

Buskett: woodland vs public gardens

The upkeep of Buskett woodland recently repeatedly fell under the axe of some mismanaged landscaping works. The tenets governing the upkeep of a woodland area are completely different from those governing the upkeep of a public garden.

After some weak rumblings a couple of months ago, when some willows were inadvertently pruned along Wied il-Luq by the same culprits, last week a whole area of undergrowth was winnowed away, with budding oaks and a number of lentisks running the gauntlet.

Fortunately, once alerted by Nature Trust, BirdLife (Malta) and other concerned entities, officials from the Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment, were quick on the scene to halt any further scarring. Some months back, a number of old-growth oak trees were overtly pruned to make way for a rubble wall reconstruction scheme.

A woodland area is not meant to be pruned or interfered with in any way and the undergrowth in itself harbours a whole gamut of floral and faunal species. Several species of birds, including Sardinian Warbler and Cetti's Warbler, also use low lying vegetation to build their nests. At least five nests are believed to have been destroyed in one of the latest cutting sprees

Do we want to give the 'public garden' facet to every natural habitat in these islands just to portray the perception that the countryside is being taken care of or to allay fears that the number of workers employed on such ventures may be surplus?

Even though I do not agree with the choice of flowers planted in our roundabouts, one must concede that such spots have been given a facelift - however, Buskett and other nature hotspots should be strictly out of bounds for any impromptu embellishment project

Buskett, which should be under MEPA management, is one of five International Important Bird Areas in Malta. It is also one of the sites that should be designated as Special Protection Areas under the Birds Directive. Furthermore, this area together with Girgenti, enjoys legal protection under local legislation and is a candidate Natura 2000 site.

On a positive note, the installation of differentiated waste collectors at Buskett is to be praised.

Riviera Martinique reconstruction

Outline development permission has been given to the owners of the old Riviera Martinique Hotel at Ghajn Tuffieha for the development of a restaurant and a multi-purpose hall in a two-storey building.

The debris which has blemished the clay slopes for so long should be removed. My instinct as an environmentalist is also to demolish the entire structure to regale visitors with unspoilt landscapes - however, realistically, this is just wishful thinking since the footprint was already committed by a preceding structure.

At least, the moray of a new hotel on site was averted - money from any planning gain from the project should be used to install educational signs around the sand dunes to avert further damage by sunbathers.

Mgiebah and DCC revisited

The MEPA PRO's attack on me last Sunday (Letters, page 16) shows that Mr Gingell did not learn anything from his two predecessors - Ivan Fenech and Sylvana Debono - who have managed to foster a good relationship with environmental correspondents and NGOs in general.

Mr Gingell's diatribe against me and Anne Zammit leaves much to be desired. He did not have the patience to await my update on the Mgiebah case (i.e. the posting of the enforcement notice by MEPA, etc.) something which I was going to carry this Sunday.

I suggest Mr Gingell gets acquainted with newspaper publishing deadlines before he accuses correspondents of a lack of propriety.

Although Mr Gingell seeks to set our mind at rest that the case will soon be added to the Direct Action list, how does he explain the 6,000 pending enforcement notice backlog that MEPA has? By Direct Action is he conjuring the sort of laissez-faire that MEPA has allowed in the La Grotta case, originally consigned to Direct Action in 1997 and still in full business today, with the case being conveniently adjourned to the end of the profitable summer season. I could provide Mr Gingell with many other supposedly 'Direct Action' cases - he should be the first to complain about MEPA's lack of human resources if this is the reason behind such protracted enforcement.

As for the Mgiebah case, can Mr Gingell confirm that MEPA specifically asked Raymond Sammut to try to identify the perpetrators of the infringement and that, after his umpteenth call to MEPA to get things moving, he was brusquely told that MEPA is following other cases too. If he does not take my word for it, why does he not ask Mr Sammut himself?

I will only rest when I see that the structure in question has been dismantled by MEPA and the culprit, if he is identified, made to pay for the rehabilitation of the garigue. This is the true meaning of 'Direct Action'. The police should be called in to determine the real culprit of such a misdemeanour rather than MEPA asking members of the public to do the investigating themselves.

I appreciate Mr Gingell's outlining of the ethical principles MEPA applies; however, the names of some particular architects have become synonymous with sanctioning and, in a small country like ours, it is difficult to be convinced of the plainsailing reality he is trying to depict as evident from the different measures applied in terms of enforcement in comparable cases by the same authority.

Architects involved in decision-making should not be practising architects nor should they be involved in any way in politics; also, why not appoint other non-architects on DCC boards - are architects the sole 'expertise' Mr Gingell is referring to?

In almost every article I include accolades for MEPA for dismantling illegalities or refuting dubious applications under the title 'Silver linings'. Does MEPA expect only praise to be showered on it?

At the time of writing, Nature Trust were about to praise MEPA for their actions at Mgiebah. The MEPA PRO should also find time to reply to WWF (World Wildlife Fund), which criticised MEPA last month for not including some nature sites, such as Ta' Cenc in Gozo, in its proposed Natura 2000 list, if he (or MEPA as a whole) is not ready to take some well-meaning criticism.

