

# The golf course

## Public ignorance and business interests



Three of the sites for which golf courses have been proposed: a bird sanctuary on the Ta` Cenc cliffs; scheduled garigue at Pembroke; and vintage farmland below the Rabat-Mdina skyline.

George Schembri's contribution (The Sunday Times, February 22) titled "Our bread and butter..." leaves me at a loss for words. But most of all, it brings a sense of acute disillusionment.

He aptly voices the public sentiment out there that the environment is all about well-kept roundabouts and rubbish in the streets, and that well-planned projects enhance our natural assets. His ranting that golf course projects enhance water catchment, that they need very little amount of herbicide and other similar mind-numbing wishy washy material, shows a good degree of misinformation courtesy of the pro-golf lobby.

Yes, Mr Schembri, NGOs like Nature Trust do read EIAs before resorting to making statements. The same EIA you refer to clearly shows that:

- the golf course at Verdala would consume 70,000 litres of water. Since as a country we consume roughly 36 million m<sup>3</sup> of water (annually), the water to be consumed by the golf course is quite significant. But maybe, Mr Schembri does not think so since he is so profligate with water. More significantly, the golf course is planned to use 72% more water per hectare than the vines to be planted. MEPA quotes water usage figures from golf courses in Mallorca, endowed with a similar type of climate, which show that figures given by the Verdala developer are probably unrealistic and should be even higher;
- the golf course developers aim to introduce the seashore paspalum, whose close cousin - Paspalum paspalodes - has already invaded most of our watercourses;
- 56.7 of the 72 ha. applied for will cease to be agricultural land. Hence, Mr Schembri's claim that projects like the golf course lead to different types of agricultural activity is incorrect, to use an understatement; and
- the EIA so flagrantly cited by Mr Schembri does not mention anywhere the agreement between the Church and the Maltese government relating to the future use of Church land handed over.

Mr Schembri in his treatise against NGOs and I in particular regales us with three other pearls of wisdom. First he questions whether I ever visit the countryside. This jolted me out of my chair and nearly threw me into a fit.

Could Mr Schembri go through all my previous articles and view for himself the volumes I wrote about dumping in the countryside? But maybe Mr Schembri should abandon his school days' concept of what the environment is - simply dumping. Does he condone illegal buildings?

Secondly, Mr Schembri states that we need Blue Flag beaches for our islands, among other things. Does he know that Nature Trust has been entrusted with introducing the Blue Flag beach certification scheme in Malta?

Also, Mr Schembri states that our countryside is replete with weeds. What exactly does he mean by weeds? I would certainly classify the golf course grass as a weed and not our indigenous flora!

But rock bottom is surely reached when Mr Schembri berates the rare orchids. Some "rare" orchids, as he calls them, are in fact endemic. What moral right do we have as Maltese to extirpate a species completely from the face of the earth?

Will we put our children into the gloomy situation of having to witness local fauna and flora only from schoolbooks and not at first hand? We are not living on the moon, Mr Schembri, we are living in Malta, unfortunately, where we fail to appreciate the natural assets our islands have been blessed with (like the circa 70 endemic species we have). These species need protection

and not some alien weed running among them. Thank God that decisions here are taken by people with an inkling of ecology too, not just by business-minded people.

Mr Schembri also makes an impassioned appeal in mentioning unemployed persons. What about the farming families (around 90 in total) who will lose their livelihood? Or does he mean by employment those in the tourism sector only?

Yes, Mr Schembri, tourism is our bread and butter, but it needs to be planned for in a rational, long-term way. Tourism has inflated our employment figures and our coffers but we are now feeling the backlash of ill-conceived planning with tourists staying away due to an overtly-congested island with little elbow room.

The result: empty hotels. Tourists with an iota of rationale and who want to get away from it all seek relatively pristine islands, like the circum-Sicilian ones, which still offer a modicum of Mediterranean character, unlike the Maltese ones.

Tourism has paid dividends but it has also taken up most of our most scenic places - the Rabat-Mdina skyline and approach should be left to the Maltese to enjoy.

Public ignorance is also explicitly expressed in Mr Newland's contribution, "The net benefits of a golf course". He ends by saying that golf courses would contribute to a greener and more varied environment.

Does he know that golf courses are known as biological deserts in that they are composed of just one species? Simply take a look at the terraced fields below Verdala and you will be imbued with (replace with really understand) what a 'varied' environment really looks like!

