

## Boreholes and a prayer for rain

Bar its last few days, last month would have been the most parched November ever, with three weeks of continuous sunny days. With slightly more than half of our drinking water coming from energy-hungry reverse osmosis plants and our aquifer being over-extracted and salinised and contaminated with fertiliser effluents, we have little to be buoyant about and should be pulling up our socks.

Even more sobering was an article in MaltaToday of October 29 which said that 350,000 m3 of water are estimated to be illegally extracted every year and that the total annual extraction amount of 650,000 m3 is precariously close to the 750,000 m3 aquifer recharge figure. The article says it should be easy for the authorities to track down the thousands of illegal boreholes which pepper our islands, since contrary to wind-propelled ones, these necessitate some form of electrical supply to power pumps, etc.

The indiscriminate filling of bowsers from the aquifer to then sell to individuals or even hotels to fill up swimming pools, etc., occurs in broad daylight in summer but seems not to raise an eyebrow with the authorities.

The depletion of the aquifer is acknowledged as a major concern, even by the State of the Environment Report - so why are authorities dragging their feet on this issue, especially when, due to financial considerations, second class water which will soon be available from the I-Cumnija sewage treatment plant will be frittered away into the sea rather than be used for irrigation?

Farmers are not the sole culprits, however - the same article also reports on the purported illegal extraction of aquifer water by a hotel in Marfa - and other hotels might be involved in this illegal practice. EEA (European Environmental Agency) report 06/2006 ("The changing faces of Europe's coastal areas") lists Malta, along with Sicily, Almeria (in Spain), Cyprus and the Black Sea coastal areas as sites where aquifer salinisation is a major concern.

The December 2006 Scientific American carried a riveting article titled "Call it Beetle Guard" in which the author gave details as to how dew could potentially be harvested into potable water by using hydrophobic (water-repelling) chemicals present on the backs of the African Stenocara beetle, which uses its wings to capture vapour molecules in the tinder-dry Namid Desert and to herd them into a droplet that rolls into its mouth. Dew is a resource that rarely, if ever, has hogged the limelight and it is a resource which is certainly not in short supply locally.

Against this backdrop, some people still manage to spawn some innovative thinking. Claudine Cardona from Nature Trust has just completed a Master's in Water Science, Policy and Management at the University of Oxford Centre for the Environment and she has compiled a family questionnaire to evaluate "The Potential of Domestic Rainwater Harvesting in Malta". Rainwater harvesting could be one of several remedies in this dry country - in fact, according to an 1880 law, every new home should have its own well. This law is redundant to say the least, despite our architects focusing on energy-efficient buildings. When will the authorities start enforcing such a law?

The directorate at the Malta Resources Authority responsible for regulating water use, etc is severely understaffed, being manned by only three individuals. Given the surfeit of workers in the public sector, is it not possible to increase the manpower at MRA?

### Reclaiming the foreshore

Reading The Guardian of October 31, I came across what appears to be a case of someone finally picking the nettle when it comes to coastal urbanisation. Around 100,000 illegal Spanish houses, including one owned by a former prime minister, have been earmarked for demolition, if firebrand prosecutor Antonio Vercher has his way, according to the report.

In fact, Spanish law stipulates that illegal homes should be demolished, irrespective of whether or not they had been bought in good faith. Such a stance comes hot on the heels of yet another welcome decision, this time taken by Andalucian town planners, to allow towns to grow

by a maximum of 40 per cent over the next years to curb urban growth, currently forging ahead at breakneck speed.

Back in Malta, the Jerma Palace Hotel announced that it will cease operations in March. Why can't our authorities take the cue from their Spanish counterparts and simply demolish the whole structure, rather than permit the owners to develop the site into more apartments? Why doesn't Government purchase the site and earmark it for the abandoned aquarium project, once destined for Qawra?

It is high time to clear the foreshore for unhindered public use.

## **Feedback from MEPA**

After this column reported illegal works at Tal-Virtù, l/o Rabat, MEPA duly issued Enforcement Notice ECF 855/06 for "Construction of underground reservoir, concrete passageway, dumping of franka blocks and erection of boundary wall with same franka blocks."

As for the site in Wied il-Bies, San Gwann, where part of the boundary wall was dismantled and dumping was taking place in a scheduled section of the valley, the boundary wall was repaired after MEPA and green wardens intervened to stave off further illegal dumping.

## **No place is sacred**

To my dismay, I recently came across PA06361/06 for the development of a water park and caravan site at Anchor Bay, Mellieha. The very idea of development in such an area is preposterous, especially since the site is an Outside Development Zone (ODZ), a proposed Natura 2000 site and a buffer zone for a site of ecological importance!

After such an application and the illegal construction of a dwelling with all amenities within the cordon of Ghadira Nature Reserve, what's next - proposing some development right in the middle of Buskett? This is not so far-fetched, you know - after all, we have parked and camped on our sand dunes, dredged close to Posidonia meadows, dumped sand on a shingle beach, opened roads in the middle of pristine garigue, are proposing a yacht marina adjacent to a popular beach, have proposed wind farms for Filfla, etc.

