

Pushing Attard towards Rabat



Access to extensive parts of Wied Qirda are cordoned off as being private property – when will the public be able to view online all land ownership regimes so as to verify such claims?



The ancient holm oak trees (ballut) at Wardija, reputed to be over 900 years old, are now off-limits to the public as they lie on private land. Can some form of compromise be reached?

PA 02153/10 was recently submitted to the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, proposing to develop a 1,000-grave cemetery, crematorium, service room, 75 parking spaces and other ancillary facilities on a site of staggering proportions (17,000 m²) in Attard. The site lies off Mdina Road in Attard and skirts Wied Ta' Rmiedi on its rear end. The site is earmarked as a Strategic Open Space Gap separating Attard and Rabat, thus constraining any development on site to be of an 'open space' type.

The application's Project Description Statement (PDS) says the proposed development is justified by demographics (Malta has an ageing population and thus increasing demands for burial spaces are an issue), geography (the proposed location would service many other localities besides Attard and Rabat), spatial constraints

The cemetery proposal is further propelling the urban fabric of Attard towards Rabat

- Alan Deidun

(the existing cemeteries in Attard and Rabat are hemmed in my residential development on all sides) and current state/use of the proposed site, which is described as being in a dilapidated, abandoned and 'infertile' state, punctuated by rubble and debris (open dump).

While no one can possibly contest the validity of the first three motivations behind the development, the fourth is somewhat untenable. In fact, the PDS in question features a number of bold statements, including: "The proposed development would embellish the site by seamlessly blending into its natural surroundings and retaining its rural characteristics."

The statement might lead one to think that the development being discussed is of an agricultural nature. One does not 'improve' a site by proposing to develop it; otherwise, one would be encouraging a vicious cycle, whereby a site is first degraded by dumping rubble and debris on it and then the same site is targeted through a subsequent planning application. Developers tend to be very attentive to such patterns, with such 'degraded' sites featuring frequently on their radar.

The PDS is quite vague on some aspects of the project – for instance, a 'special composite material' will be used to line graves to mitigate against seepage of contaminants to the water table; however, no details are provided as to what the composite material actually is.

The PDS also addresses potential environmental impacts in a superficial manner, although it does propose that the highest structure on site (a six metre-high service room) be recessed as much as possible from Mdina Road so as not to impede country views, that graves are not sited close to the Wied ta' Rmiedi and that run-off from the site is collected in water storage facilities.

A major omission of the PDS is that no mention that approximately 20 per cent of the land in question (or 14 per cent if one considers that a small vineyard is actually an encroachment by a third party) is under cultivation – although this fact emerges from the land-use report appended to the PDS. This fact is ignored by the PDS, which simply describes the site as a dump. One expects to find such important land-use statistics in the main report itself, not in addenda.

Mepa's Heritage Panel is recommending that the application be refused on the grounds that the site is too close to Wied ta' Rmiedi valley. One hopes the panel does not end up being a voice in the wilderness as so often happens.

One gets the feeling that, combined with the approved petrol station and US Embassy, and with the illegal concrete platform used as a car park and car depot just a few hundred metres away from the proposed development (for which an open storage facility application was rejected just two months ago in view of an illegal car park), the cemetery proposal is further propelling the urban fabric of Attard towards Rabat, thus slowly but surely eroding the countryside flanking both sides of Mdina Road.

Visitors barred from ancient tree

In this column I have repeatedly documented the deteriorating public access to some of the island's most iconic natural sites and another notch can be added to the ever-mushrooming tally of cordoned-off sites.

The ancient holm oak trees (ballut) at Wardija are reputed to be over 900 years old and in recent years the site in question has been visited by a stream of schoolchildren and their teachers in view of their environmental education value and also for acorn-collection to fuel oak-sowing efforts.

The site, along with Ta' Baldu, Mġiebaħ and il-Bosk in Buskett, represents one of the very last woodland remnants in the Maltese islands where one can connect with woodland free of the trappings of an afforestation site, such as a rich undergrowth, trees not planted in rows.

The fact that the oak trees lie in private grounds was not an impediment to these short educational visits since the owners and leased farmers never objected to visitors sticking to the only access road leading to the majestic trees. But it seems the tide has turned recently, as the owners recently stopped visitors from venturing close to the trees.

This effectively means that the public, not just schoolchildren, is being deprived the possibility of visiting this Natura 2000 site, protected since 1933, which has effectively been turned into a ring-fenced nature reserve whose environmental potential is not being tapped into.

Common sense should prevail and the owners should allow bona fide visitors, especially since the trees can only be accessed through a single access road. This is all the more essential for a site which in the US would qualify as national monument in view of its significance for the country's cultural identity.

Common Fisheries Policy reform

On December 18, the European Parliament's fisheries committee members voted 13 to 10 in favour of a draft report by MEP Ulrike Rodust on the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) Basic Regulation, the cornerstone of the CFP reform package and the key to sustainable fisheries in the EU. The vote took place on a small number (104) of compromise amendments, out of the total 3,000 proposed amendments, with all five of the following key demands of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) for the Common Fisheries Policy reform being voted through:

Maximum Sustainable Yield is to be set 'above' rather than 'at' MSY (BMSY) by 2020;

Multi-annual Plans and a timeline for implementation in four years' time;

Commitment to eliminate discards in European fisheries with a binding timetable;

Regionalisation – cooperation among stakeholders within or between member states to agree on management measures for shared fisheries;

External dimension – with active EU participation in international fisheries; EU fleets shall only fish surplus stocks from third countries; EU to step up fight against illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing.

The WWF believes that by the end of 2013, the CFP reform must lead to the adoption of a new regulatory framework for truly sustainable and economically viable fisheries across EU waters.

Blow against rhino poaching

A Thai national, Chumlong Lemtongthai, has been sentenced to 40 years imprisonment for his involvement in the illegal trade of rhino horns from South Africa. This is the harshest sentence given for a wildlife crime in the country to date. Lemongthai recently pleaded guilty to charges of illegally exporting rhino horns in Johannesburg's Kempton Park Magistrate's Court. This marks the successful arrest, prosecution and sentencing of the highest-ranking rhino syndicate member to be brought to book in South Africa.

Lemtongthai played a principal role in a syndicate which used white rhino trophy hunts in South Africa to obtain horns to trade in the Asian black markets, a practice known as 'pseudo-hunting'. During court proceedings, Lemtongthai confessed that the hunters were a front for exporting rhino horn for commercial trade and not for trophies.

His syndicate enlisted people from Asia to pose as hunters and take part in white rhino trophy hunts on game farms in the North West province. In response, the South African government has updated legislation to clamp down on such loopholes, including a ban on rhino hunting by Vietnamese nationals since April 2012.

www.wwf.eu/fisheries

www.wwf.org.za

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