

Updates on past stories

Bedraggled Xlendi Valley



Some parents come fully equipped for the illegal catching of frogs and tadpoles at Chadwick Lakes - such examples are easily mirrored by their children. Wardens should be on site which should be closed to vehicular traffic on Sunday afternoons.

The La Grotta Discotheque case in Xlendi is certainly a perfect illustration of feet-dragging when it comes to the planning process and enforcement.

The first enforcement notice served on the premises dates back to 1994 (00263/94) referring to the construction of concrete pillars and roofing without permission. The developer's appeal was initially dismissed in 1995, only for permission to be granted in 1996!

So, first blood was drawn by the developer, certainly buoyed by a very strange change of heart by the Planning Authority (today's MEPA). In fact, emboldened by this, the developer decided to start using the premises he illegally built as a disco without even applying for a permit - an enforcement notice was duly issued (00503/97) in 1995 and the case was only deferred to the direct action team in 1997!

Incredulity greets one upon hearing that yet another enforcement notice was served (00893/99) referring to illegal extensions to the same building. The developer, very apt now at dilly-dallying which seems to be working wonders, duly appealed in 2000 and the appeal was scheduled to be heard on January 21 this year - four years later!

To date, no information from the MEPA Website can be gleaned (both when searching enforcement notices and the DCC decisions) re the outcome of the January 21 meeting! Is it to be concluded that the decision was postponed? What about the Aarhus Convention on public access to information? In the meantime, the developer had ample time to consolidate his premises and to make a good buck out of it, despite the manifest illegality!

I believe that in the face of the time scale of this case, all mention of the MEPA caseload going down should be dismissed - three different enforcement officers have worked on the case throughout the years! One can only surmise the job satisfaction they get at seeing their recommendations continually being refuted by people high up!

There is no room for mincing with words - we are referring to a disco in the heart of a scheduled valley - due to initial complacency by MEPA, it's very difficult now to rid the protected valley (of high ecological value) of this scar.

The valley can certainly claim to be in first place when it comes to downtrodden scheduled ('protected') areas. Two hotels in the environs have had enforcement notices slapped on them for not complying with original plans and the excessive development at the mouth of the valley has resulted in erosion of the sandy beach, which today is only a spectre of its former glory. Developers are now turning their eyes further upstream by trying to widen the access road, with works being carried out by the Gozo Ministry - is some other business entity in the pipeline?

MEPA vaunts that it issues about 1,200 enforcement notices every year. While the number is indeed flattering, what happens after the issuing of the enforcement notice is not - an official figure as to the proportion of illegal structures which are eventually sanctioned or end up bogged down in the legal system would certainly help.

MEPA rightly solicits the public to report any illegal development by phoning in or on its Website - but the only way to assure the public that steps will actually be taken regarding their reports is to take the bull by its horns and pull down structures - some enforcement notices date back to the early 1990s!

Golden Bay Internet Café stairs

Initially ECF 466/00 was issued on April 18, 2000 for stairs on public land without permit and direct action was carried out between January 30 and February 4, 2002. Consequently wooden stairs were re-erected and ECF 566/02 was issued on July 17, 2002.

This enforcement is still pending since PA 4066/02 was submitted to sanction and is still pending. Let's only augur that plans are put in motion for the rehabilitation of the Ramla tal-Mixquqa (Golden Bay) sand dune, catering for the relocation of the Internet Café to the side of the sandy beach and the subsequent demolition of the wooden staircase.

Qala (Dahlet Qorrot) villa

Yet another notable case concerns the additions to a dwelling at Dahlet Qorrot in Qala, which prompted an enforcement action in ECF182/01. An application to sanction the infringements was submitted in PA1376/01 and the MEPA board twice refuted permission (February and October 2002).

In what has become a hallmark U-turn, the application to sanction the additions was approved by Planning Appeals Board decision dated September 26, 2003 and permission was issued on November 14.

The case is being followed to make sure that condition 1 of permission (i.e. removal of columns from terrace) will be adhered to. Currently, works to conform the building in question with the approved plans have not started. The site is being monitored regularly to make sure that the necessary changes to the building are carried out according to the approved plans in PA1376/01.

Therefore enforcement action in ECF182/01 is still in force. One may concede that the site is continuously being monitored but the bottom line is that additions to an existing building have been allowed to go up in a pristine area of our islands. No leeway should be allowed for sanctioning, with the total eradication of this despicable procedure.

Heartfelt thanks go to the PR office of MEPA, especially to PRO Sylvana Debono, who has greatly contributed towards the compiling of this section.

Golfing - the incurable advocates

Frank Salt is the latest to join the golf course fray. He fails to realise that most down-to-earth Maltese want to retain the simple pleasure of enjoying the countryside on a Sunday afternoon without being faced with a closed gate. Typical, rustic chequered fields, rather than a sulky artificially green monologue.

