

Pledges no one will make



There is a very real prospect of jellyfish having a negative impact on local fisheries, as this photo of Tunisian fishermen illustrates. Photo: Prof. Nejib Daly

With so many electoral pledges being floated around, it's a given that there is only so much the Nationalist and Labour parties are ready to commit to.

For example, take Armier, the iconic shanty town emblematic of other shanty towns peppering the coastline from Delimara to Dwejra. Both parties have pledged to take the most judicious decision on the matter, a stance which effectively amounts to more sitting on the fence so as not to alienate any potential voters on the eve of an election.

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- Alan Deidun

The PN/PL lockstep continues when it comes to amnesties, with both toying with the idea of granting amnesties to building infringements pre-dating the Malta Environment and Planning Authority reform of 2010, which would whitewash the islands in one fell swoop.

The introduction of daily fines on illegal development as from last November has been a hugely positive step as it has nipped such practices in the bud – this progress should not be cancelled out with such regressive measures as amnesties.

A pledge which has managed to completely elude scrutiny by the media so far is the extension of the development zones.

The revision of local plans in 2006 brought about an extension of the development boundaries equivalent to 0.18 per cent of Malta's surface area, which is about the size of Siggiewi. There was also a pledge not to extend these boundaries for 10 years thereafter – this moratorium expires in 2016, during the legislature of the next government to be chosen on March 9.

In view of the glut of vacant buildings on the market (estimated at over 70,000), which party will pledge not to further extend these boundaries come 2016?

Also, how many requests has Mepa received since 2006 by members of the public for individual plots of land to be included in revised development boundaries? Such requests

received by Mepa should be published in the same way that donations to political parties should.

Developers on board

During a recent meeting between the PL and representatives from the development lobby, Sandro Chetcuti, from the Malta Developers Association (MDA), declared that the association should be represented on Mepa planning boards as developers have a right to participate in decision-making, not only environmentalists.

At face value, this request may seem reasonable, but anyone familiar with the local scene would shoot down it down without hesitation.

The green movement has been clamouring for a greater say in decision-making boards for years, mainly because there should be a presumption against further development given that Malta's built-up area is five times the average of any European country bar Monaco.

What Chetcuti is proposing would nullify that green vote as, despite all the platitudes, when the chips are down and it's time to decide, the MDA representative's vote would probably clash with that of the environmental NGO representative on the board.

Good, bad and ugly

A common characteristic of every electoral campaign is that Gozo is the object of development proposals. The main reason for this tried and tested trend is simple to understand: conventional development (mainly investment in infrastructure) is seen as the boost to lift Gozo and its endemic employment woes from the rut some presume it to be in. The 'Malta model' of unbridled development never loses its appeal for Gozitans. This electoral campaign was no different.

Environment Minister Mario Demarco and the PL are to be praised for biting the bullet and unequivocally declaring their opposition to the proposed development at Ffondoq ir-Rummien. However, some of the proposals for Gozo floated by the two parties do raise eyebrows.

For instance, the PN pledged its support for five-star hotel development in Gozo. Meanwhile the PL is cosying up to the idea of a cruise liner terminal at Mgarr, for which an EIA study was already conducted three years ago which concluded that the site is characterised by dense Posidonia meadows, and the PN recently said it would seek EU structural funds towards such a project.

The PL's overtures towards 'agrotourism projects' are laudable as long as it's not a smokescreen to usher in new development in Outside Development Zone areas, justified as extensions to existing facilities.

Meanwhile, the PN's obsession with the undersea tunnel needs to be tempered by considerations on possible impacts on the seabed and water quality. The PL has pledged its support for an efficient connection between the two islands, which hopefully does not envisage reviving hopes for an airstrip.

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Natura 2000 agency

Malta's 34 Natura 2000 sites encompass an area amounting to almost 14 per cent of the national territory, and Mepa has asked the EU Commission to include several marine sites in the Natura 2000 network. Such is the natural and cultural patrimony represented by Natura 2000 sites that they merit an separate management authority, as has recently been proposed by the Environment Ministry.

Currently, 30 management plans (since some Natura 2000 sites will share plans) are being compiled for local Natura 2000 sites, in compliance with the EU's Habitats Directive, which stipulates that such plans should be in place by 2014, and discussions are underway between the private entities entrusted with the drafting of such plans and stakeholders, which include local councils.

In fact, the remit of the proposed Natura 2000 agency would be to oversee the detailed management work, including monitoring and surveillance, of those organisations and other individual stakeholders (in some cases these may be the farmers who own and till the land) designated to protect such sites.

While the need for such an autonomous agency exists, its creation should be accompanied by the allocation of appropriate funds to NGOs that are managing eight of the 34 Natura 2000 sites in question, as the implementation of these management plans will entail considerable expenses by the NGOs. Without proper financing in place, NGOs will find themselves between

a rock and a hard place – not being able to implement management measures specified in the plans and being heckled by the Natura 2000 agency for failing in such implementation.

Yet another problem to overcome is the lack of public awareness about Natura 2000 sites, with just 20 per cent of the local population aware of what Natura 2000 is all about.

Who's encroaching?

The local hunting lobby has in recent years strongly protested against the countryside vigils featuring representatives from local and foreign bird protection NGOs as encroachment by 'foreigners' on public land. Although one may dispute the validity of such grievances, one obviously should not trespass upon private land.

However, by the same measure, why is it that the hunting lobby isn't similarly concerned when some of its members encroach on privately-owned land or public land leased to farmers? This happens all the time, but farmers are reluctant to protest about the frequent trespassing by hunters for fear of reprisals.

Jellyfish threat

The Food and Agricultural Organisation, through its General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, has organising workshops specifically to discuss the jellyfish bloom phenomenon. However despite the concern of international fisheries authorities over this problem, locally few are those who give much weight to the threat jellyfish blooms pose to fisheries.

The above photo clearly demonstrates the link between jellyfish blooms and fisheries; it was taken in the Gulf of Gabes in Tunisia, an estimated 300 to 350 kilometres southeast of Malta, shows fishermen rummaging through a gelatinous mass of *Rhizostoma pulmo* (sea lung) to find some fish.

The Mediterranean, like most seas and oceans, is shifting from being dominated by fish to being a jellyfish-dominated one.

If we do not manage our marine resources, including allocating funding for regular monitoring surveys, we may be in for a cataclysmic impact in the years to come.