

Rational... or what?



Despite being a proposed Natura 2000 site, the Ras il-Pellegrin promontory between Gnejna and Fomm ir-Rih is off limits to most members of the public due to squatting trappers and hunters, who have grafted makeshift roads through the garigue on site and even placed a caravan. Nature Trust has reported all this to MEPA who should be taking some concrete enforcement action. Photos: Annalise Falzon.

The latest environmental hot potato appears to be the development rationalisation exercise currently under way.

What surprises me is the complete absence of the Church from the current debate - after all, a portion of the land now released for development was formerly Church-owned. Yet another question mark is the need for such a rationalisation process, especially since the available land space within existing schemes should meet the country's needs for the next 20 years. Besides, several recent documents underpin the fact that there is currently an oversupply of properties on the market (3,000 new units every year, compared to the 1,700 needed in reality).

One hopes that indeed, as Environment Minister George Pullicino stated in The Times of May 19 ("Revisiting development zones"), the rationalisation process is born out of a genuine intention to give direction to MEPA since the local plan exercise did not address such an issue.

One also commends the 33 MPs who have promptly replied to a question posed by MaltaToday - whether they own land that will be included within the new scheme. What about the other 32 MPs? Some official clarification about some allegations which have surfaced should be issued to clear the air once and for all.

But, one asks, is it fair, in order to address a few injustices perpetrated by individuals in the past, to deprive the country of even more land, hence perpetrating an even greater injustice? Minister Pullicino reassures us that no irrigated land and no ecologically sensitive land will be earmarked for the revision exercise - this is a moot point but of little solace since under 5% of all agricultural land is irrigated and ecologically sensitive areas make up for roughly 20% of the island (if one considers the 11% protected area plus the ca. 9% garigue which is largely unprotected).

Of the remaining 75%, 23% is built-up, which technically leaves 52% of our land surface area eligible for inclusion. One might argue that strict criteria have been defined in the memo to Cabinet, but the yardstick being used today can be relaxed in the future by the same or a different administration.

However, some positive outcomes emerge, namely:

- ▣ MEPA will not longer be able to sanction ODZ (outside development zone) applications.
- ▣ A proper definition of a pocket has been laid down (although one may not always agree with this, as shown in two accompanying photographs).
- ▣ The vociferous opposition to the schemes coming from unexpected quarters - namely the MHRA and the Chamber of Architects, who, despite their commercial and professional interests, have realised that further development is the least thing that our country needs at the moment.
- ▣ Future administrations are bound till 2016 not to revise any further building schemes.

It is no consolation to say that this scheme revision was bound to happen one day (e.g. the revision was promised in the Nationalist Party's 1998 electoral manifesto, point 174), although one gets the impression that Mr Pullicino is striving to limit the damage of this exercise.

Nor is any solace provided by the fact the revision will result in an average of just 2.4 plots per locality, since some localities are not affected in any way by the revision, while others, such as

Zejtun, Mgarr and some Gozo localities, are considerably affected.

Three localities which are particularly "hot" seem to be the Tal-Mirakli area in Lija, an area in Selmun and another near Manikata - these three areas had already been sold as plots for development prior to 1988 - another sobering legacy of the pre-1988 planning system.

As things stand, one can only hope that Minister Pullicino does not buckle under the pressure being exerted from all quarters to bolster the 10% of all requests that actually qualify for inclusion within the scheme (amounting to less than 2.4% of the total area). The next five-six weeks will witness lobbying from powerful quarters to have their own parcel included - such requests should be made public.

A sobering thought is that now that sacred development boundaries have been tampered with, the floodgates will be opened for even more revisions in the future and for the political pandering game of the type: your land has not been included this time round... maybe I can arrange something.

Dying a natural death

We read that the transport authority (ADT) is still not in a position to apportion blame for the collapse of the Xemxija bypass, which is six years long in the tooth. One hopes that the whole stinging issue is not allowed to die a natural death and to fade from memory, but rather, that the promise made by ADT chairman Gianfranco Selvaggi ("Believe me, we will apportion the blame and demand that the damage is fixed but we have to have proof") is translated into action, even though the recipient of the bill is none other than the Polidano Group. The total sum that needs to be forked out is thought to be around Lm500,000.

A plan for Gozo?

Gozo seems to be everyone's pick of the fruit with a gamut of different development proposals surfacing for the island from time to time. The Labour Party's latest foray on the matter is the publication of a draft plan intended to stimulate the island's social and economic development.

The plan's preamble states that "...the main aim is to increase wealth through sustainable economic development, while safeguarding and improving the environment and reducing social gaps." The jargon used is flattering indeed so far... it's when one gets to the nitty-gritty that the jargon starts to jar.

The plan in fact proposes much of the same regurgitated harebrained proposals for Gozo, such as the building or extension of a yacht marina, the building of a golf course and the building of an alternative road to Mgarr. And all this should embody sustainable development and improve the environment!

Yes, but only if one were to use the roundabout-style, kitsch definition of the environment, frequently employed by politicians when pandering to the masses. Fortunately, the MLP appears to have backtracked on the airstrip issue, although some within its fold are still recalcitrant on the issue.

The PN is no less mellow on Gozo - while it may be having second thoughts on the yacht marina, and having always rejected the idea of an airstrip in Gozo, it too is resolved to develop a golf course there.

