

## Caught in the act



The mature carob tree which bore the brunt of the senseless attack by chainsaw-touting individuals. No amount of tree-planting can make up for this lost natural heritage. Right: One of the sites before it was cleared of bulky metal, glass and other kinds of waste. Some 32 localities are being targeted.

A report regarding a carob-pruning exercise along Hill Street in Qala was lodged last weekend with Mepa's Gozo enforcement section.

When enforcement officers and police arrived on site, they met with the gruesome sight of a mature carob tree that had been cut down to size by a chainsaw. The tree's complete obliteration was only prevented by the enforcement officers' timely intervention.

Could the attack have been related to any of the two pending planning applications for works close to the carob tree? There is an application for a dwelling and swimming pool and another to demolish an existing building and erect garages, dwellings and pools on a site in Hill Street and another site in Federico Barocci Street, Qala. Could the carob tree have been obstructing the view of the green area in front of either of these two projects?

Carob trees are listed in Schedule II of the revised Trees and Woodlands Protection Regulations (2008) and are thus protected within the Outside Development Zone (ODZ) and Urban Conservation Areas. Regulation 12 of the legislation states: "No person shall fell or attempt to fell, cut or attempt to cut, strip off... the bark or leaves, uproot or attempt to uproot... or in any way destroy or attempt to destroy, damage... any tree or part thereof listed in Schedule I or Schedule II except by permission of the competent authority."

The perpetrators of the attack may contend they were just pruning the carob tree in question. However, the definition of pruning is clearly spelt out in the regulations: "Pruning means the practice of cutting away of primary branches, secondary branches, offshoots, and suckers at the base of horticulturally-grown trees, with the aim of removing diseased or injured parts of the tree, or to influence vertical or lateral growth, or to increase flowering or fruit yield." The carob tree in question was certainly not serving any horticultural purpose.

Appropriate penalties are contemplated in the legislation, along with compensatory tree planting. Hopefully, the full force of the law will be applied in this disgraceful case of environmental degradation, to send an unequivocal message that such acts cannot be tolerated.

This would reflect the spirit of the recently-introduced civil liability legislation and the harsh sentences for illegal extensions to quarry operations.

### The ODZ mill

There was a lot of hype surrounding the claimed spike in ODZ permits issued prior to last year's general election, so I think it is fitting to crunch some numbers regarding ODZ applications submitted over the last few months.

A total of 522 ODZ applications were submitted between last August and January, an average of 87 such applications per month. The figure represents a slight reduction in ODZ fever over previous months and years, where the monthly average hovered around 100 applications.

However, despite this good news, ODZ applications make up about 18 per cent of the total planning applications submitted to Mepa over the same period. The lion's share of ODZ applications in January is taken up, as usual, by proposed sanctioning of illegal extensions or developments, proposed extensions of existing developments, and proposed agriculture-related development, mainly the construction of reservoirs, tool rooms and buildings for animal rearing.

However, around 10 per cent of all monthly applications are for proposed dwellings in pristine areas and, in what has become a regular and unshakable tradition, most (about three-quarters) of them are in Gozo.

Some examples include PA 05322/08, for the construction of two terraced houses with swimming pools at Triq Wied Sara, Ghasri; PA 06061/08, for the construction of a terraced house at Triq Qasam San Pawl, Sta Lucija, Kercem; PA 06083/08, for the construction of three dwellings and three garages at Ta' Karkar, Xaghra; PA 05600/08 for the construction of two dwellings at Triq il-Kortoll, Xaghra; and PA 05613/08 for the construction of a basement garage, two flats and pool at Dahlet Pawluzzu, San Lawrenz.

Malta is not spared the ravages of such speculation, with similar planning applications featuring in Bidnija, Mgarr and Zabbar.

What raises eyebrows are the increased requests for the development of swimming pools and the surge in requests for demolition of farmhouses to make way for residences. This is sometimes guised under the phrase 'rehabilitation of an existing farmhouse', which usually entails the inclusion of a swimming pool and other modcons.

Hopefully, Mepa's much-awaited annual report, due to be published at the end of the month, will include some statistics on ODZ permits issued throughout 2008.

## **A tall order**

Hot on the heels of Parliamentary Secretary Jason Azzopardi's drive to expel squatters from public land, another parliamentary secretary, this time Chris Said, has embarked on a similarly welcome initiative.

He has set up a task force to spearhead the removal of about 240 tons of scrap metal and bulky refuse, and 40 tons of glass and oil drums from 32 localities around the islands (six in Gozo and 26 in Malta).

The process involves Mepa and local councils identifying sites blotted by such scars, and the owners of the land then being notified and given time to clear the rubbish of their own accord. If they do not do so, then enforcement teams move in to clear the material.

Thirty-one out of 42 identified sites in Mellieha and 32 out of 36 sites in Zurrieq were cleared by the land owners themselves, who thus avoided being charged for the clearance operation, or draining the task force's limited manpower and resources.

One must stress that all removed material is deposited only at licensed depots and scrapyards, before being shipped abroad for recycling.

The task force has set itself a Herculean task indeed, pledging to remove bulky waste from the 220 sites identified since the initiative started four months ago.

## **A praiseworthy effort!**

Owners wishing to dispose of bulky metal objects can do so by calling 2360 5104 or 8007 6608.