

Environment

Blues on the green



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The game of golf, once considered as marking the rite of passage to the middle class, is, for various reasons, in the doldrums, at least in the US and most of Europe. For instance, in the US, which dominates the golf market by a long shot, 160 golf courses out of the country's 14,000-odd 18-hole golf courses closed in 2013 alone, marking the eighth consecutive year of course closures.

Prospects for golf in the US are also bleak as young people are increasingly disenfranchised with the game. Between 2009 and 2013, participation in golf of 18- to 34-year-olds plummeted by 13 per cent, while the participation of the same cohort in more active sports, like jogging, rose by 29 per cent.

Prospects for golf in Europe are similarly bleak. For instance, in the homeland of golf – Scotland – where the game traces its origins back to the 15th century, membership in golf clubs plummeted by 14 per cent over the period 2004 to 2013; the plunge in England over the same period is even more acute – a whopping 205 per cent.

Although the game is still expanding in some Asian countries, particularly China, where new golf courses are being built, the game is facing a battering in mature markets such as Japan and Australia.

The stuttering form of golf has been attributed mainly to two factors – its meditative nature (completing an 18-hole course guzzles the best part of half a day) is not compatible with the frenetic time-starved lifestyle of many young people addicted to social media and other distractions. In addition, the relatively high costs involved in practising the game were not helped by the global economic downturn.

Given the current plunge in the popularity of golf, we should thank our lucky stars even more for not giving in to the local pro-golf brigade. Where would the development of a number of water-guzzling courses on these islands have left us today, if not with white elephants to be transformed into real estate or tourism projects? Verdala, Xaghra l-Hamra and Ta' Ċenċ were some of the prime locations that had been touted as potential golf courses. Luckily, good sense prevailed at the time, promoted as always by NGO-led campaigns.

2015 green wish list

Now that the bubbly has been uncorked and the elation over the New Year has calmed down, people may want to look again at their tentative wish lists for 2015. As with all wish lists, mine is idealistic, and so highly unlikely to be realised, but worth compiling all the same.

For instance, the permanent shelving of the development boundary 'tweaking' exercise announced recently by Michael Falzon, and of

The current downturn that golf is facing might have thrown golf courses in Malta out of business, leaving developers with white elephants waiting for an alternative use.



This year could see the government finally take some action to ensure public access to areas that have unlawfully been cordoned off. Wishful thinking?

the Xghajra coastline proposals (dubbed the 'Bugibba in the south'), despite being highly improbable, would go a long way towards making 2015 a year to remember.

The organisation of the spring hunting referendum in a timely fashion and in conjunction with the local council elections, and a positive turnout by those eligible to vote, would put a further shine to 2015. However, putting a definite end to the practice of bird trapping and finally coming to grips with the widespread abusive use of bird callers by the hunting community is probably asking too much.

Proposed large-scale projects earmarked for outside development zone areas, such as the old people's home in Santa Luċija, should be rejected. Furthermore, the environmental appeals tribunal should refrain from giving the green light to previously-rejected projects that have a considerable environmental impact, such as the recently-approved new quarry in Wied Moqbol (which rubs shoulders with the Natura 2000 site stretching all

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along the western cliffs of Malta).

I also wish we would have a marine protected area which actually works and does not exist only on paper, as is the case with the five MPAs we currently have.

The cherry on the cake would be not having the Malta Developers

Association constantly dictating local planning and development matters, and having an environment minister bold enough to make his voice heard on specific projects that have a local bearing, rather than being engrossed almost exclusively on debates regarding climate change and waste.

Equally ambitious is the aspiration to have trammel nets (*parit*) being pushed further offshore from coastal areas; to have local contractors finally respecting mature and indigenous trees; to have an environmental enforcement arm that is efficient in its operations on land and out at sea; and to finally get the PN to take bold stands on environmental issues (such as by declaring whether it is in favour of curtailing spring hunting).

But I suppose this wish list is way too large a mouthful to chew. I guess one must be grateful for small mercies, such as if the government decides to publish all the land reclamation proposals it received in response to the international call for offers it issued last year.

Doing more with waste oils

In recent years, novel applications for waste oils have been developed, with biodiesel perhaps being the most familiar of these. Through the EU-funded Bio-Surfest project, an additional number of such applications for waste oils, which are produced mainly by the catering and biodiesel industries, are being demonstrated.

These include the production of ester oils, which are useful as lubricants by virtue of their resistance to high temperatures and low viscosity, as well as air compressors.

Another novel product emerging from waste oils consists of biosurfactants, which are useful in agriculture, industry, medicine and petroleum industry.

For more information about the project, visit the website below.

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