

Gozitan coast again under assault



Left: The proposed road at Mizieb/Ta` Pennellu will adversely affect Malta`s largest national tree population (Sandarac gum tree) and the tranquillity of the area and... Right: Still waiting for a reply from MEPA - this site along Triq in-Nadur in Marsascula bears the hallmarks of carob tree cutting and severe `pruning`. The MEPA has been asked about the legality of this `activity`.

Forty-three per cent of the Maltese coastline is urbanised - yet this sobering statistic has no bearing on the development applications currently before MEPA. In fact, despite the hullabaloo raised by the Fort Chambray development and the speculation surrounding the Ta' Cenc area, more coastal swathes seem to be in several developers' sights. Two cases in point are:

The development of the Ulysses Lodge premises overlooking Ramla (PA 7902 for the demolition of existing commercial complex and construction of dwelling units with pools). The description of works as originally submitted by the applicant in the outline application (PA 5138/02) was somewhat different and made no reference to the controversial villas with pools - "the redevelopment of an existing fully licensed commercial complex".

On reading this, one might heave a sigh of relief and be led to think that the application refers to a redevelopment of an already existing site. However, nothing could be further from the truth, since the latest application occupies a larger footprint than that covered by the outline permit. In this regard, MEPA's column 'One World' last Tuesday hit the nail on its head when stating: "Be clear about what your proposals are, who may be affected, what questions are being asked and the timescale for responses."

It appears that developers, probably with the help of some individuals from 'the grapevine', have developed a knack for undermining existing MEPA policies. In addition, a new access road must be constructed, jeopardising the existing Roman road. Contrary to what MEPA had stated, a permit was mandatory for access roads to new developments in the PAPB (the PA's predecessor).

It appears that some development applications are afforded the fast track - for example, usually a developer is first asked to apply to sanction existing illegalities prior to applying for a fully-fledged new development. This practice was not adhered to here. One only hopes that board members are fully conversant with the site before deciding on this application which should be treated as another housing scheme or tourist project. Does Gozo need more of the same - i.e. villas with pools?

The proposed yacht marina at Hondoq ir-Rummien, Qala (PA 03798/02) refers to the construction of a 'glamorous' destination port, comprising a hotel, yacht marina and tourist village in the few sandy beaches in Gozo. Recently, such an application seems to have been afforded the fast track, although the Gozo/Comino Local Plan is still being drawn up. This is being done with one clear aim in mind - to avert Policy GZ-TRAN-12 in the same draft local plan which limits any future proposals for the upgrading of facilities at Hondoq ir-Rummien to repairing existing jetties with the possible addition of berthing buoys.

The local plan also says that MEPA will only consider a berthing proposal if a detailed justification on the need for additional berthing space for essential operations can be produced and underscores the deterioration of water quality over the past three years and points to the chemical hazards posed by a concentration of yachts because of the anti-fouling paint used on their hulls.

This is yet another example of undermining policy. In this respect, Alternattiva Demokratika's Gozo section is to be praised for alerting the public to the case.

Making history

It may not dawn upon you immediately but history was being written in the last few weeks. First, MEPA chairman Andrew Calleja was quoted as saying that, in line with suggestions contained in the Xemxija collapse inquiry, "MEPA will be calling a meeting with the Chamber of Architects to discuss the fact that some architects knowingly assist clients to develop sites illegally".

Eureka - this is indeed a breakthrough, but its potential effect depends on what exactly Mr Calleja means by 'illegally'. Does it include the submission by well-known architects of repeated ODZ applications on behalf of their clients? If such a 'practice' is not considered illegal, then it

should be made so, so cutting down on the 300-odd ODZ permits granted every year, although a number of architects, including the BICC chairman, would face a drastic drop in business.

In addition, a groundswell against top contractors has arisen on a number of fronts, namely the Xemxija bypass collapse and the Sliema crane saga. A recurring characteristic appears to be the elusiveness of the contractor or his legal representatives.

Having a less domineering construction industry sounds like wishful thinking but at least things are moving - it is up to the pro-active members of the public to keep the pressure on the government to deliver its promises of accountability in MEPA and in the sector as a whole, as embodied by The Times editorial of April 22: "Accountability must prevail. Otherwise, not only the house of MEPA will be left hanging in mid-air but also the government's."

Disappointing Reporters without Borders

I must agree with Pamela Hansen (The Sunday Times, May 7), who rapped the international journalists' NGO Reporters without Borders on the knuckles for their final verdict on the local situation.

From statements like "Malta is a freedom of expression haven" or "there appears to be no problem in Malta" or "full marks for the way it upholds freedom of expression", it does seem as if the NGO took only a cursory glance at freedom of speech in Malta.

True, we are not in the dark Seventies and Eighties, or in totalitarian Belarus, where journalists end up in a ditch for their pains, but censorship over here is much more subtle. Very little criticism of top local contractors filters through the media, especially TV stations, due to the "hidden networks of influence which permeate Maltese society" (Jeremy Boissevain, Contesting the Foreshore).