Let us stop trying to find analogies with foreign lands. In fact, hats off go to Mr Spiteri of Balzan, who rightly argues that Malta cannot compare Portugal with minuscule Malta. For example, our population density - at 1,100 per sq. km - is more than four times that of Portugal and one of the highest in the world. Hard facts that cannot be ignored - sublime!

It's not all roses at Portugal's golf courses, as Mr Salt would have us believe - just look at the consequences the pumping of massive amounts of water necessary to keep the golf courses of arid Algarve (in south Portugal - average rainfall of 450 mm, similar to Malta's) is having!

If highly visible personalities like Mr Salt are raising the stakes by being so publicly pro-golfing, the prospects of stopping the projected golf course don't look rosy shortly before the decision is to be taken.

Prospects also do not seem rosy in the face of a recent court decision which has hardly been noticed - to the effect that MEPA had legal jurisdiction over Church property. Even though this decision was taken in the context of structural works carried out in Church buildings, it could also be resorted to in the golf course saga when it comes to deciding over the fate of public land previously owned by the Church.

Is it indeed a coincidence that golfing advocates seek to raise their momentum the closer we get to EU accession on May 1, when such large-scale projects will be more open to public scrutiny? The Verdala golf course has already been blemished by misleading advertising, especially by foreign Websites, such as those marketing retiring schemes in Malta which claim

that the golf course has already been granted development permission. We don't want another failed Marsa experiment - we simply can't afford being so profligate with our land!

Saving our valleys, but seriously!

Wied Qlejgha, or Chadwick Lakes, as they are more popularly known, never risks to become a completely downtrodden valley as it periodically hogs the limelight with authorities.

A recent initiative dubbed Hbieb ta' Wied Qlejgha should be commended for calling for the repairing of damaged rubble walls in the valley and not to replace them with concrete blocks as was being done elsewhere, such as at Mtarfa.

However, symptomatic of the way we view our natural areas, such an initiative failed to address the two main scourges afflicting the valley - i.e. overt intrusion by cars on Sunday afternoons (the numerous pedestrians have literally to spill over in the water course to enable cars to pass) and the illegal (since these amphibians are legally protected) collection of frogs and tadpoles without anyone batting an eyelid.

Hence, two solutions which can be easily implemented is the closing off of Chadwick Lakes to cars on Sunday afternoons by means of a gate, and a warden/inspector who periodically passes by as a deterrent against collection of frogs (as has been done for the freshwater crab at Bahrija). Will these two suggestions be acted upon?

Planting trees and building rubble walls

The council of Nadur is keeping ecotourism in our country flickering by setting up an ecotourism committee and embarking on various initiatives in this direction. These include the opening of the 'Maltese Garden' at Ta' Kenuna, comprised entirely of over 100 species of indigenous shrubs and a number of local habitats, such as watercourses, garigue and sand dunes.

Other laudable initiatives taken include the planting of 3,000 olive trees over the past three years and the distribution of yet another 3,000 olive trees among five other Gozitan local councils. Nadur council has enhanced accessibility for farmers to their fields to redress the tendency of increasing abandonment of land cultivation and has set up a farmers' association aimed at improving their produce.

One of the tenets of the council's green creed is the emphasis on indigenous trees, which have been planted in gardens throughout the locality, such as at Tal-Hali and San Blas gardens. Let's hope that the example is followed by other local councils.

A special hats off

Mr P. Pryce, writing from Texas (The Sunday Times, January 25) gets my 'hats off' of the month. His letter ("Downfall of an island") could not have been more aptly titled since he eloquently states that there is a need to curb the greed that has devoured the land in our islands and that the building of a bridge between Malta and Gozo would surely sound the death-knell for unspoilt Gozo.

Predictably, his words of wisdom - "Stop giving planning permission to those who vote for your party" and "Give Malta back to the Maltese" - will fall on deaf ears.

What is really astounding is that such pearls were not voiced by a Maltese (i.e. a citizen of a minuscule country, where land is at a premium) but from a gargantuan state like the US.

Jokes of the month

As a welcome respite from the drab prospects that our natural environment is facing, I am including what I believe are the best two jokes of the month.

▫ The Federation for Hunting and Conservation said it was instituting legal proceedings for libel and slander against BirdLife (Malta) and all media that have alleged that hunters were behind the killing of two spoonbills in the Ghadira nature reserve on January 17. Yes, honestly, I do believe that those two poor spoonbills were killed by some birdwatcher!

▫ A Greek captain, Mr Pangouras, who faces trial in Spain over one of the country's worst oil tanker disasters (the Prestige one) has been put forward for a prestigious nautical award for bravery when his ship was sinking.

More updates will be carried later.