

# Monsters!



PA 04308/04 refers to the construction of basement parking and overlying dwellings at the eponymous Sqaq il-Harrub, close to the `old` quarters of Marsascala. Despite a refusal being recommended by the Directorate, the application hearing was adjourned to September 2005 and was due to be decided on May 3 this year, but adjourned yet again.

Forget the wonders of education. Forget the benefits of consultation and of an inclusive society. Forget all that - some people simply cannot abandon their fiendish tactics. And branding the destruction of 3,000 tree samplings at Mellieha as a "fiendish" act is an understatement.

It is difficult to understand how the authorities have no clue about the identity of the perpetrators - one expects these vandals to be known to certain lobby groups. There are no half measures here - you either bring these people to justice or the reputation of the entire political establishment is dented. Any permitted impunity will weigh heavily on the conscience of our politicians.

Every calamity holds opportunity, however - the way has been paved for commercial and business entities to volunteer and replace the vandalised stock as soon as possible to convey the message that no degree of arm-twisting by those who stoop so low will dampen the current tree-planting momentum.

The despicable destruction of three years of hard work by Din l-Art Helwa, BirdLife and the Parks Section should jolt our powers that be to take action, in the same way that the vandalism at the megalithic temples in the 1990s did, with the formulation of a more serious approach to historical heritage conservation.

The blame for such vandalism also lies partly on the authorities for failing to take preventive measures. With so many government employees twiddling their thumbs all day, would it have been so costly to employ some of them to act as round-the-clock watchmen?

What is more costly: the wages of two night watchmen for three to five years or replacing the 3,000 trees now gone missing? This is where our political system is to blame - ministers are under pressure to find employment for individuals from their electoral districts, even where such employment is not needed, while other sectors in the country are allowed to go to rot. Shame on the perpetrators, but shame too on those who were unable to prevent such vandalism!

## Exercises in futility

Pre-budget environmental meeting - Fiona Galea Debono's report in The Times of May 4 ("Dialogue with the Prime Minister - Controversial issues hardly get a mention") could not have been more aptly titled. In fact, as stated in the report, what normally would conjure up scenes of objections from the floor in relation to the myriad environmental problems facing our country ended up in a much more tranquil affair with only one interjection, ironically coming from an architect, who rightly denounced the current upsurge in construction proceeding at breakneck speed.

Needless to say, since the architect was the only voice of dissent; he was also the only one to be urged to get to the point. Last year, my colleagues and I were present for a similar dialogue session and we too were stopped from elaborating overtly on our point in the same subtle way, while individuals with personal grievances (despite the insistence that only generic issues were to be raised) were allowed a free rein.

The GRTU seems to have pre-empted the presence of some anti-construction voices among those present since their representatives were quick to rebut that "construction was part of the environment and the fact that it was growing was positive. Malta was a construction site that needed to be rebuilt from scratch to suit current needs."

I shudder at the thought of Malta being considered as one large construction site. How can any political party aspire to dampen the construction industry when it was hobnobbing with representatives of the GRTU and the construction industry?

Hot on the heels of this meeting was another consultation meeting, held last Sunday in Gozo, and the anti-environmentalist atmosphere was even more marked, with shameful booing from some of those present when an exponent of the SOS Hondoq lobby rose to make his point and some of the featured speakers even complained about "environmentalists".

Such pre-Budget meetings, rather than helping to formulate the policies and directions to adopt come November, have taken on a clientelistic character, with individuals only bent on lobbying for their personal interests rather than for the general good of the environment. No wonder I decided to give this year's meeting a miss, even if I am a strong believer in consultation exercises.

Particular planning applications - an application to construct a waste sorting plant in Wied Garnaw, l/o Sta Lucija, was lodged with MEPA four years ago. Before that, the site was already cleared of topsoil and was used abusively as a skip depot.

MEPA twice turned down the application, with the stubborn developer appealing each time. In the final twist to the long-drawn-out affair, MEPA inspected the site last week before taking a final decision on the matter. Such a saga warrants inclusion in this article for the length of MEPA employee time wasted by the same cheeky developer - with the gamut of enforcement cases clamouring for attention, isn't it time to move on?

Climate change think tank - Needless to say, I harbour an innate admiration for all those who strive to improve the local environment, and that's why I greatly admire Martin Scicluna. However, disillusioned as I am with the prospects for our natural heritage, I must say that his plans for a 'think tank' (public policy research institute) to address climate change locally is basically a waste of time.

Despite numerous overtures made by our two main political parties on the European and international scene in support of policies to tackle global warming, what has really been done is just hot air. While it is common knowledge that Malta and Cyprus are the only two European Union states to rely solely on fossil fuels, Enemalta plans to install a 10 KW wind turbine along Marfa Peninsula, which would meet the requirements of just four people.

