

The golf course spreads



The arrow in the photo shows the Ta' Cenc cliffs in Gozo, visible from Ix-Xaghra l-Hamra. Will such an unbroken skyline survive for long? Is landscape and scenic value ever considered?

Hardly had the dust settled on the gargantuan Xaghra l-Hamra golf course proposal (equivalent to the whole village of Ghaxaq) that the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA) had the cheek to ask Government to consider the development of a third golf course in the White Rocks/Pembroke area, which has already been spared a golf course in the past by MEPA (which had rejected the application outright). The choice of the Pembroke area, strategically close to the interests of some of the MHRA's head honchos, is hardly surprising.

Backtracking from all the progress made in recent years in planning legislation and procedures, the MHRA welcomed Government's modus operandi of using the MTA's fast track to facilitate the development of golf courses. Fast track or ad hoc clientelism? By also soliciting the Ta' Cenc golf course in its statement, the MHRA is effectively setting its eyes on roughly 1% of our land resources, or a staggering 250 ha.

The GRTU promptly jumped on the bandwagon by welcoming the proposed golf course at Xaghra l-Hamra, saying it will not cause any ecological damage. One wonders if such a conclusion is backed by any watertight data; if so, they should liaise with the EIA team to be chosen for the site.

Support for the golf course development by the Federated Association of Travel and Tourism Agents (FATTA) raises more than an eyebrow... has the association no faith in alternative, less land-intensive activities for the site, such as eco-tourism? Have the aims of 2002, the WTO's international ecotourism year, been forgotten already?

On a local TV station, a spokesman for the Royal Malta Golf Club was interviewed at Marsa on the issue. I admired his grit and determination to continue with the interview, although he was perspiring profusely - quite understandable, in view of the season and the time of the day. Hence, how can one expect tourists to play for hours on end during the summer season? Not to say anything about winter, when the site is exposed to the prevailing NW winds.

Put your money where your mouth is!

If the hotel industry put so much faith in the golfing white elephant, why don't they pay for it themselves? Why does Government have to pass on public land to private interests? Who is paying for the massive works on site, for the compost, etc.? Government has already ceded too much of the foreshore for paltry sums to the tourism industry - one would see what the MHRA's reaction would be were Government to announce that the 112 ha need to be purchased by the developer at current market ODZ prices.

Another case of putting one's money where one's mouth is comes from Nationalist MP Joseph Falzon's speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on June 20 (The Sunday Times, July 10) in which he stated that "Deforestation, the loss of biodiversity, soil

erosion and desertification, reduction in water tables and the increase in natural disasters all have devastating impact on climate change". Fine words indeed... but destroying vast swathes of garigue is certainly not the most congenial way of safeguarding biodiversity.

'It's only garigue' and similar misconceptions

When it comes to golf, both political parties can rely on the unwavering support of the English-language daily newspapers. The Malta Independent editorial of July 7 stated: "...if the golf course will enable Malta to attract more high quality tourists to make it more competitive, then it would be better to have a golf course rather than a barren piece of land".

Has the editor of this newspaper actually gone for a walk in garigue during the rainy season?

It appears that Government's announcement regarding Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra was very conveniently timed in the middle of the dry season, when the site can be denigrated at will due to its dry profile. The first rains literally transform the parched earth into a verdant, flower-spangled paradise, which greets the visitor with its pungent hallmark aromas of xerophytes like wild thyme, plants which can teach us volumes about wise water management.

"Roamer" (The Sunday Times, July 10) states that one has to have the determination of a Hercules to wander around Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra. One wonders how much rambling "Roamer" regularly indulges in.

The Times' interpretation of the online poll on the golfing issue also leaves much to be desired, when it reported that over 40% backed the Xaghra I-Hamra choice when in fact almost 60% were against the site one way or the other.

To date, the ruling party's newspapers have yet to feature the views of a single dissenting voice to the proposed golf course; their jubilant headlines also run in the same vein, to the tune of "even more support pours in for the proposed golf course..." So partisan and blinkered.

Mr Ian Galea, writing in The Times (July 8) in favour of the proposed golf site states that "after all, this is a golf course we are talking about, not a monstrous car park or apartment block" - if 112 ha is a joke for him, then he should study a map to see how many hectares actually make up our islands - the proposed 112-ha golf course at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra encompasses a full 0.5% of our land resources - hence, the concern is more than justified since this can safely be stamped as the largest real estate project in our islands' history.

He continues by suggesting that environmentalists should come up with alternative sites - then, so be it: Maghtab (too costly for the developer to rehabilitate?), discarded land within an existing industrial zone (too degraded?). If few sites on the islands can be identified, it really shows that Malta does not afford having any golf course - stop dreaming of the Costa Brava and the like and come back to earth with our rocks having the highest population density in the world.

