

A wish list for 2008



Squatters, such as those colonising the former barracks at Manikata/Ghajn Tuffieha, should be evicted.

The arrival of a new year is traditionally punctuated with resolutions and, most of all, wishful thinking. As a general election looms, I list my green wishes for 2008:

1. More effective Outside Development Zone enforcement. To quote Chris Borg (Malta Environment and Planning Authority Director of Planning) "...enforcement in ODZ areas, which is our most important enforcement objective" and "the proposed changes in the legislation are also expected to increase the enforcement powers, especially the ODZ enforcement. Our main objective is zero tolerance to ODZ illegalities".

2. No further ODZ development should be approved. In the offing are the Ffondoq ir-Rummien, Ta' Cenc and Tal-Papa (Għirghien, in Birżebbuga), while a few notable others have already been given the green light, such as the Tal-Buqana petrol station. More carrying capacity studies need be carried out. At least two other supermarkets are in the pipeline (at Luqa and Safi) and other similar applications are being concocted.

One wonders whether anyone has actually posed the question 'is there a need for all this?' Such considerations should also be made by those in authority when deliberating the gargantuan proposed extensions to the Sea Bank Hotel in Ghadira and to the Mistra Holiday Complex.

3. 'Degraded land' should not be used as an excuse for further ODZ development - the most glaring example is the recent approval of the extensions to the Ramla Bay Hotel.

Though the earmarked site is on public land and close to an ecologically important site, the proponents of the development successfully argued that it is degraded land and that by converting it to a tennis court, they would effectively be improving it.

By giving in on such hogwash, Mepa has effectively fuelled the conviction in prospective developers that it's good to degrade your land before a development decision. Such a practice is unfortunately all too common already and Mepa should clamp down immediately on ODZ dumping cases as these are usually the antecedents of development.

4. ODZ tourist development should be either razed to the ground or else its tourist (and not residential) timbre ensured, once its operations are no longer viable. The former Mġarr Hotel and the current San Lawrenz Hotel sites immediately spring to mind.

5. Brazen squatters should be evicted from public land. In a closely-knit island like ours, this suggestion might appear quirky, especially in view of the extent of local squatting. Just to mention a few examples - the swathes of coastline taken over by illegal boathouses (including

those along the Marfa peninsula, at Baħar ic-Cagħaq, San Tumas, Delimara, and at Daħlet Qorrot in Gozo), former barrack sites (such as Manikata - see accompanying photo) and entire cliff edges (especially along the Baħrija-Mtaħleb stretch) with the trademark RTO sign. The most daring of all must be when sections of cultural heritage are taken over, such as the chapel dedicated to St Paul Shipwrecked at Xrobb I-Għagin, constructed in 1740 and to which the public is completely debarred from visiting by the 'tenant' inside.

6. The dubious application of the maxim quid pro quo (giving something of value for something else) by Mepa's Environmental Directorate should be revised. According to its warped interpretation, carte blanche is given to the uprooting of mature trees to pave the way for development, in return for the planting of greater numbers of immature trees at other designated sites.

While one may laud such a protocol by citing the larger number of trees, the remedy is unacceptable since there are no guarantees that the planted trees will grow to maturity. Cases in question include the uprooting of mature trees to make way for an extended parvis in front of the St Rita Chapel in St Julian's, the uprooting of mature pine trees to enable traffic alignment in connection with the new fuel station in Attard and the proposed uprooting of a mature Norfolk pine in Sliema.

7. No further coastal/foreshore areas should be conceded to private parties by parliamentary decree. A case in point is the Otters Clubhouse in Marsalforn, where part of the foreshore, traditionally the prerogative of the public, has been encroached upon. More is to follow if a pending application (PA 01894/07, referring to the construction of a 370 cubic metre sea-water pool, again on public land) is approved.

In fact, in June 2004, the Government transferred 597 square metres of the Marsalforn public foreshore to the Otters Waterpolo Club, together with the right to charge money for the use of facilities on the foreshore. The land was leased to Otters for 49 years against payment of an annual ground rent of Lm2,000 (€4658).

The matter is not just about accessibility, but also the ecological and cultural/historical importance of the coast in question. In fact, PA 05828/04 for the proposed development of a Sailing Club on the same site was refused on ecological grounds, among other factors.

8. A comprehensive policy to mitigate against the entry of alien (non-indigenous) species should be drafted, especially in the wake of the unsolicited introduction of the red palm weevil.

Malta is no stranger to such deleterious introductions - yet some people, especially those from the horticulture sectors, still clamour for the importation of more non-indigenous/exotic species, despite the ramifications of such introductions not being as yet fully understood.

9. Parastatal entities, such as Enemalta, should be more sensitive to aesthetic considerations. The recent erection of electricity pylons close to the Nadur Tower, Malta's testifies to the dearth of sensitivity by such entities.

To be continued

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