What about bolstering incentives for those who buy solar panels and electric-powered cars and for people to input 'clean energy' into the national grid? What about more frequent car-free days, despite the opposition of the business community? One could think of even more solutions - what about enforcing an 1880 law which stipulates that every new dwelling should have its own well? This would certainly cut down on reverse osmosis production levels as such plants consume almost a fifth of our total electricity output.

The MCSD (Malta Council for Sustainable Development) was yet another brave attempt at inculcating tenets of sustainability in our country's administration - a highly relevant position paper was even published, but which has so far been shelved. I hope I am proved wrong and that Mr Scicluna's venture succeeds.

Embellishment works - PA 3622/06 refers to embellishment works to be carried out along the Wied Hoxt-Hagar Qim stretch. After the Wied Babu fiasco, where the Works Division was repeatedly rapped by MEPA's Auditor for failing to wait for a permit to be issued and for not adhering to the permit conditions, the Works Division decided to apply for a permit this time round. The site in question is within a Level 2 Area of Ecological Importance, Level 3 Area of Ecological Importance (Buffer Zone) and within a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

After extensive internal consultations (e.g. with the EPD) and a subsequent watering down of the initial proposals, MEPA's Directorate recommended the approval of the permit, which was granted on April 7. While one may think that the approach taken by the Works Division this time round is much more judicious, some of the permit conditions were certainly not adhered to during execution of the works. These include:

- "Avoiding damage to existing trees" - as shown in the accompanying photos, at least one carob on site was heavily 'pruned';
- "All construction works are to be contained within the existing road boundary" - as shown in the accompanying photos, some of the equipment used has been discarded unceremoniously on the margins of the valley.

On the pro side, the total width of the proposed road was reduced from 8 m to 7.3 m, the proposed planting strip was scuttled and the proposed 1.2 m high wall with iron railings was watered down too. One also augurs that the permit condition stipulating that "the parking area was to remain within the same footprint and no extra terrain is to be taken as proposed" is adhered to once the project has been completed.

Embellishment works such as all along the Wied Babu-Hagar Qim stretch merit an inclusion here since one fails to justify the need for such projects seeing that footpaths already existed on site and most tourists reach the megalithic temples by public transport and not by walking along the Wied Hoxt stretch.

## **Birkirkara carobs update**

Regarding the smothered carobs highlighted in this column two weeks ago, MEPA states that it seeking legal advice, having said that the perpetrators could not be traced. This despite the fact that onlookers repeatedly witnessed the infringements in broad daylight, being able also to note the registration numbers of the vehicles involved.

One hopes that this is not another expedient to take the wind out of the sails of conscientious citizens seeking to save the last few carobs on the sides of Valley Road, Birkirkara.

## **Mistra Village**

Nature Trust (Malta) and Friends of the Earth (FoE) jointly made submissions in response to the EPS (Environmental Planning Statement) presented for PA 5538/04 which refers to the redevelopment of the Mistra Village precincts. The project's proposals raise a few eyebrows, especially in view of the following:

- Proposed four multi-storey buildings, including a 19-storey building
- The site's proximity to an Area of High Landscape Value (AHLV)
- Discrepancy between the developable area of 28,700 m<sup>2</sup> cited in the PDS compared with 31,293 m<sup>2</sup> cited in the EPS. In addition, the current footprint of the abandoned site is 11,165 m<sup>2</sup> - how will the added footprint be accommodated, if the site is a stone's throw from dense maquis and garigue?

Reference is made in the EPS to the nexus between upper-market properties and the Xemxija yacht marina, for which no permits are in hand.

The project will put further strain on the already serious traffic situation along Xemxija Hill.

The project's long-term feasibility - will an extra 1,000 units to the existing property glut help to iron out the current impasse?

## **Local radio priorities**

Local radios, especially those appealing to the young, rarely feature songs with a useful message. Rather, they dish out the usual monotonous thudding tracks and advertising stunts, which appeal to today's alienated youth, with no attempt at injecting some social conscience in their operations.

A case in point is the latest release by Walter Micallef and Co. of the album Hamsin, chockful with witty lyrics and wacky cynicism about Malta's dire environmental situation. Will any local radio station start thinking out of the box and feature any of these songs to finally sensitise their apathetic listeners?

## **Silver linings**

Climate change committee by EU - MEPs on April 25 voted to set up a new temporary committee on climate change. It will have 60 members, still to be appointed, and a mandate of one year. The committee's main objective will be to formulate proposals on the European Union's future integrated policy on climate change and to co-ordinate the European Parliament's position with a view to negotiating the international framework for climate policy after 2012, better known as the Kyoto Protocol.

Intra-faith committee - Britain's environment minister, David Milliband, stated that a worldwide coalition of churches and non-Christian faith communities is needed to drive humanity's "ecological conversion", enabling it to overcome the threat of climate change.

Convened by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (PCJP), a two-day high-level seminar on 'Climate Change and Development' held last month resulted from a suggestion to the Holy See made by Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown.

Interestingly enough, as reported by an exponent from Yale University, the US scientific community is urgently appealing to the churches and other faiths for moral leadership on climate change and environmental issues in general.