

## The green whistleblower



A tunnel has been excavated around the outer curtilage of the Mellieha Holiday Complex at Ghadira, with the debris being used to reclaim and smother an adjacent field - once again, any answers from MEPA on the case have gone begging. Is the tunnel related to the recent approval of the extension (by 30 units) of the same holiday village? How will the environs be reinstated?

Our media have rightly been ablaze recently with statistics showing the preponderance of obese individuals in the Maltese Islands. Such a dubious distinction has been attributed to a variety of factors, such as the lack of exercise, a high-calorie diet, etc.

Local development trends suggest that another more insipid factor is to blame... the ubiquity of supermarkets. After the application to develop ODZ (Outside Development Zone) supermarkets in Mosta (PA7617/06 - refused outright), Luqa (PA4472/06 - approved) and Zebbug (PA1339/06) - deferred, awaiting clarifications), Charles Polidano now has the temerity to apply for a similar development in an ODZ area in Zabbar (PA7244/06), merely 500 metres away from an established supermarket in the area.

Local residents claim that the site notice was affixed on May 28, a day after the expiry date for representations and objections; MEPA should investigate such a claim and reopen the period allowed for objections.

The earmarked site lies cheek by jowl with a greenhouse site, for which an application for further greenhouses has been lodged. The development of such a supermarket would surely impinge on the congeniality of the site for agricultural use due to shading effects, etc.

Besides limiting the legal tools available to developers, MEPA should also have the faculty to refute applications outright if their feasibility or social utility cannot be proven. For example, why should MEPA even consider an application for an ODZ supermarket 500 metres away from an existing one?

Or does the developer have future plans for the site, in case his supermarket venture flounders and he is forced (very unfortunately) to apply for a change of use to a block of apartments? The restrictions on the number of pharmacies in a locality (currently an apple of discord) do not extend to supermarkets?

In addition to the current pressure being exerted by Mr Polidano on local land resources with his spiralling number of development applications, part of the Bugibba bypass is still awaiting reconstruction due to ongoing discussions with MEPA on who is responsible for the road collapse after illegal excavations conducted by his team.

This besides the countless infringements attributed to his operations at Hal Farrug, all tacitly sanctioned recently and the blankets of white smoke smothering vegetation in the vicinity of his quarries, such as Ghar Lapsi, and the public land illegally squatted at Marfa.

But, as an afterthought, all these misdemeanours pale in front of the thousands of people he employs, to the thousands of liri he has donated for the safeguard of our cultural heritage and for contribution to the economy of these islands. Pity that his operations are costing the country and the population much more in terms of quality of life.

## **San Tumas 'beach rooms'**

Election years are always hectic ones, which witness tragicomedies of posturing and pandering. The 'owners' or squatters of some of the illegal boathouses at San Tumas have appealed the refusal to their sanctioning applications (PA 01389/04, PA 01390/04, PA 01391/04 and PA 01392/04) once again after their initial applications and their reconsiderations were both refuted in the past, on June 28, 2004, and May 15, 2005, respectively.

The approved South Malta Local Plan (Policy SMMS08) stipulates that "MEPA will prepare an Action Plan for the St Thomas Bay Coastal Recreational Area. This area is designated primarily for coastal recreation and related facilities (e.g., beach rooms).

"In the interim period prior to the finalisation and approval of the Action Plan, no extensions to existing beach rooms or additional beach rooms will be permitted and change of use from holiday accommodation or permanent residential or commercial use will not be permitted."

In addition, "the plan will recommend measures for the provision of additional facilities in appropriate areas and to improve the overall amenity of the area while ensuring that the coastal resources are protected and not degraded".

The same report estimates 140 'beach rooms' in the area. Hence, MEPA, in deliberating on such sanctioning appeals on September 28, 2007, should abide by the guidelines laid down by the SMLP, although branding illegal boathouses beach rooms is an unwelcome euphemism.

The authorities seem to be Janus-faced when addressing the boathouses issue - tolerating the L-Ahrax and San Tumas ones and commendably clamping down on the Gnejna ones. Hence, those who took the road to illegality in the past are being inadvertently rewarded for their exploits, as highlighted in a foul-mouthed Maltese saying.

## **Wied l-Armla update**

This and other columns (especially MaltaStar) grovelled to report on the Wied l-Armla case relating to a property developed on the footprint of a former one, very close to Chadwick Lakes. These are some updates pertinent to the case.

The developer reapplied to MEPA about a year ago to sanction the new passage developed around the property and to construct a rubble wall to enclose it. The footprint of the existing building is the same as that of the previous derelict building and the franka slabs lining the new passage will be replaced by rubble stones.

The developer is binding himself in the new application to plant a large number of olive trees around the property and not to hinder in any way vehicular access to farmers or to water resources.

One further issue that should be addressed is the eventual removal and replacement of the eyesore concrete 'bridge' crossing over the water passageway.

## **Insensitive GRTU**

The G.R.T.U. has confirmed once again that it is being increasingly swayed by pro-construction elements within its fold. First it stated repeatedly that it is in favour of a watering down of existing bureaucracy when it comes to granting permits; then that it will not tolerate any shackles to the construction industry (even during a consultation with Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi on the environment).

Now, after one of its leading exponents, Sandro Chetcuti, is involved in the development of high-rise towers in Mellieha, the GRTU has now churned its latest bravado - the proposal that a fee should be charged to anyone who files an objection with MEPA for a development application.

