and that wages and salaries increase while the loaned capital is static. But this is little consolation indeed for the thousands of couples facing 30 or 40 years of debt repayment, especially in view of rising interest rates. Hence, the loaned capital might be static but repayments are not.

But let's dissect the argument from an environmental perspective. Mr Falzon states that the 'large' amount of empty residential units is actually a canard and that such empty dwellings are mostly old, uninhabitable houses and new flats in 'tourist' areas like Bugibba and Marsascula.

So the 25,000-odd vacant dwellings are not that many, really? Add to these the 3,000 or so new apartments still on plan and for which permits are at hand as part of mega-projects. So does that mean that the fact that at least two-thirds of these vacant properties which are in an acceptable state of repair (SPR and NCDS documents) is baloney?

When listing Bugibba and Marsascula as top areas with vacant dwellings, Mr Falzon is ignoring other localities renowned for their dearth of occupied dwellings, such as the whole of Gozo. He also states that calls for MEPA to stop issuing so many permits (which even MEPA's director-general did on a recent TV programme) would actually lead to a rise in property prices. Such an orthodox supply-demand situation, which is one of the cornerstones of economics, has been dismissed by none other than Minister George Pullicino and a number of estate agents.

One cannot keep condoning the recent construction surge on the basis of couples not being able to find dwellings in their preferred localities or in their home towns, especially since nowhere in Malta is more than 45 minutes away by car.

The GRTU has again betrayed a lack of green credentials when attacking the Church document. It stated that, as an important stakeholder in the property sector, it had expected to be consulted before the commission talked publicly about the cost of property and that the absolute majority of the GRTU's members and Maltese businessmen were property owners.

The latter two statements, albeit not uttered in the same breath (but in the same press release), are incongruous, to say the least. If an entity expects to be consulted, then it is taking on itself an unbiased and uncommitted role so as to contribute towards a unprejudiced debate - how then can the GRTU expect the Church commission to consult it if it states in no uncertain terms that it is basically after safeguarding the rights of its majority of property owners?

The GRTU also claims that it is making sensible proposals, such as to call on the Joint Office to pass land to the private sector at nominal prices to develop into affordable housing units. How's that for some cheek? This is tantamount to saying that Government should pass public land over to contractors to develop at peppercorn prices so that they can drive around in their Ferraris, all in the name of affordable housing.

The same contractors and developers forming the spine of the GRTU's construction sector are also involved in development projects in exclusive sites such as Santa Marija Estate in Mellieha - why don't they sell such properties at affordable prices if they have the welfare of young couples so much at heart?

There is little hope that property prices will level off, especially since both major political parties avoid calling for a tax on vacant property to prevent speculation through hoarding of land. Labour's answer to all this is a populist call to flood the market with affordable housing units, rather than assessing the existing property glut.

One hopes that the Church's commissions involved in efforts to improve local environmental and social realities are resilient enough to withstand the criticism directed at them and to carry on with their mission.

One hopes that, when it comes to raising environmental awareness, Archbishop Paul Cremona follows in the footsteps of his predecessor, Archbishop Joseph Mercieca, who, more than once, upset the applecart with his statements. After all, environmental and social justice are inherently moulded together and the local Curia has generally woken up to this reality.

## **Gozo airstrip and 'real agendas'**

In his letter (The Sunday Times, January 28) Mario Grech seeks to sow doubts when he questions the "real agendas" of NGOs opposing extensions to the Gozo airstrip. It is hard to conceive how in this day and age individuals still question the operations of NGOs, which, tirelessly and certainly for no financial motive, devote time and energy to defend our last remaining stretches of greenery. Is it that hard to fathom that most NGOs are against the extension of the airstrip simply because it will encroach on more land and for no other reason? Must we justify any project on the islands by stating that it will keep the spectre of speculation away?

Speculators will also be kept away from Ta' Lambert by sprucing up the area, preserving any archaeological remains on site and scheduling the area if necessary.

Having said this, I congratulate "Castelain" (Gozo Newsletter, January 28) for having underscored the pros and cons of a seaplane link.

## **Climate change and EU**

The German EU presidency has set itself a number of daunting objectives, including some in the environmental field. The recent dispute between Russia and Belarus and the subsequent debate over the security of Europe's energy reserves can be touted as a blessing in disguise since it has also led the EU to turn its gaze towards other energy sources.

Besides security, the EU also stresses the importance of competitiveness and sustainability and, to achieve these three goals, the EU believes that an internal energy market is needed. In fact, the introduction to the EU's draft revised energy policy states that "Energy accounts for 80% of all greenhouse gas (GHG) emission in the EU1; it is at the root of climate change and most air pollution. The EU is committed to addressing this - by reducing EU and worldwide greenhouse gas emissions that would limit the global temperature increase to 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels.