Mr Noel Gatt (The Times, July 8) does not realise that clubhouses and the like will be built on his doorstep at Manikata, besides the added moray of a new road under the EU's TEN-T network, spelling the end of tranquil Manikata.

When making comparisons, all the pro-golfers miss the point in not using analogies to Malta - Mr Gatt mentions Spain making Lm3 billion, but he does not, for example, mention Elba (similarly sized to Malta) with our same population density. No all-embracing statistic can hold for Malta whose plight in the form of restricted land resources and high population density is unique.

Do they need golf?

The soul-searching question should be: do we need golf? Or even better, is the tourism situation so bad? According to Eurostat, Malta's hotels can boast the highest occupancy rates in Europe, with an average of 74.9 per cent in July 2004, 84.4 per cent in August and 67.8 per cent in September. In addition, with all the clamouring for the golf course at Ta' Ċenċ in Gozo, tourists opting for Gozo as their main accommodation reached 10,810 and increased by 4.8 per cent compared to last year.

Tourism Minister Francis Zammit Dimech himself stated that "Malta is a very successful destination in terms of spreading its seasonality. Whereas 52% of European holiday trips are concentrated around the period May to August, in Malta's case the figure amounts to 46%. For the rest of the year, whereas this accounts for 48% of European holiday trips, in Malta's case the share rises to 54%" (The Sunday Times, June 19).

In addition, quoting from the Golf Course Development in Malta: A Policy Paper: "In Europe, there are about 5,000 existing golf courses spanning over 200,000 ha of land, with the figure for the Mediterranean region currently standing at 324". Can we ever compete? Do we need to, when we are sitting on archaeological riches to rankle our competitors: Tunisia, the Balearic Islands and the like?

Dangerous precedent

The Malta Independent on Sunday (July 10) stated that 'the government will now hold talks with environmental NGOs to agree how the spaces will be landscaped, while Government will not meet with NGOs to see how areas can be landscaped - meagre consolation indeed when they are presented with a top-down fait accompli, with Government riding roughshod over MEPA, as in the bad old Seventies and Eighties of ministerial fiat, and shovelling in its protégé, the MTA, with little or no green credentials (except those associated maybe with lawn upkeep, etc.) and a sixth golf course site down MEPA's throat.

"Landscaping" is a fad word often abused by politicians to reassure the layman that no eyesores are being created. As if garigue and natural settings can be landscaped... will someone try his hand at landscaping our cliffs next? And as if the envisaged ancillary 'country club' style centre (specified by the Golf Course Development Policy Paper as offices, bars and restaurants, tennis, squash and swimming pool) would blend quite well with the wild setting of Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra.

Government, seeing its once snug electoral largesse whittled down (also through the introduction of Green initiatives too, it must be said, like waste management, etc.) has buckled under the pressure of businessmen who breathe 'speculation' on every unspoilt foreshore and scenic landscape they set their eyes on.

The way Government is pandering to the business community, who saturate the airwaves with empty promises of massive employment and cash flow for the country and tone down accordingly their formerly vociferous opposition to government projects like the engineered landfill at Ta' Zwejra, is sickening to say the least. Mutual scratching of backs seems to be the order of the day.

Even more sickening is the fact that the Opposition will probably consolidate in less subtle ways the golf curse even further once in power.

Malta's knuckles rapped by EU... SEA legislation

The EU Commission has announced that it has given Malta a final written warning for failing to incorporate into national law an EU law (the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive) aimed at assessing the long-term environmental impact of a wide range of plans and programmes, whose deadline was July 21. The various golf course projects (and the land reclamation issue) should certainly qualify for such a long-term assessment... once the goalposts are moved and the onus goes on the phrase 'long-term', golf course projects certainly face down the barrel.

Again, the government's propaganda machine carried the SEA Directive story by featuring a bring-in site, rather than giving some coverage of the massive swathe being proposed for golf or the scars being left by the Mosta-Mgarr road project.

Debunking the myths

Rather than emotional drivel, here are some ironclad statements:

"A level of 4,000 golf air packages can be reached after the fourth year of operation... with an additional 16,000 more casual golfers with a second golf course in operation" (Golf Course Development in Malta: A Policy Paper). This adds up to 20,000 projected additional visitors (a third fewer than that being promised) and there is no talk of the effect of a third golf course. It would be quite fitting if Minister Zammit Dimech, the PM or MTA publicly state how the illusory figure of 30,000 well-heeled golfers to the islands has been reached.

"Development should not adversely affect areas of conservation value or which are already or are likely candidates for scheduled areas or designated areas as Areas of Ecological Importance (e.g. garigue)" (Tourism Topic Study, Draft for Public Consultation, October 2000).

