

Serious enforcement at last



Mepa enforcement reclaiming the coast from caravan owners at St Thomas' Bay.

Enforcement has often been regarded as the Cinderella arm of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, mainly in view of its perceived fickle and ineffective nature.

Mepa is aware of this public perception, which has matured over the years as a result of its burgeoning enforcement caseload.

The appointment of Alex Borg as the new head of new enforcement at Mepa might signal a sea change as regards enforcement, with numerous high-profile cases being tackled over the past few weeks.

For instance, at St Thomas Bay, in preparation for the summer season, which normally sees caravans being placed along the bay's shoreline for months on end, Mepa recently ripped up concrete platforms which were illegally laid, presumably by caravan owners, so as to 'cushion' their extended stay by the water's edge.

Through this column I was the first to report this infringement, along with the dumping of tons of construction rubble and debris along the shoreline and into the sea in order to widen the coastal stretch available to caravan owners in a spurious case of land reclamation.

There is obviously nothing wrong with owning and enjoying a caravan. However, a situation in which a crowded and impromptu 'caravan site' sprouts up every summer in an unmanaged fashion, discharging raw sewage and undertaking unauthorised 'engineering' works on the coastal environment, is certainly not on.

Yet another case reported in this column refers to a remote site in Ghaxaq, out of public view. Mepa removed a total of 60 truckloads of inert waste from the site, which was subjected to systematic dumping despite its agricultural setting.

This case highlights the staggering quantities of construction and demolition waste being constantly generated on these islands and the paucity in appropriate receptors of such waste, with reclaimed quarry sites filling up fast.

Desperate attempt to save Wied il-Ghasel

The Wied il-Ghasel Residents Committee and the NGO Harsien Patrimonju Malti have applied for an injunction to stop the developers of the swathe of land along the valley side at Wied il-Ghasel in Mosta in their tracks.

It might sound like a draconian measure but it is literally the last chance for residents since the developer has opted to proceed with works on site despite an ongoing appeal against the permit issued for the development.

Ironically, the next hearing of the appeal is scheduled for September, by which time there will be a fait accompli (a hollowed out site, tailor-made for the development in question) which would undermine the usefulness of the appeals process.

At the time of writing, the court hearing on the injunction had yet to be heard.

Major recognition for local NGO's work

On World Environmental Day, the European Commission presented local environmental NGO Nature Trust (Malta) with an award for the most outstanding project in Youth in Action under the European Voluntary Service.

The project, which concerned the protection of injured turtle protection was conducted by the NGO in collaboration with staff at the Aquaculture Research Centre at San Luġjan.

The award was presented to Nature Trust president Vince Attard at various events held in Brussels and Antwerp to commemorate European Youth Week 2011.

The NGO's work in this area will be further galvanised through the opening in the near future of a wildlife rehabilitation clinic to handle injured marine and land animal species, at the recently opened sustainability centre at Xrobb I-Għaġin.

Besides Nature Trust (Malta), Bicref is another local NGO involved in the rescue of injured turtles.

Breakthrough in red coral protection

Although the Maltese are not known for their predilection for precious red coral, this coveted species has been 'fished' in the Mediterranean Sea since Greek times, with most shallow-water (in less than 50m depth of water) populations being almost completely wiped out.

This slow-growing species is highly valued by the jewellery industry, which sculpts the bright red skeleton of this coral species to make all sorts of items.

Our islands do not boast extensive banks of this species, with most grounds being extensively harvested in the past courtesy of frequent visits by foreign fishermen and also through the operations of a local company in the 1980s.

After years of squabbling between various Mediterranean countries, some of which being more keen to safeguard the interests of their red coral industry (such that a proposal by the US at the last CITES meeting in Doha to ban all trade in the species failed), a breakthrough was finally registered.

In fact, the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean within the Food and Agriculture Organisation, which is also instrumental in regulating fishing for a number of species in the Mediterranean, adopted a binding recommendation at its 35th meeting in Rome last month, which should hopefully usher in a new era of sustainable red coral harvesting in the Mediterranean.

The adopted binding recommendation, based on an EU proposal, requests contracting parties to prohibit the exploitation of red coral populations at depths of less than 50 metres, ensures that authorised fishermen record and report to national authorities the daily catches and fishing effort by area and depths (e.g. number of fishing days, numbers of diving, and so forth), engages in capacity-building efforts and other research cooperative activities to improve knowledge on red coral and red coral fisheries, including entering into cooperative arrangements with other appropriate international bodies, and promotes participatory programmes with relevant stakeholders.