

Watering down groundwater protection



Sunbathing on coastal garigue at Blue Lagoon - Another face of unsustainability.

I hate to criticise the same entity over and over again but the Malta Chamber of SMEs (GRTU) has repeatedly shown that it deserves the dunce cap for its green credentials. Despite seeking to shore up its green credentials (and obviously make a hefty profit in the process) by setting up a waste management company (Green MT Ltd), the GRTU or its representatives have repeatedly voiced opinions or proposals of dubious environmental value.

The latest example is its complaint that the government (specifically, Resources Minister George Pullicino) was out to get water bowser operators (many of who, incidentally, are members of the GRTU), through proposed measures to prevent further illegal groundwater extraction.

The fact that our water aquifer is under strain from over-extraction has almost become a cliché. It is estimated that the 34 million cubic metres of water pumped out annually is well beyond the sustainable level of 23 to 28 million cubic metres.

NGOs have long clamoured for the government to smell the coffee and to take concrete steps to stem the illegal flow of groundwater. Finally, the government did - its proposals aim to ensure that all water bowser suppliers have a specific licence from the Malta Resources Authority, and a tracking system to show from where and how much water is being extracted and where it is being taken. This system, supervised at all times, would eventually give a complete picture of what was really happening with our groundwater.

One would have expected NGOs to scramble over each other to support such a commendable development, and to strongly condemn the GRTU's shortsighted lament. Strangely though, the silence is deafening. This is unfortunate indeed, especially since the GRTU is known for its leverage.

I would not be surprised if the proposals are heavily watered down over the coming weeks or months. Predictably, the NGOs would then spring back into action with words of condemnation. It is at this stage that the NGOs should invest time and effort in lobbying the government not to cave in to GRTU's demands. It's all a question of clever timing.

Enforcement at sea

There is a stark contrast between the media coverage given to enforcement action carried out over contraventions on land - which rightly hog the limelight - compared with enforcement carried out at sea.

For example, two individuals were recently apprehended by an Armed Forces of Malta patrol on the shores of Filfla scouring the rocks for limpets, despite the fact that since 1988 no vessel can anchor within one nautical mile of the islet nor land on it without authorisation.

However, despite access to Filfla being completely prohibited the illegal practice of limpet collection from the islet is rife.

This commendable AFM action did not show up on the radar of any of the local media. The media needs to give equal importance to enforcement carried out at sea, whether it is conducted by the AFM or the Malta Environment and Planning Authority.

This incident further underscores the urgent need for the authorities to declare Filfla and other marine areas as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) - the management plan for the Filfla MPA has been gathering dust for the past three years.

Not a whale of a time

Last week, another landmark notch could have been marked in the conservation of marine mammals and predators. Following the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species meeting in Dubai a few months ago, which debated the possible banning of bluefin tuna fishing, last week the 62nd meeting of the 88-nation International Whaling Commission (IWC) ended in Agadir, Morocco.

Like all such high-profile meetings, a post-mortem assessment indicates a chequered progress sheet. The meeting was a continuous tug-of-war between member nations seeking to curb whale quotas and three other nations - Iceland, Norway and Japan - that currently whale-hunt and which sought to overturn the 24-year-old moratorium on whale hunting instituted in 1986.

Despite the moratorium, these three countries still exploit legal loopholes to continue their despicable cull of such leviathians, with an estimated 1,578 whales having being killed in the 2008-2009 season alone.

Since the start of the moratorium, it is mooted that Japan alone has killed over 9,400 whales in the Southern Ocean in the name of 'scientific research' (after the 'research' is over the whale meat inevitably ends up being consumed).

The meeting in Agadir, which was marred by the decision to conduct proceedings behind closed doors and to ban NGOs until the final day of proceedings, ended in a veritable stalemate, with the flimsy whale-hunting moratorium still in place, as well as whale-hunting activities by Japan in the Southern Ocean.

This ocean is still considered as the last major refuge for many whale species and, despite a large whale reserve being declared in 1994, Japan still hunts for whales in the ocean since the IWC has no enforcement powers in the area. In order to curb such infringement, Australia has sought redress from the International Court of Justice in The Hague, the Netherlands.

Today, most great whale species in the Southern Ocean remain severely depleted. More than 200,000 Antarctic blue whales used to live in the Southern Ocean but 20th-century whaling has decimated this population, and latest estimates put it at around 2,300 individuals.

About 725,000 fin whales were killed in previous commercial whaling operations - and the species is now listed as endangered. Yet the IWC is proposing to open a commercial hunt for fin whales in the Southern Ocean.

Anti-whaling proponents highlight that there is more economic benefit to be gained from whale-watching activities which have mushroomed all over the world. In fact, according to a recently published study, whale-watching revenue topped \$2 billion in 2009, and it is set to grow by 10 per cent a year.

Just four whale species have been recorded in Maltese waters in the past 10 years - sperm whales, Cuvier's beaked whales, long-finned pilot whales and fin whales.