

No halt to biodiversity loss



The drive to clear discarded cars and other bulky refuse from our countryside is welcome, but illegal extensions to scrapyards (such as the one above in Birzebugia) should also be tackled, as well as the parking of vehicles within farms, which double up as vehicle depots, side by side with cow sheds and manure mounds.

In 2001, European leaders signed up as contracting parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, joining 130 world leaders in pledging support for an ambitious endeavour to halt biodiversity loss by 2010. A Biodiversity Action Plan to achieve this goal was embarked upon in May 2006.

Earlier this year, an assessment was published of the progress achieved half-way through the implementation of the action plan. It is a damning indictment of the European Commission's general failure to stem the extermination of rare species and habitats within its borders.

In particular, the assessment report reveals that 50 per cent of all species and up to 80 per cent of habitat types deemed by the EU to be "of conservation interest" in Europe now have "unfavourable conservation" status. The same goes for over 40 per cent of European bird species.

Silver linings included success of extending the Natura 2000 network, as well as strides forward in the protection of endangered large mammal species and the conservation of the marine environment, including the adoption of the Marine Strategy Directive. The combined Natura 2000 network now comprises more than 25,000 sites, covering around 17 per cent of the European Union's total land area.

Cause for concern is the pressure from agriculture, as a result of the impetus for greater food and biofuel production. As a result, vast swathes of land within the EU could be converted for intensive agriculture in the next few years, causing the extermination of any wildlife it may support.

The assessment criticised Malta, along with Italy, Greece, Portugal, Slovakia and Luxembourg, for failing to even respond to the Commission's questions when the report was being compiled.

Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas's message could not have been more forceful: "This continuing loss of biodiversity is critical, not just because of the intrinsic value of nature, but also because of the resulting decline in vital 'ecosystem services'. We have set an ambitious biodiversity target for 2010, we know what needs to be done and we have the tools to achieve this. I therefore call on all member states to redouble their efforts to sustain the variety of life, and the health of the ecosystems that underpin our prosperity and well being."

Publish those names

Local political establishments should take the cue from Bill Clinton's William J. Clinton Foundation which, after a decade of resistance to disclosure, finally lifted the lid on the list of its staggering 205,000 donors, who managed to cobble up an impressive \$496 million.

Apart from the ordinary people on the list (who forked less than \$250 each and who constituted 90 per cent of all donors), who would not be expected to cause a stir, there were some

eyebrow-raising names on the list, including the Saudi government, Indian politicians, the Blackwater security firm, besmirched due to its Iraq operations, and Jerry Yang, co-founder of Yahoo, who was bashed for keeling over and passing e-mails sent through his network to the Chinese government, eventually resulting in the arrest of two notorious dissidents.

In Malta, local parties have been urged to publish the names of their financiers for years, to no avail. A threshold could be introduced to weed out the non-commercial entities contributing insignificant amounts, to avoid disclosing the identity of all people and thus maintain the popular party-funding mechanisms.

The Clinton Foundation affirmed that almost no donor objected to their name being published and none asked for its donation to be refunded in the aftermath of the disclosure. Would the same apply to the dozens of construction and commercial gurus who support our political parties if their names were published in future?

Clinton also committed himself to subjecting paid speeches and details of future activities of his foundation to an ethics review, and to inform the State Department of new sources of income and revenue. How's that for unfettered transparency?

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