

## When pigs fly in Gozo



The damage being wrought by the quarry along the Qala coastline did not elicit the same response as the filming incident in Dwejra.

The phrase 'when pigs fly' is an adynaton – a figure of speech so hyperbolic that it describes an impossibility. I could not choose a better expression to describe the latest white elephant to be proposed – an underwater tunnel linking Gozo and Malta.

What is disconcerting is that the political class has immediately latched on to what was essentially a feeler thrown out by a businessman – unless they have reports in hand to justify their boldness –without waiting for the impact assessment process to take its course.

What is even more disconcerting is that some politicians completely bypass professionals, such as marine biologists, geologists and marine archaeologists, and pre-empt the Environment Impact Assessment process by making statements such as “the tunnel will not disturb the seabed” simply because it would be dug 50 metres below the seabed.

It is very difficult to verify such a statement when one considers all the trenching, blasting, drilling, excavation and pile-driving such a tunnel development would invariably entail.

The tunnel excavation will de facto turn sections of the seabed into an underwater construction site, smothering the most sensitive of marine habitats and species to be found in the Gozo Channel.

A big controversy has erupted about the potential impacts of the Fõnduq ir-Rummien yacht marina proposal on water quality in the Gozo Channel, and rightly so. If, and when the tunnel proposal is raised for more serious discussion, similar concerns should be raised by all who have the local marine environment at heart.

Readers were busy tapping away online as soon as the tunnel bombshell was dropped. Very few, if any, actually took the time to consider the ecological importance of the seabed in question before venting their opinion, with accessibility to Gozo being their sole preoccupation.

Many chose to tout examples of other underwater tunnels, notably the Eksund Tunnel in Norway, as shining proof that the project can be done. When making such comparisons, the financial element trumps over any other consideration, without anyone realising that the same tunnel in Norway was constructed at maximum depth of about 250 metres (hence, on a seabed shorn of any sea grasses) and which consisted mainly of bare sand (which ecologically is the least sensitive of habitats).

The impact a tunnel would have on traffic circulating within Gozo is not to be discounted, especially since, already in the absence of the tunnel, over 1.1 million cars, or an average of 3,025 cars per day, crossed over to Gozo last year, an increase of 3.3 per cent over the previous year.

Such figures hardly suggest that Gozo is an isolated, unconnected island. Although I am no economist, the touted €150 million price tag for the tunnel also sounds a tad suspicious, and I suspect the real cost of developing such a tunnel would probably be considerably higher.

I anticipate that the tunnel idea will fly like a lead balloon. So rather than frittering our time away, we should all work towards making the eco-Gozo concept a concrete reality rather than a pin-cushion at the mercy of various development and infrastructure proposals.

Some correspondents went further by including Comino in the equation, saying it could be developed further into a tourist resort. Truly, collective foolishness knows no bounds.

### **Dwejra vs Qala**

The saying, 'What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve', is used in many countries, which indicates the truth of the notion it seeks to convey. It easily explains, for instance, why the recent commotion about the Dwejra filming incident is not being echoed over the dumping of silt along the northeastern coast of Gozo in the locality of Qala.

As the photo above illustrates, the problem appears at first sight to be much greater than at Dwejra, with silt regularly leaching into the sea and clogging the coastal rockpools and rocky coastline.

This is not to say – as my detractors would be quick to suggest – that the Dwejra filming incident was not deplorable in its own right. But as the Qala site is far from the public eye and from media outcries, the quarry operator on site can proceed with impunity to ruin this section of coast, much to the chagrin of locals and foreign tourists who walk around the Gozitan coastline. Only the occasional letter to the editor keeps a spotlight on the issue.

Truly a case of two weights and two measures.

### **Bar vehicle access to Selmun clay slopes**

Despite the evident physical damage being wrought on site and the enhanced erosion being caused, off-road vehicles still have access to the Selmun clay slopes as illustrated by the photo.

This is taking place despite the fact that offroading is illegal and despite the fact that it is relatively simple to bar access to these slopes. A couple of large boulders or concrete blocks would do the trick, similar to the ones used by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority to seal off properties subject to enforcement.

Are the authorities too afraid to take on the off-roading lobby to prevent further erosion of the clay slopes?

### **Giving Mepa credit where it's due**

The Mepa reform has borne its first tangible fruit, with Giovanni Bonello showing his mettle in the Mepa board to which he was recently appointed by arguing for a non-sanctioning of the illegalities concerning the petrol station on the outskirts of Qormi.

His arguments that precedents should apply to legal buildings only, and that board members do not have an obligation to sanction illegalities, prevailed over the spineless behaviour of the two political representatives on the same board, who both voted in favour of the sanctioning.

If the two major political parties claim to be so contrary to Outside Development Zone sanctionings, then they should instruct their representatives on the Mepa board to behave accordingly and in sync with such a claim.

Mepa's recent enforcement at Mellieħa made prime time TV during the PBS 8 p.m. news bulletin, and for good reason.

The enforcement action in question, conducted at Ta' Msid in Mellieħa, was a mammoth one.

It involved the confiscation of a 20-ton bulldozer used to illegally dump construction debris and topsoil over garigue, up to a height of two metres in some cases, in what was an area earmarked as an Area of Ecological Importance (Level 2).

My kneejerk reaction to all this is to encourage Mepa to continue with such sterling work.

The only flaw in this uplifting story is the customary cynicism and lukewarm reception such enforcement encounters from the public in general.

Anyway, I am not afraid of unreservedly saying: “Well done Mepa enforcement – keep up the momentum”.

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