## **Dangerous tampering with decision-making**

So we are back to the ignominious 1980s with former ministers and key figureheads not taking a 'no' for an answer and trying to sway (or rather bully) MEPA to their side.

More disconsolately, even newspaper editorials have thrown their proverbial integrity to the wind, with The Times stating that MEPA should make sure that the effort to bring one to term should not slacken in any way.

How about that for dabbling in decision-making? The Malta Independent, similarly, discards all the valid arguments against the golf course and bases its pro-golf stance uncouthly only on tourism figures.

In one of his articles last year, Mr Michael Falzon vehemently defended the setting up of the PA in 1992, for which he was partly responsible, by saying that this mollified the previous development sins of the Labour administrations.

Once having lauded MEPA, Mr Falzon now turns to lambasting it simply because its decisions are not to his liking. As Aristophanes puts it: "It is preferable not to rear a lion within your city (MEPA in this case). But if you do, then you must humour all his moods."

Roamer's Column of February 22 also lives up to its billing as a traditional anti-environmentalist column, treating us again to a derisive treatment of everything that has to do with green activism.

The word "environmentalist" evokes hare-brained visions of eccentric flower power hippy types in the minds of some Maltese and this is clearly evident from Roamer's Column. Does it dawn on anyone that the green movement has moved on from the Hippy Era of the 1970s and that what we environmentalists (proud to be one) strive for is the common good?

Dear Roamer and Mr Schembri, believe it or not, environmentalists like the Front Kontra il-Golf Kors (and the NGOs included within the umbrella) have sought the professional advice of economists about the economic aspects of the notorious EIA.

The bottom line on their part is that a careful review of the EIA's description of these negative elements are sufficient to convince the reader that the highly speculative, risk-prone supposed "benefits" of the project, with the "economic benefits" receiving most emphasis, in no way outweigh the certain, very significant environmental and social costs of the proposed golf course, many of which could not be reversed. A number of so-called projections and forecasts are merely presented as "it is assumed that".

## **2002 - Ecotourism Year - long gone!**

Our love for the environment is only skin deep. This is evident from the way we have already forgotten the basic tenets of ecotourism, even though 2002 was the Ecotourism Year!

Although the MTA (Malta Tourism Authority) launched its ecoguide (to which I was a proud contributor), its top cheeses are now clamouring for a golf course. And exponents of the misinformed public, like Mr Schembri, indicate that the ecotourism year did not leave much of a legacy here.

I strongly urge anyone still in doubt on the golfing issue to ponder for a few moments on the following: "If we are so intent on improving our tourist sector, we do not need to listen solely to the golf lobby; why don't we listen, for a change, to the experts - the three to five per cent of tourists who are repeat visitors to our country, many of whom write letters to The Times?"

"Their theme is less development, not more!" (courtesy of Mr Jeffrey Grech, Victoria, The Times, February 23). It can be truly said that such words come straight from the horse's mouth!

(Special thanks go to all the members of the FKGK (Front Kontra il-Golf Kors) for their support in compiling this part of the article.)

## **Wied I-Ghasel: decline of yet another valley**

Plans have been in the offing for quite some time now to safeguard Wied I-Ghasel, including proposals for the valley to be declared a Natura 2000 site - recent discoveries of a number of sandarac gum tree (gharghar) specimens certainly bolster interest in the valley.

Despite this, however, sewage was still flowing profusely along some sections of the valley up to at least a couple of weeks ago. Even more galling is the illegal construction of two dwellings right in the middle of the valley without any form of permission being sought.

A first enforcement notice was meted out to one of the dwellings at Triq il-Pont, Mosta (01456/97), after which the developer appealed on March 22, 1999, against enforcement action being taken in his regard. One wonders, on what grounds?

Building a new dwelling in the middle of a valley without a permit... it should be enough to send developers in the dock! The Planning Appeals Board has scheduled the meeting on this case for April 16.

The developer of the second dwelling has appealed to the Tribunal for the Investigation of Injustices! The capers developers resort to! Is there no way of stopping this mise en scene?

## **The Monaco connection**

After Prince Albert of Monaco lamented at the urban sprawl in Malta, the concern the principality's inhabitants have for our land use again came to the fore with a letter by Dr Burau-Senac, who said that Malta is in the throes of self-destruction after he witnessed the destruction of yet another green lung in Attard (Triq il-Gradijja).

"It seems that the people of Malta will never arise from their lethargy until the last green blades of green grass have been cut down..." When will we stop dismissing such observations as xenophobic drivel and start paying attention? Can we lift our head from the proverbial sand?

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