

## Need for more landscaping



The garigue in the Ta` Gerzuma area in Bahrija, previously used as a dump, has been cleared and the area fenced off to allow its regeneration. This excellent example of ecological restoration was conducted by MEPA after being alerted by Nature Trust volunteers.

January saw the first mention of the terms of reference for the demolition and subsequent reconstruction of the Golden Sands Hotel at Ghajn Tuffieha. I had thought of including this snippet of news in the "silver linings" section but from past experience I thought it would be wiser to wait for the eventual construction of the new hotel before rejoicing.

The demolition of the Golden Sands Hotel, however, cannot but be taken as a positive development, since we will be finally relieved of the sight scarring our beautiful Golden Bay. The unsightly mound of the hotel is even more striking if seen along the way from Xemxija, with an awesome contrast with the completely flat cultivated fields of Pwales Valley in the foreground.

Now that the tenets of landscaping are well known to our architects, unlike at the time the Golden Sands Hotel was built, we only wish for a less conspicuous building to be developed. I refer here, for the umpteenth time, to the disparity between the Mistra Village Holiday Complex building (exquisitely landscaped) and the eyesore towering block of apartments literally abutting on it.

I think I would be forcing my luck if I had to suggest that the land be left vacant after the demolition. On second thoughts, however, is the building of such a hotel so crucial to our economy, especially with over 40 applications for new hotels in the pipeline and with the recent opening of the InterContinental Hotel?

### Hunting distortions

I would here like to set straight some of the distortions of the facts made by the hunting lobby in last Friday week's Xarabank on TVM. I was elated by the incessant interruptions by rowdy elements from the hunting lobby which marred the programme, since these only served to undermine the hunters' cause even further.

The most blatant of such distortions, perhaps, was that hunters contribute positively towards the natural environment! This can be taken to be gospel truth - if only we were to shun the thousands of alien eucalyptus and acacia trees planted by hunters all over the countryside, the protected garigue which has been smothered by hunters with their nets at Pembroke, Mnajdra, all around Dingli Cliffs and at Nadur in Gozo, and the showering of lead pellets just a stone's throw from cultivated fields.

Can a measure similar to the recent introduction of LRP (lead replacement petrol) be adopted also for lead pellets (maybe, lead-free pellets?). It is inconceivable how both our major political parties pander to the hunting lobby as expressed by the recently issued new hunting regulations, where trapping was extended even to February.

The public is still waiting for our political parties to show they have guts and announce that, if returned to power, they would strive to come to grips with the "RTO" hoax. If, predictably, this does not materialise, then anyone can feel free to purchase a toy gun and "colonise" any part of the countryside he cherishes.

### The same old saga

This month we have more dumping reports. In fact in January it was the turn of Triq Pantar and Triq I-Imdina (opposite Mount Carmel Hospital) in Attard; Triq il-Missjunarju Malti in Mosta (opposite Mount St Joseph) and Triq Santa Lucija (with the Addolarata Cemetery as a backdrop) to hog the limelight.

One question I would like our authorities to answer is whether the fact that the land in question is privately owned entitles one to use it for dumping purposes.

In fact, significant stretches of garigue in Mgarr have been bought to be used solely for dumping purposes.

Besides building rubble, illegal scrapyards are also a common sight of the Maltese countryside, especially in the south. A case in point is the one literally abutting on Wied Has-Saptan in Birzebbuga, with plates of rusted metal threatening to fall into the ecologically important valley below.

Once again, it seems that the usual protracted legal procedures, often resorted to by developers, are preventing MEPA from taking direct action.

## **We are killing the Med**

After all the palaver generated by the Prestige oil tanker case, our news broadcasters reserved little airtime for yet another tanker disaster in the Mediterranean - fortunately, this time on a smaller scale.

The oil barge Spabunker IV sank on January 21 in Algeciras Bay, Gibraltar, with a load of 900 metric tons of fuel oil. The Port Authority at Gibraltar has attributed the accident to bad weather conditions.

There could finally be an answer to the mass strandings of marine mammals on beaches which has boggled the mind of scientists so long - it seems the reason is that some warships are fitted with submarine-seeking sonar devices, according to some Euro MPs.

In fact, strandings of marine mammals have increased following tests of the devices: 17 whales, dolphins and porpoises were beached in March 2000 following US tests near the Bahamas. Nine died following bleeding of the eyes, brain and lungs.

A NATO investigation admitted an earlier 1996 mass stranding of Curvier's beaked whales in Greece in the wake of LFAS tests could not have been caused naturally. Most recently, 15 beaked whales died after being washed up on the Canary Islands following naval manoeuvres had suffered brain lesions and inner ear damage.

A cross-party group of over 60 MEPs have signed a motion proposed by Green Euro-MP Caroline Lucas supporting a moratorium on LFAS use until a full environmental impact assessment is carried out, as required by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The European Parliament in Strasbourg approved a ban on such devices on January 16.

## **Silver linings**

January 13 is International Tree (Arbor) Day. Nature Trust (Malta) commemorates this day by organising a tree-planting session at Wied Ghollieq, l/o San Gwann. This year was no exception and the event was sponsored by co-partners HSBC with the participation of MEPA. The words of the CEO of HSBC - i.e. that big companies and entities have a social responsibility - still reverberate in my mind since they hit the nail on its head. Let's hope that the cue is taken by others.

Also worth mentioning is the ORNIS committee which will be set up and which will consist of pro- and anti-hunting entities and will have the tricky task of drawing up sustainable quotas for bird species which can be trapped and/or hunted. Sustainability is a principle which needs to become ingrained in every aspect of our life on this highly limited island of ours.

The replacement of leaded petrol with LRP by Enemalta also deserves some accolade. The next step is to focus on how to introduce bicycle lanes on our roads (tailor-made only for conventional traffic means) and to introduce alternative energy sources for our islands, such as wind and solar energy.

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