

The Green Whistleblower

Golf at Ta' Cenc



The authorities would do well to look into the situation at the British period barracks at Rđum id-Delli just a stone's throw from the new Golden Sands Hotel. Besides the squatting with small sums being paid to `rent out` rooms in these public barracks, squatters are also illegally drawing their electricity supply from an Enemalta sub-station on site.

When it transpired that Ta' Cenc in Gozo was not included as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) or in the proposed Natura 2000 protected sites, many smelt a rat. This came hot on the heels of repeated incidents of burning and rubble dumping on the garigue (to reduce its ecological importance) and the fait accompli last month was presented with the inclusion of Ta' Cenc among the proposed five golfing sites in a MEPA report to the PM.

PA 5277/96 is gut-wrenching to say the least - it contemplates the construction of four different zones, which include 114 villas, 76 apartments, a sports centre, an 18-hole golf course, horseriding and access to an esoteric-sounding 'Kantra Beach'! All of this just a couple of kilometres away from the eyesore known as Fort Chambray!

While bracing myself for all of this, I wonder what is going through the minds of bird-lovers who so vehemently support the Verdala golf course. Since the development will be very close to the important bird-nesting cliffs in at least one spot, what will their position now be?

Those cringing in front of such a development should start to pull up their socks right now and voice their disapproval regarding this unsustainable proposal from the very onset.

This section was compiled with the help of Annalise Falzon, Nature Trust (Malta)

Hats off

The accolades for this month certainly go to Colin Fitz for his article "Hofra in one" (Tune-In magazine, November 28), in which he aptly depicts the local situation regarding golf, a reality which we have been shunning for too long - i.e. that Malta should promote its assets, like its world-renowned neolithic temples and alluring seascapes, rather than mulling over white elephants like golf courses, whose tangible benefits are dubious, to say the least.

Among the many pro-golf course contributions to the press, you may get the occasional one running 'against the grain'...

Salina/Burmarrad and public perceptions

I welcome Hugh Arnett's contribution (The Sunday Times, November 28) since, unlike other contributions, it seeks to debate the Salina stormwater works in a methodical way, even though I beg to differ in certain aspects.

The apple of discord is not that Burmarrad should be spared the onslaught of storm waters but the way the works were carried out. Rather than waiting for a MEPA permit to be issued, the Works Department simply started works in the three sensitive sites (Għajn Rihana, Salina and Wied il-Kbir) with no hint whatsoever of environmental monitoring to safeguard against unforeseen consequences.

I am sure Mr Arnett is aware as to why these three sites are considered sensitive, but if not, I can refer him to a recent article of mine, in which I gave some information regarding their ecological importance, as well as a recommended visit to MEPA to view existing legislation concerning the same sites.

Environmental monitoring is part and parcel of every major project undertaken abroad but it seems that local public entities can opt to bypass it if necessary. Fortunately, the progress of most local projects is indeed monitored by those competent in the green field, such as the roads project in the Qormi-Mosta area funded by the Italian protocol.

Mr Arnett refers to a specific planning case - the bungalow at Gebel Ghawzara (DCC93-01/04, PA 2573/03). However I do not think it judicious to lobby for a particular case while criticising another. One cannot expect the Maltese to resort to illegal building, as in the case of the Gebel Ghawzara bungalow, to keep hunters off their land - in this case, Ras il-Pellegrin (between Gnejna and Fomm ir-Rih) - and a myriad of other places around the islands to be punctuated with plush bungalows.

Mr Arnett chose to describe the land as 'pristine'. Unfortunately, this is not the case, in view of the aforementioned construction and the massive driveway leading to it. Despite landscaping efforts, the bungalow is visible from the surrounding land since it conveniently occupies the promontory.

As regards the other Bidnija property in Triq is-Sagra Familja, I will undoubtedly follow up the case.

Unsustainable tourism

For those striving continuously to drum home the word 'sustainability', Tourism Minister Francis Zammit Dimech's statements in his column (The Sunday Times, November 14) must have certainly been a bolt from the blue.

The minister stated that the government was aiming to attract 150,000 more tourists by 2007. Taking into account a tourist density of 3,600 tourists/sq km (by far the highest in Europe), this surely must be mind-numbing stuff, especially if one considers that we are already seeing a 3:1 tourist:local ratio.

Sustainability reports for the tourism sector drafted by the MTA must surely have been swept under the carpet since the rallying call now is no longer "we need more quality tourists" but "we need more tourists" - period. Rather than diversifying our economic sectors, we continue to place all our eggs in the tourism basket; seemingly not having learnt the lessons of 9/11.

