

Amateurs in Parliament



Contrary to what an MP said in Parliament, accumulations of beached seagrass debris help to conserve sand, and not the other way round.



The offshore wind farm of Rhyl Flats, just north of the picturesque seaside resort of Lladudno – no qualms about aesthetics here.

The latest shenanigans in Parliament have done nothing to restore the public's trust in the highest democratic institution in the country. With all the headline-grabbing foibles going on in the past few months, some Member of Parliament have meanwhile managed to get away with murder, so to speak.

For instance, during Parliamentary session 466 on April 30, Labour MP Roderick Galdes tabled Parliamentary Question 34012 for Resources Minister George Pullicino, in which he claimed that the accumulation of beached seagrass debris at Armier was preventing the natural sand replenishment of the beach.

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- Alan Deidun

This could not be further from the truth.

These accumulations, known as banquettes, may seem unsightly to many but they actually play very useful roles in beach ecosystems, including that of conserving the sand beneath them.

The removal or 'grooming' of these banquettes with heavy machinery is the actual culprit, as copious amounts of sand are normally scooped up, along with the beached vegetation, such that the underlying bedrock is sometimes exposed along some stretches.

The only way such banquettes should be groomed is either through manual means or using small vehicles, to avoid compacting sand and accelerating its erosion by making sand dune profiles more pronounced.

Even beach-cleaning has been turned into a political battle ground with the opposition perennially accusing the beach-cleaning authorities of neglecting the beaches as the seagrass debris is unsightly for tourists.

After years of requests, the local tourism and beach-cleaning authorities, which fall under two separate ministries, finally saw the light and agreed to start an annual beach-grooming campaign not earlier than spring, in view of the upcoming bathing season, in order to preserve the banquettes protecting the sand on the beach during the autumn and winter seasons, when waves would otherwise erode the beach away.

This incident is further proof that it is high time that technocrats, rather than political appointees, are given a greater share in decision-making.

Lessons from Wales

A recent short visit to north Wales has convinced me that the traditional frugality of the Maltese when it comes to water consumption is slowly but surely eroding away.

Despite not exactly being the most arid part of the world (north Wales is blessed, or cursed, by a mean annual rainfall two-and-a-half times the Maltese average), north Wales has mounted a steadfast campaign aimed at conserving water. A hallmark of the campaign is the many signs peppering most attractions urging visitors to use water carefully.

The same attractions probably have their own rainwater harvesting systems. Waterless urinals in hotels and public toilets, reputed to save up to 100,000 litres of water every year, are another commendable water-conserving feature.

Such frugality, in a country whose wells never run dry, contrasts with the recent statement by the Water Services Corporation chairman that Malta can never run out of water thanks to its desalination plants, which are not yet running at full capacity. This attitude undermines any feeble attempt to instill some water conservation awareness in the Maltese public, which is growing ever more accustomed to powerjet car washes and to anomalously low water tariffs.

The UK is also very conscious of its paper consumption. In fact, enough paper is used in the UK each year to consume a forest the size of Wales. Numerous low-key initiatives are being undertaken to tackle the issue, including the replacement of paper towels in toilets with hand driers.

One of the arguments made by detractors of the *Sikka l-Bajda* offshore wind farm is that it would mar the aesthetics of the Mellieħa-Qawra coastal area in that the wind turbines would be very visible from land. The Welsh do not seem to have the same qualms – for instance, Rhyll Flats is a 25-turbine offshore wind farm just north of Lladudno, reputed to be the most picturesque and refined sea resort in Wales.

Booming trade in ivory, tiger parts

The survival of wild rhinos, tigers and elephants in key countries is under threat, a new World Wildlife Fund report has found.

The analysis, released as governments gather in Geneva this week to discuss a range of issues related to wildlife trade, rates 23 of the top African and Asian nations facing high levels of poaching and trafficking in ivory, rhino horn and tiger parts.

The report, entitled *Wildlife Crime Scorecard: Assessing Compliance with and Enforcement of CITES Commitments for Tigers, Rhinos and Elephants*, examines the many countries considered as range, transit or consumer countries for these species. It gives countries scores of green, yellow or red for each animal, as applicable, as an indicator of recent progress.

WWF found that illegal trade persists in virtually all 23 countries reviewed, but the scorecard seeks to differentiate between countries where it is actively being countered from those where current efforts are entirely inadequate.

Among the worst performers is Vietnam that received two red scores, for rhinos and tigers. Vietnam is identified in the report as the top destination country for rhino horn, which has fuelled a poaching crisis in South Africa.

A record 448 South African rhinos were killed for their horns in 2011, and the country, which itself receives a yellow for rhinos, has already lost an additional 262 this year. According to the report, many Vietnamese have been arrested or implicated in South Africa for acquiring rhino horns illegally, including Vietnamese diplomats.

Inadequate enforcement of domestic ivory markets in China is also highlighted in the report. China receives a yellow score for elephants, indicating a failure by the country to effectively police its legal ivory markets. "The ongoing flow of large volumes of illegal ivory to China suggests that such ivory may be moving into legal ivory trade channels," the report says.

China is urged to dramatically and consistently improve its enforcement controls for ivory and to communicate to Chinese nationals in Africa that anyone caught importing illegal wildlife

products into China would be prosecuted, and if convicted, severely penalised.

Tens of thousands of African elephants are being killed by poachers each year for their tusks, and China and Thailand are top destinations for illegal African ivory. Thailand receives a red score for its failure to close a legal loophole that makes it easy for retailers to sell ivory from poached African elephants.

Elephant poaching is at crisis levels in central Africa, where rhinos are likely to be poached to extinction. Last year witnessed the highest elephant poaching rates across the continent since records began. Early this year hundreds of elephants were killed in a single incident in a Cameroon national park.

Silver linings from the report are green scores for India and Nepal for each of the three species groups. In 2011, Nepal celebrated a year without any rhino poaching incidents, which was largely attributed to improvements to anti-poaching and other law enforcement efforts.

The report can be accessed from <http://mb.cision.com/Public/18/9286062/be5cc11302cc5664.pdf>

No Arab spring yet for Egyptian zoos

Despite the Arab spring being hailed for heralding the beginnings of democracy in the Arab world, the revolution has claimed many victims, some that are still awaiting recognition, let alone redress.

For instance, online activists are desperately calling for attention for the plight of animals in Egyptian zoos

These include half-starved lions and tigers, which are fed through the use of metal rods, doubling up as props for photo shoots with visitors, tumour-ridden camels and scarred wolves in desperate need of medical attention. Last week, one of the lionesses died of starvation.

A Facebook group has been set up to rally support for this cause:

www.facebook.com/RescueAnimalsInEgyptZoos.

www.alandeidun.eu