"Potentially suitable locations are those where positive environmental benefits can be achieved by utilising derelict land or other land requiring major environmental improvements" (Structure Plan policy TOU 12). Nurturing species such as the Mediterranean Heath (*Erica multiflora*), Mediterranean Thyme (*Thymus capitatus*), Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), Spurges (*Euphorbia melitensis*, *E. dendroides*), Rock-Roses (*Cistus* sp.), Olive-leaved Germander (*Teucrium fruticans*), Azure Stonecrop (*Sedum caeruleum*) and various orchids such as the Maltese Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis urvilleana*), not to mention the welter of faunal species, garigue can hardly be described as derelict land. While the barracks area next to the Golden Sands Hotel can certainly qualify as such, this is just a fraction of the total proposed area.

RCO 4 states that "MEPA will not permit the development of any structure or activity which would adversely affect scenic value because it would break a presently undisturbed skyline, obstruct a pleasant and particularly panoramic view, introduce alien forms..."

People who thinkout of the box - mounting opposition

Civil society seems determined this time round not to be elbowed out of the way by those who see Malta as one large real estate venture. Quotes worth highlighting from the anti-golf correspondents include:

✦ Lino Spiteri (The Sunday Times, July 3): "Meanwhile, it is hard to understand what the Prime Minister meant when he said that the government could have concluded the process at this point, and issued a call for expressions of interest, immediately." and "One would have thought that no call for tenders, regarding any project, no matter how small or big, would be made by the government without all the parameters being clearly laid out. What on earth did the Prime Minister mean?"

✦ Justin Vassallo (The Times, July 4): "Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra is one of the extremely few remaining examples of Maltese garigue that has not been messed up by developers or trappers/hunters. Please let it remain so."

✦ Jaycee Sullivan (The Times, July 8): "Yet another piece of real estate taken, oops, stolen from the people, to be given away in a Robin Hood reversal style."

✦ Charles Flores (The Malta Independent on Sunday, July 10): "The Maltese tourism industry needs a lot more imagination than that to fight the malaise that has been afflicting it for quite a few years now. A new golf course that would destroy a part of the island that still boasts large patches of typical Mediterranean garigue cannot do the trick or, even worse, the miracle that now seems required."

✦ Richard Cachia Zammit (The Sunday Times, July 10): "Numerous species of wild flowers have adapted to flourish in this harsh environment, including endemic and rare orchids, and in spring, our garigues are colourful gardens for all to admire."

The pro-golf politicians would do well to put their ears to the ground and heed the lamentations of the man in the street who opposes further shenanigans with public land. Or will they just disdain such contributions as those coming from 'environmentalists'?

Ceratonia Foundation, an NGO whose mission is "to focus public attention on the value of safeguarding the natural environment for present and future generations and the creation of a just and inclusive society" is certainly living up to its billing, by organising today at 6 p.m. (meeting place: Manikata church) a guided walk on site for the public, with talks by leading botanist Edwin Lanfranco, and an artistic meeting for all those interested in catching the last fleeting glimpses of Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra. Well done to the people behind this laudable venture - Victor Galea, Louisa Houlton, Alex Cali, Mark Causon, etc.

Some final thoughts

The second State of the Environment Report (2002) states that around 12% of our land resources is composed of garigue... with the continued onslaught from road construction, the proposed golf courses, trapping, land reclamation (backed by the draft North West Local Plan), such a figure certainly needs some adjustment in the revamped SoE report currently being drafted by MEPA.

While one of the main trump cards of developer Anglu Xuereb in the Verdala golf course was that the land could be reconverted into fields if the golf course failed, the same certainly cannot be said for the Xaghra I-Hamra and Pembroke sites.

With massive levelling and surfacing works needing to be carried out on site, the death-knell will certainly be sounded for the garigue. And what then... will the site be opened up for speculation with proponents stating that the land is more than degraded, even though at their own hands? My suspicions are substantiated by Structure Plan section 13.12, which states: "A major disbenefit (of golf courses) is that no developer can now afford to open up a golf course in isolation: development economics dictate that courses have to be accompanied by profit making urban development (high value residential areas, hotels, etc.) since golf courses do not produce profit."

We live in an age where those opposing major projects like golf courses have to drum up support by quoting the ecological importance of a site. Fine... but what about the landscape and wilderness value of a site? Are we to muzzle all our remote sites to create artificiality, like plush lawns in the middle of summer, exotic palms, etc? The poor landscaping standards of our only camping site bears testimony to all this. "Landscapes are one of the nation's primary natural resources. The landscape of Malta has a timelessness about it..." (State of the Environment Report, 2002).

If the Xaghra I-Hamra golf course goes ahead, the Scouts will have to be uprooted and settled elsewhere... this could well turn into a mina vagante as the golf course would indirectly also impact yet another area.

Signs of the times

"Golf is a good walk spoiled" (Mark Twain, courtesy of Martin Galea DeGiovanni). For those with a strong stomach, the eloquent link <http://l-istordut.blogspot.com/> is much louder than any words.

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