

Of mediocrity and sob stories



Engine oil discarded recklessly in what should be a proposed Natura 2,000 site at il-Maghluq ta' Marsascalea.

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority and anything even vaguely related to it continues to transfix the public's imagination and still manages to stir up hype and awe. No wonder the authority is a favourite with prime time television programmes.

Nothing untoward in that – after all, the mission statement of such programmes is not to educate but to generate revenue to keep them going. What is cringe-inducing, however, is the mediocre and superficial way in which planning issues in this country are treated in the media.

For instance, I stumbled upon John Bundy's Friday evening programme on February 4 which tackled the Mepa hot potato. While reserving a praise for the presenter on some aspects (namely the orderly proceeding of the programme), his personal messages were somewhat contradictory.

His decrying the boathouse shanty towns was laudable (even though he picked on the wrong example, since the Ghadira green shacks have a legal standing, courtesy of the Mintoff years).

However, he raised some eyebrows with his appeal for the fast tracking of what seem at first sight to be small-scale and innocuous field rooms, which would involve clearing collapsed rubble wall debris and 'haxix hazin' (weeds) to enable families to have barbecues in fields, especially in view of rampant abuse in this area.

Luckily, Parliamentary Secretary Mario de Marco highlighted the indiscriminate abuse behind such seemingly meek planning applications, which are sometimes nothing more than smokescreens for the piecemeal development of countryside dwellings with all modern facilities.

The reasoning that authorities should turn a blind eye to the so-called 'small fry' and focus mainly on the 'big fish' such as the leaders of the construction industry, is a myopic and blinkered argument, especially since the vast majority of illegal development in Outside Development Zone areas is committed by the so-called small fry.

However, many still embrace such a view, including eminent green campaigners in this country, and television programmes on Mepa only serve to embolden those with all sorts of sob stories about how Mepa enforcement unjustly clamped down on their measly tool room or boathouse.

As for architect Robert Musu- meci's participation in the programme, this can be only summarised in one phrase: the letter of the law.

He continuously resorted to quoting legal technicalities and his role in defending his client's rights, leaving those watching, most of whom are not so conversant with planning laws,

clueless.

He might be right, but someone should explain to him that it's the spirit of the law, rather than the letter of the law, which should be applied, and that considerations on ODZ area preservation should prevail over the need to respect precedents.

Hot off the press

Two landmark publications have just rolled off the press. The first publication is the 2010 World Ocean Review (accessible at <http://worldoceanreview.com>).

This first such momentous enterprise was jointly undertaken by the non-profit German company Maribus and Future Ocean, a research group consisting of more than 250 scientists investigating climate and ocean change at a number of research institutions in Kiel, Germany.

The International Ocean Institute (IOI) is partner in the project to provide logistical support.

It is no coincidence that the IOI was founded by a German woman – Elisabeth Mann Borgese – placing that country firmly in the driver's seat in the field of marine conservation.

Such is the profile of the World Ocean Review that over 40 scientists contributed to its compilation. The review touches upon themes such as the impact of climate change on oceans, the impact of ocean acidification, overfishing, pollution and rising sea levels, and the future of blue energy and maritime transport.

The second publication, The European Environment – State and Outlook 2010, a Synthesis (accessible at www.eea.europa.eu/soer/synthesis/synthesis) is a compendium of indicators and snippets which give the most realistic picture of the environment in Europe.

Released by the European Environment Agency, it gives a comprehensive outlook on the state of the environment in the European continent, addressing a wide range of issues such as biodiversity, waste and environmental health.

I will quote just a few snippets from the report:

- Artificial/built-up areas in Europe make up four per cent of the total land area (compared with 25 per cent in Malta, which is downplayed by some who now represent the construction lobby). Luckily, the annual rate of growth in land-cover between 2000 and 2006 (0.1 per cent) was lower than that between 1990 and 2000 (0.2 per cent).
- Only five per cent of the European forest area is currently considered to be undisturbed by man, with the largest areas being in Bulgaria and Romania (incidentally, the poorest EU member states, which speaks volumes about the sustainability of mainstream economic development).
- One of the potential large-scale impacts of climate change on Europe – a considerable sea level rise – could very well come from the melting of the west Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets.

Impact on sea

Although the climate change adaptation study recently drafted by an expert panel appointed by Ministry of Resources and Rural Affairs is comprehensive, it is fundamentally flawed insofar as the sea around Malta is concerned.

The report says precious little about the possible impact of climate change on the sea around our islands. It glibly limits itself to a mere half-page on the impacts on the marine environment, and completely misses out some aspects altogether.

For instance, no mention whatsoever is made of the ongoing proliferation of alien marine species as a result of the warming of the Mediterranean, despite this having potentially grave consequences for fisheries and marine ecosystem health in general.

Support for local biodiversity

The commitment to conserve biodiversity in all its intricacy and complexity should remain a priority, despite 2010 – the year designated by the UN to celebrate biodiversity – being history, and despite the current economic doldrums the world is facing. Two commendable local initiatives taken in this direction are worthy of mention.

While renowned academic journals such as Nature and Science understandably soak up the media limelight, local journals tend to remain obscure, despite the laudable efforts of home-grown naturalists who strive to bring aspects of local biodiversity to the attention of the Maltese public.

For example, the Central Mediterranean Naturalist is a peer-reviewed local natural history journal that has been published by Nature Trust every year since 1970. Its archives feature almost 400 papers on various local species and habitats. Yet the journal's very existence is still unknown many.

Things are perhaps set to change with the online hosting of the journal's recent contents at <http://cmn-ntm.org.mt> . The Malta Council for Science and Technology funded the journal's digital migration, and plans are in the offing for the full archives to be eventually hosted online.

Meanwhile, the IOI Kids website (www.ioikids.net) is an online didactic tool which aims to bolster awareness in the younger generations about the marine world. The kaleidoscope of online facilities that may be accessed through this portal were recently the subject of a paper published in the Journal of Marine Education, the quarterly magazine of the US-based National Marine Educators Association.

The same website features educational games about the sea, quizzes, animated lectures and even short video clips of underwater life. The publication may be accessed at <http://alandeidun.webs.com/downloads.htm>

www.alandeidun.eu