The limelight was understandably stolen from the results of a global survey carried out by the World Travel and Tourism Council. While Malta scored first place in infrastructure, our islands' performance in the environmental sector is less edifying - a dismal 141st. This measure indicates Government's awareness of environmental aspects of development using population density, CO2 emissions and the ratification of environmental treaties as appropriate indicators.

With all the hype regarding the proposed golf courses on the island as a possible panacea for our woes, few have realised that the same WTCC survey states that Malta places 59th for tourism price competitiveness. The figure is computed by using the hotel price index, taxes on goods and services, and purchasing power parity.

It does not need much brainracking to realise that tourists are staying away because of the environment, the exorbitant prices and the poor service offered. Anthony Gatt, chairman of the human resource and support services directorate of MTA, stated in the annual MTA conference that 700 complaints regarding the catering industry were received by the MTA during January alone.

Against such a backdrop, one would have expected the annual MTA conference to tackle the environment as one of its cardinal points. Yet the environment barely featured, except in a brief mention to country walks.

Incidentally, one of the country walks booklets published by MTA - Bahrija walk - featured a segment of the Bahrija cliffs (Ras il-Qlejgha) which I am again showing in the accompanying photograph with a 'No Entry' sign in red proudly fixed to a chain-link fence.

A similar situation is to be encountered at the portal leading to the hamlet of Mtahleb (previously featured by Lino Bugeja and also in the same MTA booklet).

So how can one, by any figment of the imagination, seriously consider bringing tourists over for country walks when some of the sites featured in the guidebooks seen by tourists are being cordoned off?

A closer collaboration between the MTA, MEPA and the somnolent Lands Department is clearly needed.

Ex-Mistra Village and a flour mill

A few years back I had the opportunity to visit a flour mill (one of the very few extant in our islands) hewn out of rock just under the site of the former Mistra Village.

The vandalism on site was appalling, with every nook and cranny, like glass panes, the lighting system and even a generator being vandalised or removed, while rust was taking its toll on the metal parts of the mill.

Last year I had the opportunity to revisit the site and the formerly decrepit and abandoned mill (which had been built by the British in 1952) had been transformed into a fully functional one. In fact, of the flour mills on the islands, the Mistra one is the only fully functional one, thanks to the painstaking work carried out by a group of five dedicated volunteers.

If the flour mill was able to resist the rigours of time and vandals, questions still exist concerning the proposed construction of private apartments on the site of the former Mistra Village. In fact, the proposed footprint extends further than the previous one, encroaching closer to the flour mill site.

Is this site scheduled, one wonders? Shouldn't the immediate vicinity of such a building be safeguarded as a buffer zone rather than surrounded by new development? Besides, the parcels of land closest to the mill still harbour lush garigue and maquis vegetation. Cannot this land be spared the axe of development? The MEPA mapserver indicates that such land is privately owned, unlike what was being indicated a few years back.

NGOs - still waiting in the wings

Non-Government organisations (NGOs) are still in a legislative swamp because their legal status is still not officially recognised. The much-trumpeted White Paper which should iron such a kink is still on the shelves, with the result that NGOs are recognised by the state when it comes to paying tax, VAT, etc., but not when applying for much-needed EU funds, for example.

When will this farcical situation be rectified?

Vodafone and HSBC Green initiatives

I welcome Vodafone's laudable "Save our environment for our children - recycle your mobile phone" campaign. Since it started in 14 out of the 16 countries in which Vodafone operates, Vodafone has collected 1.5 million mobile telephone sets, most of which were recycled to cut down on the emission of greenhouse gases and ozone-depleting CFCs and HCFCs.

Defunct mobiles can be handed in at any Vodafone outlet and the proceeds from such a venture are being channelled towards the YMCA.

Interview of the month

For those of us working in the environment sector, the words by anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain ("A louder voice", The Malta Independent on Sunday, December 5) certainly provided a welcome tonic from the daily grind.

Professor Boissevain certainly knows how to portray Malta most candidly, correctly stating that civil society is getting louder all the time (as in the case of the Verdala golf course, Siggiewi cement plant, Gozo airstrip, Wed Garnaw, Qui-si-sana public garden and others), that people are afraid of speaking out for fear of being victimised and that an intricate system of dependency relations is making the majority of Maltese vulnerable.

Professor Boissevain said there are budding dumps around the periphery of every town and that with just Lm2 million the government could give Malta a major facelift. "If you are given something, does it make you beholden?" Parole sante... never barter your freedom of speech for anything.

Reminder: I am still waiting for an official reply regarding my queries as to whether the practice of beach grooming will be abandoned on non-frequented beaches in summer and which ministry will now be responsible for such a practice. I sent e-mails to Tourism Minister Francis Zammit Dimech and Environment Minister George Pullicino over three weeks ago!