

The Green Whistleblower



Jerome Licari, writing in The Sunday Times of February 5, states that the biodiversity of the Munxar area will be retained and restored, and that the owner of the land is Rennie Scicluna, responsible for environmental infringements at a separate site in Wied Qirda, as seen here. Is this their idea of preserving the biodiversity of the site - dumping rubble on native vegetation and reclaiming it for other purposes? What will the land at Munxar really be used for?

"The increasing public interest in countryside issues represents a growing awareness of the relationship between quality of life and the environment" - State of the Environment Report, 2005.

On February 9 I was given the rare opportunity of venting some of my pent-up feelings regarding the country's environmental problems, or so I thought. Invited to join the Opinionist panel (Net TV), I found myself bogged down in the cross-fire between Environment Minister George Pullicino and the Opposition's environment spokesman, Roderick Galdes.

I was sitting next to a well-known property dealer - Sandro Chetcuti of Sandro Estates - a highly endearing character but with whose outlook I beg to differ. Why a property dealer was invited to a programme on the State of the Environment Report still beats me, or rather not since Joe Grima, who was chairing the discussion (and who should have therefore been super partes), was generally four-square with Mr Chetcuti on most of the issues raised, even claiming that the construction industry and the property market were the main economic driver of the country.

In the quotation I used earlier, I underlined the phrase 'quality of life', which is somewhat different from the monetary 'standard of living' developers seek to drive home.

Off air, Mr Chetcuti sounded us off on the possibility of his joining the political fray - God forbid I replied, especially since his green credentials leave much to be desired (to put it mildly). Stephen Borg, a friend of mine from Marsascula, told me that some years back, Mr Chetcuti, in a frank exchange with him, expressed his relief at there being so many vehement environmentalists who would take up arms to defend ODZs (Outside Development Zones) that the value of property bordering ODZs would continue to spiral!

Mr Chetcuti briefly agreed with me when he said that residents affected by projects of national importance, such as the Sant'Antnin waste treatment plant, should be afforded some planning gain. This agreement was short-lived, however, since Mr Chetcuti stated that one possible form of such gain could be a yacht marina at Marsascula, as if we do not have enough yacht marinas already! The points I tried to highlight during the programme were:

▫ three per cent of all permits are granted in ODZ sites - the Structure Plan review documents state that "if left unchecked this may lead to further urban sprawl..."

▫ while 51 per cent of Malta was identified as of high or very high landscape value in 2004, only 12 per cent of the island's landscape has been formally protected - "some important areas of landscape quality... have not yet been afforded statutory protection" (SoE Report). But Mr Chetcuti firmly believes that areas within Temporary Provision Schemes (TPS) should be developed without any qualms or hitches, irrespective of its landscape or ecological value.

≈ 23 per cent of our land resources are developed (compared with an EU average of less than 10 per cent), although the rate of urbanisation decreased over the last few years. Urban areas are now visible from 90 per cent of the Maltese territory - "the impact of these trends on the openness and rural feeling of the countryside is becoming significant" (SoE Report).

≈ 23,000 vacant buildings haunt us, 75 per cent of which are in an acceptable state of repair. Despite this, the Structure Plan review document states that 3,000 new dwelling units are being constructed every year, although only 1,700 are actually needed - hence, supply is far exceeding demand, exacerbating the vacant buildings figure - "there is significant potential for improving the overall efficiency of land use" (SoE Report). Unfortunately, this would drive people like Mr Chetcuti out of business, but would give our children the opportunity to savour some undeveloped areas of the island.

A restructuring of the construction industry is thus direly needed.

In the face of such sobering statistics, I quipped during the programme that one day we might well have to take our children over to Sicily to enjoy some open spaces - neither Mr Grima nor Mr Chetcuti were fazed by this statement or by any of the above statistics. A curt 'so what?' was their enduring reply.

One silver lining was MEPA director-general Dr Godwin Cassar placing somewhat of a wet blanket over Mr Chetcuti's incessant calls for greater shackle-free development when he stated that applicants and their architects should show a modicum of self-restraint and regulation when submitting applications, hinting that some of these verged on the irresponsible, and he also highlighted that fact that MEPA was granting 6,000-odd permits a year on this small rock of ours.

May I suggest to Mr Grima that next time he should restrict the discussion to individuals who have no vested interest in the issues on the table. As Astrid Vella (The Times, February 10) aptly puts it: "Analyse a strand of our DNA and all it will read is money, money, money".

Are some building contractors above the law?

JUST BEFORE the Christmas period, all major TV stations were bristling with positive reports on the latest economic foray by Polidano Brothers - the production of pressurised gas cylinders. PBS and Net TV were even at odds on the exact number of employees on the company's payroll, with Net claiming a 3,000+ figure, and PBS sticking to a more conservative 1,000-2,000.

I am pointing this out since the same two stations were conspicuous by their absence when it came to lambasting Polidano Brothers for various environmental and planning infringements. Did any political TV station report the misdemeanours at Xemxija, with the collapse of part of a property and the illegal cutting down of several olive and carob trees on an ODZ site which was the subject of two enforcement notices (the first dating back to 2002! - 315/02 and 762/04), or at Hal Farrug, with enforcement notices again being meted out for illegal dumping and other offences?

If contractors are blacklisted from public tenders for three years for illegally employing foreigners, why shouldn't they be blacklisted for environmental infringements?