However, current energy and transport policies would mean EU CO2 emissions would increase by around 5% by 2030 and global emissions would rise by 55%. The present energy policies within the EU are not sustainable."

An action plan spanning till 2020 has been drafted by the EU to "transform Europe into a highly energy-efficient and low CO2 energy economy, catalysing a new industrial revolution, accelerating the change to low carbon growth and, over a period of years, dramatically increasing the amount of local, low emission energy that we produce and use". Measures in this action plan include:

- An EU objective in international negotiations of 30% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by developed countries by 2020 compared to 1990. In addition, 2050 global GHG emissions must be reduced by up to 50% compared to 1990, implying reductions in industrialised countries of 60-80% by 2050.
- An EU commitment now to achieve, in any case, at least a 20% reduction of greenhouse gases by 2020 compared to 1990.
- Accelerating the use of fuel-efficient vehicles for transport, making better use of public transport; and ensuring that the true costs of transport are faced by consumers;

- Tougher standards and better labelling on appliances;
- Rapidly improving the energy performance of the EU's existing buildings and taking the lead to make very low energy houses the norm for new buildings;
- Coherent use of taxation to achieve more efficient use of energy;
- Improving the efficiency of heat and electricity generation, transmission and distribution; and
- A new international agreement on energy efficiency to promote a common effort.

This action plan comes hot on the heels of the Energy Efficiency Action Plan, which was adopted on October 19, 2006, that would put the EU well on the way to achieving a key goal of reducing its global primary energy use by 20% by 2020. If successful, this would mean that by 2020 the EU would use approximately 13% less energy than today, saving €100 billion and around 780 millions tonnes of CO2 each year.

Still in the same vein, the European Commission on Wednesday proposed new standards for transport fuels that will reduce their contribution to climate change and air pollution, including greater use of biofuels. A key measure foreseen is that, to encourage the development of lower-carbon fuels and bio-fuels, suppliers will have to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions caused by the production, transport and use of their fuels by 10% between 2011 and 2020. This will cut emissions by 500 million tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2020 - equivalent to the total combined emissions of Spain and Sweden today.

(I would like to thank the European Commission Representation in Malta for providing continuous up-to-date data re EU environmental issues.)

## Management of scheduled sites

One cannot but commend MEPA for adding two other ecologically sensitive sites (Is-Simar in Xemxija and Il-Ballut in Marsaxlokk) to the list of scheduled locations. However, scheduling alone will not preserve these two sites for posterity. While Is-Simar is cordoned off with a fence which is still in a reasonable state and is monitored by a warden employed by an NGO, the situation at Il-Ballut is much less secure. The fence around the small wetland enclave is sporadically targeted by vandals, and a nearby husbandry farm and sustained erosion of the coastline further exacerbate the site's teething problems.

Against this backdrop, it is very easy for MEPA and other entities to point accusing fingers at the NGO that manages the site, while forgetting the basic fact that NGOs need funds to manage sites. The NGO in question has been asking MEPA for funds to safeguard Il-Ballut for the last few years, but very little has been forthcoming, even if the area holds educational and scientific value and the draft management plan for the site has been completed.

Allotting manpower to carry out repairs on site is just a palliative since such manpower is usually unskilled (scientifically speaking) and needs to be supervised continuously, while funds are also needed to commission the necessary studies (e.g., on the effect of currents on coastal erosion, etc).

When an NGO manages an ecologically sensitive site, they do this at a fraction of what it would cost a public or private entity to do the job - so it is a case of funds well spent. MEPA officials should put their money where their mouth is when stating that funds for the safeguarding of such sites is available (from project planning gain, for example) and also approve site management plans within reasonable timeframes.

The sobering situation depicted above is true for a handful of other ecologically important sites around the islands. Scheduling of a site should be dovetailed with appropriate funding - otherwise, this would be worth little more than yet another legal or government notice and serves only to issue yet another press release. By holding back funds, MEPA is only betraying its lack of trust in the operations of NGOs.

## Silver linings

Banks and afforestation - Malta's two largest banks once again set the standard when it came to Arbor Day commemorations. HSBC announced that it was committing itself to replace all the dead trees along Sliema's promenade, while BOV donated 10,000 rulers and bookmarks with images and information about the five indigenous trees planted under the 34U campaign.

Peace Boat visit - Peace Boat is a Japan-based international non-governmental and non-profit organisation that works to promote peace, human rights, equal and sustainable development and respect for the environment. Peace Boat is affiliated to Friends of the Earth International. Recently, the vessel visited Malta where participants were lectured by FoE and Gaia exponents, and had the opportunity to visit Gaia's organic centre at Ghajn Tuffieha. The boat then sailed for Tripoli, the next leg of its three-month global tour.