Needless to say, Nature Trust objected to this application, made on behalf of a local hotel owner, also because there is no management plan for the site yet. What beggars belief is the proposal itself - a caravan site!

After a camping site, proposals for an F1 racing track, golf courses, and a Disney theme park at Bahrija, the existing marine theme park at Bahar ic-Caghaq and countless others, now it was the turn of yet another white elephant - a caravan site. The spill-over effects of such a site are well known - just look at the supposed caravan site at Bahar ic-Caghaq, which has turned into a shanty town of sorts.

## **Time up for bluefin tuna**

As this year's meeting of ICCAT (International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna) in Dubrovnik, Croatia, drew to a close last week, there was a feeling that no headway had been made in the actual conservation of the bluefin tuna. In fact, WWF Mediterranean declared its deep dissatisfaction with the outcome for the Mediterranean bluefin tuna fishery - with the European Union delegation refusing to accept the strict recovery plan which is so desperately needed.

As a result, ICCAT approved an extremely weak set of measures which fail to protect the vulnerable species. WWF issued a strongly-worded statement, declaring ICCAT to be no longer the adequate forum to ensure the conservation of bluefin tuna and that "today's decision will go down in history as destroying the credibility of ICCAT as a regional fisheries management organisation. This is an unprecedented scandal, sounding the death knell for bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean," according to Dr Sergei Tudela, head of fisheries at WWF Mediterranean.

"WWF is shocked and disappointed by this disastrous result," added Paolo Lombardi, director of WWF Mediterranean. "The EU's fisheries representatives must now be held directly responsible for the collapse of this fishery."

A strong and feasible plan for East Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna was tabled early in the meeting by the US delegation - adhering closely to scientific advice - yet the EU refused to budge on its own weak proposal. The EU plan, finally adopted by ICCAT today, is totally insufficient - with almost no reduction in total catch, and a seasonal closure which deliberately excludes the peak of spawning when most adult catches are taken.

"This is a collapse plan, not a recovery plan - and a mockery of the work of scientists," Dr Tudela continued. "The EU has betrayed its obligation to manage fisheries sustainably - for the sake of the short-term interests of its own bluefin tuna industry."

EU fishing fleets are responsible for the bulk of illegal catches of bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean, as a WWF report published in July clearly demonstrated. While the Mediterranean bluefin tuna catch is 32,000 tons, it is suspected that at least 50,000 tons are actually captured from the wild annually.

## **Of tree-plantings and cuttings**

As much as I wish to commend the current tree-planting momentum, I wish to condemn the sheer lack of arboreal acumen shown by some sectors.

After the notorious tree-cutting incident at Attard, conducted in the name of a 'much-needed' petrol station, yet another tree specimen of venerable age (this time, a Norfolk pine - Arawkarja) is facing the axe in Sliema, as a result of application PA 02054/06.

Residents of the area, represented by Dr J. Doublet, meticulously compiled a list of objections to the application, grouped in 12 different points, one of which was the protection of the tree, purportedly over 100 years old.

As rightly mentioned in the objections filed by the residents, such a tree is protected by LN 12 of 2001 and by GN 269 of 1933 (Antiquities Act), while three different policy documents (UCADG, NHLP and Structure Plan - RCO 33) state that soft landscaping in UCA's should be retained and such trees should be protected.

Fortunately, the DCC decided to postpone its decision on the case, which was due to be made on November 28, partly because the information included in the application was incorrect. In addition, the case officer's report on the application made no mention whatsoever of this tree specimen.

## **Silver linings**

34U - St James Hospital has committed itself to planting a tree for every child born at one of its hospitals "to celebrate the miracle of life". Group chairman Josie Muscat said the 34U Babies Scheme will be making Malta a greener place to live in.

Bypass and golf plans derailed - The decisions to derail golf plans for Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra and the Manikata bypass clearly show the Green movement is able to add the occasional notch to its tally and that the pro-golf movement is still to produce compelling arguments to back its stance.

Hats off to hydrologist Marco Cremona for bringing the catchment area status of Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra to the fore and to the Kumitat ghall-Harsien Rurali tal-Manikata for lobbying against the Manikata road project.

One now hopes that the redrafted road route passing through Ta' I-Imbordin will not be an environmental chimera in itself, especially if this connects with Ta' Pennellu in Mellieha, home to the largest population in the wild of Sandarac Gum Tree, the national tree species.

Energy-efficient pelican lights - The Malta Transport Authority (ADT) has launched a pilot project to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of energy efficient lighting systems. The standard light fittings of the pelican crossing in St Andrews have been replaced by light efficient diode traffic signal modules. The ADT said these modules will reduce operating and maintenance costs with up to 90 per cent energy savings, 10 times longer operating life and a five-year warranty on workmanship and materials defects.

Editorial on Litter Act - The Times editorial of November 21 is to be commended for lamenting on the malfunctioning of the recently introduced Litter Act, with a large proportion of fines meted out still to be collected.

As the editorial rightly states, "all need to understand that desecrating our surroundings is morally unacceptable and has serious long-term consequences that we can ill afford to neglect any more."