Some snippets from the exchanges in the newspapers over the matter are quite revealing:

"However, the authority did not have the power to physically stop the development or secure the site itself and neither could it fine the developer" (The Times, January 31).

"But an enforcement order does not seem to be worth the paper it is printed on! If MEPA cannot enforce its decision, then why does it make any decisions at all!" - Joe Aquilina St John (The Times, February 9)

"This brazen and very apparent non-observance of the enforcement order without any form of punitive action from MEPA has alarmed my clients, as they logically fear that notwithstanding the seeming impossibility of application number 2358/2002 being approved, things might turn out otherwise" - residents' lawyer as quoted in The Times on January 31.

"Most importantly, the government needs to introduce some people who are not architects into the fray. The whole thing just smacks of vested interests." - Pamela Hansen (The Sunday Times, February 12)

Predictably, the lapping waves created by this mudslide will be allowed to calm down, the inquiry (ordered by Government soon after the January 21 incident) results will be condescending and the whole affair will be forgotten, until yet another mudslide or collapse. Unfortunately, building in ODZ sites and cutting down of carob trees, etc. continues, but does not make the headlines!

Reply re Munxar

MY JAW dropped when I read Jerome Licari's reply to Michael Attard's letter (The Sunday Times, February 5) regarding the cordoning off of Il-Munxar.

Especially flabbergasting are the following statements: "...is kept secure and also to safeguard it from trespassers so that its natural state and biodiversity is not only retained but also restored to its optimum level by proper care and maintenance" and "...nothing will be carried out that will not be in conformity with local legislation and any efforts, even those affecting the environment, will be made with the full permission of the relevant authorities".

I beg to differ, especially since Mr Licari regaled readers with the name of the owner of the land in question - Rennie Scicluna - who carried out massive rubble/debris dumping exercises in Wied Qirda/Wied Bilbli on another property of his.

Both MEPA and the ALE intervened on the case and some of these illegalities are shown in an accompanying photo. I leave it to readers to judge whether the biodiversity of this site in the limits of Siggiewi has been "retained and restored". From past experience, we could say that the Munxar biodiversity will face the gauntlet of heavy-handed 'restoration'.

Mr Licari gave readers the name of the association he represents - Leisure FieldSports Ltd - however he did not state the real purpose for which the land at Munxar will be used. And yet again, I ask, why is the Marsascala council keeping out of all this? Isn't access to the foreshore as valid an environmental tenet at the siting of the Sant'Antnin waste treatment plant or the tuna farms?

I hope that members of Nature Trust and I do not receive offensive telephone calls after the publication of this piece, as happened after the exposure of the Wied Qirda dumping. A court case in this regard is under way. One also hopes that the enforcement notice meted out on site (ECF00078/06) for the construction of a franka wall bears fruit, especially since, as revealed by research conducted by the Ramblers' Association, the ten-foot route to the beach post is public, since this was purchased by the War Department in 1941. We hope this path returns to the public domain soon and does not end up as another Fomm ir-Rih saga.

Yet another artificial 'embellishment'

The Word 'embellishment' is increasingly being abused in the most anthropogenic of ways - natural settings "need to be embellished" and replaced by glaring floodlights, pink pavements and exotic vegetation.

Take Wied Babu, for example - in what looks like a vote-catching exercise, yet another 'belvedere' is being moulded out of the valley side vegetation, literally a stone's throw away from the existing belvedere.

PA 02673/04 was submitted for the upgrading of existing walkway from Nigret to Wied iz-Zurrieq, as if the existing walkway was posing some peril to passers-by who use it to enjoy views of the valley and the sea beyond. Such an application conveniently excised out any mention of the numerous Mediterranean heather, lentisk, honeysuckle, protected wild thyme and carobs that were either uprooted or smothered by the works. Will the new belvedere incorporate such lost flora?

The Wied Babu belvedere and other similar works (such as at Salina) speak volumes about the priority we reserve to natural values - we seek to prefer the domestication of 'wild nature' into pruned public gardens, asphalted pathways and anything that has more of a 'human touch'.

Experience teaches us that no intervention is often the best way forward. Recently, in response to a parliamentary question, Resources Minister Ninu Zammit told Labour MP Noel Farrugia that "concrete is being used during the rehabilitation of valleys only when needed for structural reasons, to ease the flow of water or to facilitate cleaning and maintenance". This might be true, but concrete is still used not far off from valley beds, as will be the case in the new Wied Babu belvedere.

Silver linings

MEPA campaign on illegal scrapyards - Illegal scrapyards are one of the scourges of the Maltese countryside. Hence, any serious attempts to tackle such eyesores are to be commended. MEPA recently announced the clearing of Qrendi scrapyard and the ratcheting of its campaign to rid the islands of such yards.

Call for sea protection zones - The government has called for the establishment of regional ecological protection zones in the sea as it welcomes the European Commission's initiative to draw up a Green Paper to address Europe's maritime affairs. To ensure protection, countries adjacent to waters under national jurisdictions - whether EU states or not - would need to subscribe to similar standards.

EU funding for polluter pays principle - MEPA has obtained €200,000 from the EU to help it put in practice the polluter-pays principle. The funds will trickle from the EU Transitional Facility programme for a project entitled Building Capacity To Introduce The Polluter Pays Principle Through Economic Instruments To Implement The EU Environmental Acquis.

Update on Aarhus Convention - On January 19, the European Parliament amended a Council decision to improve access to information and public participation in EU environmental decision-making - the only snag in this is that it refused to give NGOs the right to take member states to court.

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