Such a move can be interpreted as an attempt to pave the way for further development by dissuading potential objectors. Civil society has every right to object to development applications and the institution of such a fee would certainly detract from such a right.

Members of the public and NGOs frequently draft sterling objections, quoting chapter and verse from existing planning legislation - it seems that the GRTU, rather than countering such objections with valid arguments, is seeking to put spokes in the wheels of those who are deemed as obstacles to further development.

## **Hidden agendas**

A number of individuals hailing from different entities, such as political parties and NGOs, have embarked on a mission to smear the Xaghra l-Hamra national park project from the very offset. Most of this gripe reeks of sour grapes, mainly because three of the myriad local NGOs have been picked for the management of the site.

By giving vent to such diatribes, these individuals either betray their hidden agendas or uncannily undermine the environmental movement. Contrary to what was claimed by one such exponent, these three NGOs did not connive with Government to accede to the management of the area.

All forms of conspiracy theories have been conjured to try to explain why these three NGOs in particular were chosen - few, if any, stated that such a choice was made in view of the mettle they have shown in site management over recent years.

The only NGO conversant with site management and which has been 'excluded' is BirdLife, which is already managing two other sites, and has plans for other sites. Only time will tell how the three NGOs handpicked for the job at hand still opposed vehemently the Ta' Cenc and Hondoq projects and were not placated in any way by this added responsibility.

Needless to say (and as rightly expounded by Din l-Art Helwa president Martin Galea in his letter 'North by North West') the door remains open to all other NGOs to contribute to the seamless management of the area, as long as contributions are made in good faith.

Any alluded "divisions" between NGOs were not introduced by this government's choice of the three NGOs, contrary to yet another claim made recently, but were simmering long before the announcement of this project.

The bottom line is that some individuals should exempt themselves from penning articles on behalf of others, with the conceited intention of harvesting any mileage. The dichotomy of politics and the environment should remain such and not become a monologue.

This is a time for all NGOs and green-minded politicians across the divide to celebrate and not to engage in bean-counting and political scheming exercises. Also, some pearls of wisdom are delivered to NGOs from Gabriel Lopez, IUCN's director of Global Strategies, as reported in IUCN's World Conservation journal issue of January 2007:

"Donors, the general public and other stakeholders are turning the spotlight on NGOs and challenging their accountability. Do they spend their money efficiently? Are they delivering the promises for which they receive funding? Do they act fairly and sustainably in their daily work, through their decision-making, staff development and office practices?"

## **Pillaging our natural resources**

The marauding of natural resources, such as timber, minerals and precious metals, wildlife, etc., in developing countries (such as those of the African, South American and Asian continents) is a well-known scourge, about which we produce documentaries, write text books and lecture our children.

However, few realise that such a pillage is closer to home than one thinks. The theft of the natural and national resource of groundwater is finally hoarding the limelight in the media that it deserves (e.g. Marco Cremona - The Times - Getting away with stealing water - (June 6); Anna Mallia - MaltaToday - Water theft: a crime blessed by government - June 3) but is far from becoming a political priority.

The location of illegal boreholes is a parrot's secret - simply take a walk through a country lane and one will easily stumble on the revving sound of a generator and pump stashing precious groundwater into bowsers, ready for the lucrative private pool and well market - flitting through the Yellow Pages, one is greeted by a gossamer of these water marketers.

Are all these operators legal? The State of the Environment Report (2005) concedes: "Water theft, illegal abstraction from unregistered boreholes, particularly for agriculture, and the use of privately supplied water of unknown quality by domestic users, remain matters of concern." The number of unregistered boreholes is estimated at around 5,000.

The indictment of three individuals for stealing groundwater (The Times, May 26) may be a step in the right direction but more exorbitant fines (than the Lm550 meted out to all three together) and a greater manpower to the MRA are sorely needed at this stage.

## **An epitaph for a fellow green**

Ferdinand Demicoli will be sorely missed at Nature Trust, where his acumen on renewable energy resources and technological/engineering advances and his favourable disposition to organise myriad activities for members were highly prized.

Ferdinand was an inspiration to all around him since he showed by example the transposition of the green principles he preached. He had a particular sympathy for the willow (zafzafa) and in a way he identified with this tree - resilient and determined to make a last stand against all odds.

Needless to say, Ferdinand was an asset to all those around him and a genuine green at heart.

## **Silver linings**

St Aloysius Tree-Planting Award - St Aloysius' College students walked away with two awards in the Ministry of Education's Tree Growing Competition held on May 24. They were awarded the School Arbor Committee Trophy, for the school that grew the largest number of native saplings, and The Scicluna Spiteri Shield, for the school that produced the largest number of saplings on a student population basis, this scholastic year.

Today the school boasts a nursery with over 2,000 indigenous saplings, sown from seeds and cared for by the students themselves. This year, apart from participating in the 34U Campaign, students also planted the first 50 oak and almond saplings from their nursery at Salina National Park.

The Ministry of Rural Affairs and the Environment supplied soil while the Bank of Valletta sponsored the project. Kudos to all the students involved and to all supervising teachers, especially Michel Spiteri.

Church Commission's latest initiative - The Church Environment Commission continues to set the pace when it comes to environmental awareness.

This summer it is organising yet again a sea-based spiritual meditation period on July 20 and on July 27-28, which includes a sea tour of the islands' coastal area, a spiritual gathering and an overnight stay in Gozo.

Those wishing to attend can apply at the Commission's office at the Curia, Floriana.

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