Direct physical attack may not be directly forthcoming, especially if you steer clear of pro-immigrant comments, but rather a more subtle form of retribution, in the form of unofficial 'blacklisting' from any important academic or professional posts is practised. This is the retribution that doesn't make the headlines, since it is usually considered run-of-the-mill.

Strange but true

I was almost gob-smacked when reading that MEPA officials admitted to an internal audit they were unaware that the Aarhus Convention, giving citizens greater access to information, had been transposed to Maltese law a year ago - something that surfaced after Qui-si-sana residents complained to MEPA's audit office. The audit report notes that Legal Notice 116/2005 transposed the Aarhus Convention into Maltese law and has been in force since May 17 last year, as established by Legal Notice 139/2005.

Freedom of speech gaining momentum

This column obviously takes pride in the current drive to have a 'Whistle-Blower Act' to protect future whistleblowers in the public service. The call for such an Act was made by the Institute of Maltese Journalists and the newly-formed Journalists' Committee on World Press Freedom Day (May), which also called for a 'Freedom of Information' Act and an overhaul of the archaic libel and laws.

There is a dire need for all four, despite the lukewarm reception from certain quarters - taking libel as a case in point, as aptly expounded by Malcolm Naudi, chairman of the Institute of Maltese Journalists: "In the present state of affairs, libel is often used as a cheap and convenient tool to silence the press."

I have repeatedly experienced this myself, with powerful individuals often resorting to the threat of libel. Libel laws clearly need reviewing.

A positive step in this direction has already been performed - the fact that libel would no longer be punishable with imprisonment.

Drowning in sour grapes

For all bird enthusiasts out there whose blood boils at the thought of the continuing onslaught on birds and natural habitats in the Maltese Islands, it's time for some envy. In the overcrowded South-East of England, more precisely over an expanse of nearly 300 square miles, stretching from the M25, west of London, almost to Reading, the nesting of three endangered bird species has thwarted plans to construct 20,000 new homes.

The case has pitted the government's wildlife agency, English Nature against the building/construction lobby, and even the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) against the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).

What saved the day for the endangered nightjar, woodlark and the Dartford warbler was the European Union wildlife protection law, which strongly safeguards the three bird species. I smile when I imagine a similar scenario in Malta - what, stopping a local contractor from building apartment blocks or opening up a new road just because of a few lizards or snails? You must be an extremist, my friend! Sounds familiar, eh?

Quotable quote

"Hunters defend their perverse desire to extinguish life by saying it is traditional. Unfortunately many barbaric practices are traditional. However, modern day hunting bears little relation to so called traditional hunting. Hunters today are more akin to those who eradicated the bison and took only the tongues." - Paul Watson (in his resignation speech as a National Board Member of the Sierra Club, USA, which was overly courting hunters in his opinion). I thank Annalise Falzon for referring me to this source.

WWF Mediterranean calls for sanctuary

World Wildlife Fund, the global conservation organisation, is urging Italy, Malta and Tunisia to combine forces to create a much needed marine sanctuary in the Sicily Channel - a biodiversity hot spot at the crossroads between Italy, Tunisia and Malta.

The Sicily Channel hosts one of the highest biodiversity levels in the Mediterranean and is also an important feeding area for numerous protected species such as the globally endangered fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*), numbering an estimated 3,500 in the Mediterranean, according to ACCOBAMS.

Almost a third of all the oil shipping vessels in the Mediterranean cross the area every day, fuelling collisions with whales and other marine mammals.

Silver linings

Chalet cleanup - As evidence that things can change, even in ossified Malta, hot on the heels of this column reporting, through photographic evidence, the dumping of building rubble from the Chalet demolition site in Sliema, divers were dispatched to the site to recuperate at least some of the discarded material. This action is to be commended, although initial greater care by the Works Division would have spared the trouble.

Mgarr ix-Xini clean-up - A number of limestone blocks, dumped in a field in Mgarr ix-Xini, were recently removed by the owner following immediate action by MEPA officers in Gozo. This column had reported on the dumping previously, while AD chairman Harry Vassallo also visited the site. Well done!

Massive fine - This is indeed a piece of good news. A Gozitan, who for eight years ignored a court order to demolish an illegal building, on April 21 was fined a staggering Lm57,300, that is, Lm25 for each of the 2,292 days the structure remained standing. The court also ordered him to demolish the illegal structure within three months or pay a Lm25 fine daily.

EcoServ's initiative - The tuna industry frequently raises the hackles of marine enthusiasts, so that positive initiatives taken by the same industry often fade into oblivion.

A case in point is EcoServ Ltd, responsible for environmental monitoring of local tuna-penning operations, which recently organised a series of seminars for divers and staff of three local tuna farms, with the scope of disseminating awareness on the feed management and mitigating measures to prevent adverse impacts on the marine environment.

Natura 2000 and Tourism Seminar - When it comes to seminars, MEPA is a hive of activity. The latest notch to the tally is the 'Natura 2000 and its relevance for Tourism' one, organised last Thursday in conjunction with the Tourism Unit of the University of Malta and the Austrian Federal Environment Agency.

Website to visit

www.ambjentahjar.org/ - the portal of the newly-fledged Flimkien ghal Ambjent Ahjar movement.

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