

It's litmus test time



This entangled moray eel within what should be a Marine Protected Area is testimony to the low priority given to marine conservation in Malta. Photo courtesy of Amphibians Diving club.

The summer heat seems to impart a sense of gravitas, a sense of a growing crescendo, leading us ultimately to a climax – in this case a slew of significant decisions by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority which are due over the coming weeks and months.

These include a wide range of issues and locations, including the boathouses at St Thomas Bay, the Lidl supermarket in Xewkija, and the Hondoq ir-Rummien-Qala Creek project involving the 'development' of a yacht marina and residential and tourism facilities.

St Thomas Bay boathouses

The 'boathouse' hot potato rears its ugly head from time to time, and what should simply be a simple matter of planning enforcement is a favourite in generating hype on media portals.

News of a possible large-scale sanctioning of the St Thomas Bay illicit coastal settlement recently emerged in the local press, with Mepa purportedly being in the process of drafting an action plan for the 370 boathouses, on similar lines as the Dwejra boathouses area. Whenever I hear mention about an action plan, I have a sense of foreboding, and with good reason too, especially since the Dwejra Action Plan had proposed the sanctioning, through the payment of an annual contribution, of part of the Dwejra boathouses.

The Mepa spokesman rightly underscored the fact that the whole process might take years (the approval of the draft Marfa Action Plan, which encompassed the Armier boathouses, which has been in the pipeline for many years now, offers some hindsight here), during which time the owners of the same boathouses might continue to enjoy the fruits of their actions.

The fact that most of the land at St Thomas Bay is private should not be used to give the boathouses on site a veneer of legitimacy.

Even the oldest holm oaks (ballut) on the island, reputed to be close to 1,000 years old, lie on private land in Wardija – what if the owner/s decided to chop these down in an unilateral action?

St Thomas Bay is not as ecologically important as the Wardija site but it is still a coveted coastal site which should have been preserved in its pristine state, free from the cloistered conditions of unsanitary and unsightly boathouses.

In granting an en masse approval, Mepa would simply be conveying the following message to Joe Citizen: infringements, especially if conducted on one's own private patch and conducted in a large enough lobby, can pass scot-free.

In this column I have lauded the enforcement efforts at St Thomas Bay when concrete platforms on site along with construction debris dumped into the sea were removed, but such action would simply pale into insignificance if the boathouses are permitted to stay.

Only those boathouses genuinely used by part-time or full-time fishermen for the storage of seacraft should be allowed.

Gozo Lidl

The issue over the latest Lidl supermarket application, this time in Xewkija, risks being bogged down in a debacle over how much of the site in question is actually in an Outside Development Zone site or not, when the issue of most relevance is another one.

While a number of environmentalists, including myself, have criticised the application as, according to the Mepa website, it is completely in an ODZ site, Lidl's legal adviser stated in a reply to this newspaper last Sunday that only part of the site in question is ODZ, and this would not be impinged upon by the development.

I am wary of the direction in which the debate is veering.

Lidl has, through its contractor of choice, Polidano, submitted a number of applications over the past few years for supermarkets in ODZ areas, including those at Safi (approved, triggering an indignant Audit Officer report and an en masse resignation by the Mepa board), Żebbuġ (not approved) and Mosta (not approved).

The Lidl supermarket in Luqa was approved despite legitimate concerns that its development would interfere with flight operations due to its proximity to major flight runways.

Hence, it is only understandable that local environmentalists get cold feet when Lidl says it will respect the ODZ part of the Xewkija site and that this would not be developed.

Let us assume Lidl is right and the Mepa website is not – that is, that only part of the site in question is ODZ – two nagging points are worth highlighting. Firstly, what weight does Lidl's assurance carry?

For instance, what guarantee is there that in future the ODZ part of the site, supposedly left for posterity as a 'green site', would not be requested by Lidl as an additional car park or for other ancillary facilities? It is difficult to envisage a large retail activity such as Lidl being completely ring-fenced, contained and not spilling out onto adjacent areas.

Secondly, is the ODZ designation the only yardstick one should apply? Some have claimed the site in question is in a dilapidated state with no ecological value. This might be true but what about the sense of openness and un-cluttered environment Gozo is renowned for?

Victoria also hosts a cohort of large-scale retail outlets which, truth be told, are not supermarkets, but which still result in traffic-congested access roads around them. Is a similar scenario for Xewkija desirable?

Some of the online comments posted in reaction to the news item featured in The Times defy credulity in terms of their short-sightedness. For instance, some of these comments extolled the cheap prices Lidl offered to its patrons and that Gozo direly needed such an outlet... as if the future of an island aspiring to be an ecological one and aiming to offer some solace to Maltese and foreign tourists from all the trappings of an urban lifestyle should hinge on the presence or not of a supermarket.

Mistaking the wood for the trees

A good friend of mine – Jason Fabri – a seasoned diving instructor who has been plying his trade for over 25 years, recently witnessed the indiscriminate attack on a shallow-water area at Tigné, Sliema, by ruthless individuals who, over a couple of hours, simply pillaged with impunity sackloads of sea urchins, octopus and any other marine life of commercial or edible use.

The most dastardly part of it all was that the act occurred during a briefing session with budding divers, who were being instructed on the need to protect marine life during their dives.

Fabri duly alerted the Police Administrative Law Enforcement that same day but it seems no personnel were dispatched to the site. Although the individuals ravaging the marine life on site may not have been breaking the law as edible sea urchins and octopus can be harvested, it is despicable for them to conduct such actions so close to areas that are popular with diving activities which serve as a showcase of Malta's underwater biodiversity to foreigners. Who should be regulating sea urchin harvesting, for instance, as is done in places like Sicily?

A big fuss was subsequently raised over whether or not Fabri had submitted the report to the ALE through the proper channels.

This is well and truly a case of missing the wood for the trees. I am sure of Fabri's integrity and in his proactive stance towards the environment, and even if he might not have followed protocol in submitting a report to the ALE, the real issue here is that the marine environment is still at the mercy of a few who manage to pillage with impunity due to a slow-reacting enforcement arm.

Such pillaging also takes the form of trammel nets deployed at Delimara and St Thomas Bay literally metres away from the shore. It also takes the form of Marine Protected Areas which exist only on paper – the so-called paper reserves – with no implementation of management measures whatsoever.

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The photo on opposite page, showing a moray eel entangled in a fishing line suspended from a cliff position, is testimony to this, since this photo was shot just within the Rdum Majjiesa MPA.

All this is happening in a country projecting itself as the mecca of diving tourism and seeking to promote its MPAs with foreign divers – just imagine what a foreign diver would say if, after being enticed to dive at Rdum Majjiesa, he is faced by the sight of this moray eel.

Marine conservation and diving tourism, which are inherently dependent on each other, well and truly lie at the bottom of our country's priorities.

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