Pity that environmental irresponsibility rears up its ugly head from time to time in the two major political parties, especially since they both have a number of valid people. Labour MP Evarist Bartolo is a case in point - among his latest commendable environmental initiatives is his complaint about the manpower allotted to the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage and that government should seek to ensure public access to our coast, to mirror the situation in ramblers' paradises like Wales.

Chalet demolition update

Joe Spiteri Bailey of Sliema, writing in The Times (May 18), claims to have followed closely the dismantling of the Chalet ruins and says he can report no dumping of debris in the surrounding sea from his purported vantage position. In fact, he confidently asserts that the project was well planned and executed.

He may not have seen the photos published in this column of April 30 showing site workers dumping part of the debris into the sea. This irrefutable photographic evidence is confirmed by two other correspondents (Stefan Buontempo and Paul Grech).

The object of this column is not to denigrate Works Division workers but rather to stress the importance of proper training of these workers and monitoring of works - it was the first in fact to congratulate the dispatching of divers to the area to clear part of the debris, even if such a waste of taxpayers' money could have been avoided with more care.

Gnejna and Filfla - misconceptions

Stephen Aquilina's letter in The Times of May 15 ("Gnejna Bay") lifts the lid on a widespread misconception that 'seaweed' (construed to be seagrass) debris on a beach is not akin to a clean environment and hence our beaches should be cleared of every iota of such 'waste'. In fact, seagrass debris is still classified as a waste category by the MRAE, despite its ecological importance (as a habitat in itself and to allay beach erosion).

Fortunately, the MTA has stopped 'grooming' beaches in the low tourist season - one concedes that our beaches should be 'cleaned' in the summer months, however - hence, my whole point is to dispel the stigma attached to such 'debris'. Beach patrons should now call for debris removal as from the start of May (due to the imminent summer season) but not refer to the debris in such a disparaging way.

The same issue of The Times regaled readers with an even more incredible suggestion - that by Joseph Buhagiar ("Filfla for wind power"). "Why not use the island of Filfla as a start-up venue for wind and wave power generation? It offers an ideal site, with all the advantages, and is there for us to exploit," Mr Buhagiar writes.

After the ravages inflicted by targeted bombing, Filfla was finally declared a Nature Reserve in 1988 since it harbours faunal and floral species isolated from their counterparts on the mainland. Hence, the island is an important bird-nesting site and is home to some very rare floral species and snail species, and to a possibly endemic lizard sub-species. So how can anyone ever even consider using Filfla for energy generation?

Filfla is one of those rare nature troves, whose integrity should be protected at all costs. The word 'exploit' reeks of a fundamentalist interpretation of the creation account in the Genesis, where man was purportedly given a carte blanche to 'exploit' the rest of creation, rather than being given stewardship over it.

Works Division - even more friction

After the faux pas of Salini and Wied Babu, the Works Division is embroiled in yet more cases of environmental degradation - this time at Burmarrad and Cospicua. In the former locality we read that while an application to 'restore' the old stormwater channel built by the British in the early 1800s was submitted in 2004, plans really refer to the digging of a new, parallel channel in the flood plain.

Such plans have raised eyebrows at the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage which is concerned that the works will disturb an archaeologically sensitive area. One must appreciate (with tongue firmly in cheek) that the Works Division has applied for a permit this time round - at Il-Mixtla ta' Bormla, 'restoration and rehabilitation' works have started on a large wooded area (albeit mostly not indigenous) without the necessary permits in hand - one can imagine then the degree of monitoring from MEPA.

Minister Ninu Zammit is quoted as saying in July 2005 that "I have no problem waiting for a study to come to an end. However, you can carry out a study in four days or stretch it to six months. I really think that permits need to be issued as soon as possible if we want to get things done in this country." How can the time needed to issue permits be reduced?

Silver linings

Waste volumes - The amount of waste dumped in sites managed by WasteServ declined by just over one million tonnes last year when compared to 2004.

Enemalta setting the example - During an open day organised at Enemalta last Sunday, chairman Alex Tranter announced that, by the end of the year, Enemalta would have installed photo-voltaic panels (which turn sunlight into electricity) to run one of its distribution centres entirely on alternative energy in order to assess the feasibility of alternative energy sources and expand its use over the years.

Advice to SMEs - The Parliamentary Secretariat for Small Business and the Self-Employed should be lauded for announcing that it will be issuing a call for expressions of interest from engineers willing to advise small enterprises (SMEs) on how they can alleviate their outlay on water and electricity.

Welcome appointment on climate change board - Michael Zammit Cutajar, the Maltese climate expert, has recently been appointed to overcome deep policy splits on global warming. From the timbre of the initial interviews he conceded, the man seems to mean business - finally, a Maltese in a string-pulling position who does not give up his right to speak his mind.

EU stance on biodiversity loss - European Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas set out an ambitious policy to halt the loss of biodiversity throughout the EU by 2010, in the form of an action plan.

The priority objectives included in the action plan are: a bigger commitment from member states to propose, designate, protect and effectively manage Natura 2000 (protected) sites; the effective implementation of the UN convention on biological diversity; substantial cuts in greenhouse gas emissions and the strengthening of the citizens' understanding of biodiversity and ecosystem services.