Mr Gingell should know quite well that I have the greatest respect for MEPA employees who work round the clock to fulfil their duties. The problem I have is with the decision-making and with the protocol followed which shackles MEPA from taking direct decisive action.

I often thanked MEPA PROs in the past for their help - hence, my criticism is certainly not directed towards the MEPA PR office, which is certainly doing its job.

However, how does Mr Gingell expect me to describe an entity which has failed to reply to my letter on the introduction of Ammophila at White Tower Bay, sent last November?

On a final note, Mr Gingell should not make disparaging, unprofessional comments, like "This article misleads and misinforms your readers solely to give 'the green whistle-blower' something to write about" - environmental correspondents are part and parcel of the media of every civilised country, and these are bound to put pressure on those charged with enforcing environmental legislation.

Mr Gingell can rest assured that there is no shortage of environment issues on which to write. I hope the collaboration between NGOs and environmental correspondents and the MEPA PRO office can still proceed smoothly.

I leave it to your readers to judge whether the work done by such correspondents is having the desired results.

Quote of the month

For those guilty of generating a cacophony on our beaches, some wisdom from the Pope, uttered while resting on the fringes of Monte Rosa in the Alps:

"In this oasis of calm, in front of this marvellous show of nature, one can easily appreciate just how fruitful silence, something which is becoming ever more rare these days, can be."

Silver linings

The proposed construction of two maisonettes and two apartments at 2, Triq Pedidalwett, Swieqi (PA06515/02) was refused by the DCC, which upheld its original refusal.

Over two years ago, Nature Trust had issued a press releasing calling for the valley's safeguarding.

While praising the DCC for its resolute stand on the matter, one augurs that the valley is rehabilitated as a potential green lung for the area.

Summer fires

Dry season fires are common in the Mediterranean region. However, they seldom make news here. Last Sunday, while relaxing at Gnejna Bay, I witnessed at first hand the wanton destruction of a whole swathe of clay slope vegetation through the act of some pyromaniac.

Civil Protection officers battled with the fires from 3 p.m. till late at night.

Ghajn Tuffieha close by also bears the brunt of frequent acts of vandalism, which are abetted by the tinder-try conditions. This time round, two persons were caught in the act.

Such acts of cowardice are coaxed by the public's laid-back attitude - while at the beach, a minor effort could result in the Civil Protection being dispatched on site (tel: 199 or 112). Tougher penalties as a more convincing deterrent should also be meted out to those caught in the act.

Pembroke afforestation

I express solidarity with Mark Causon, secretary of the Pembroke residents' association, and with the Pembroke council, for striving to give some more momentum to the proposed Pembroke afforestation after it ground to a halt due to disagreements between the local council and the Ministry for Rural Affairs and the Environment.

Marasaxlokk carobs revisited

An application (PA 03495/04) has been posted for the construction of a swimming pool and ancillary facilities very close to the 'felled carobs' site in Marsaxlokk at Ras il-Wied. Is the carob felling related in some way to such a proposed development?

Offroading scourge

Wied tal-Mosta, Wied is-Sewda in Zebbug and Wied Hanaq close to Ramla in Gozo are just a few of the growing list of scalps claimed by the offroading scourge in our islands. Tyre markings are the only signs left in the wake of offroading ventures which smother vegetation and stir up whole dust clouds, besides causing soil erosion, runoff and desertification.

Clay appears to be the preferred substratum for offroading enthusiasts, with the Selmun clay slopes bearing the full brunt of their forays, as evident from the numerous gulleys created after heavy rainfall since most of the clay had been previously loosened and crumb structure destroyed.

Janfranco (1999) laments the disappearance of one plant species, *Trifolium lappaceum*, from its last haunt on the clays of Selmun in the late 1980s or early 1990s due to offroading exploits. Do we need a plethora of other species to become extinct to start budging on the matter?

A prominent German car manufacturer even chose to market its newly fledged offroading vehicle by holding a publicity stunt on a clay slope site in Gozo, inadvertently breaking the law in the process (liable to fines up to Lm1,000) and buttressing the illegal practice of offroading in the process. Authorities should seriously start enforcing Legal Notice 196 (1997) of the Motor Vehicles (Offroading) Regulations.

Frequent asperity between ALE officers and offroading enthusiasts is witnessed in the Rđum Majjiesa/Rđum id-Delli area (behind the Golden Sands Hotel/barracks) area with the latter ruthlessly driving in on what should be scheduled garigue.

Can the area be cordoned off once and for all through the placement of large boulders, for example? Offroading enthusiasts rally behind their claim that the area is also used by horse riding ventures. Is horse-trampling tantamount to wild careering by a vehicle?

A possible solution could be the introduction of offroading tracks in a degraded part of the islands since to date no such sites have been earmarked for the 'practice'.