

It's all about the money



Gharb Council was awarded EU Structural Funds for the restoration of rubble walls and management of stormwater through Wied il-Mielah. Such a project should have been completed by the end of last year, but three years on, half-built rubble walls and mounds of rubble and debris still punctuate the valley bed. Besides, not all rubble walls are being constructed using tas-sejjieh stones. A skip in the adjacent Wied l-Ghasri (under the responsibility of Ghasri council) is bursting at the seams with all forms of waste, along the route frequented by tourists. Is this the way local councils are promoting eco-tourism in their localities?

I agree with Pierre Mizzi, marketing director of Duplex Real Estate Branding, that the 10 Cape Verde islands 500 km to the west of Africa and Malta have very little in common ("Putting Malta on the international property map", The Sunday Times, March 4).

However, according to Mr Mizzi, the two archipelagoes differ mainly in the geographical location and the fact that Cape Verde has only recently emerged on the tourism map. Hence, Mr Mizzi reasons that, if Cape Verde's real estate market for foreigners is proceeding at full throttle, why not Malta's?

A simple look at an atlas would give Mr Mizzi the answer - the Cape Verde islands have a combined area of more than 10 times that of Malta and are inhabited by 420,000 people, roughly the same as us. Hence, this effectively gives Cape Verde a population density which is almost 10 times less than ours.

This is why Cape Verde can afford to boost its real estate sector, albeit at a cost to the islands' stunning natural beauty. Malta can ill afford to do so - our islands are already heaving under a smothering construction industry with little regard for open spaces and citizens' right to a tranquil existence.

As the song *It's all about the money* by Meja goes, "We find strange ways, Of showing them how much we really care, When in fact we just don't seem to care at all" - Mr Mizzi sells his rationale by using the clichéd economic argument, when Maltese are now more intent on a good quality of life rather than an even higher standard of living.

Yet another analogy comes from Bulgaria, which is being marketed as a property investment opportunity. While extolling the economic virtues of such an investment, such as low cost, potential for growth, etc, agents ignore the environmental repercussions of such an influx they are abetting.

As rightly highlighted by the World Wildlife Fund, the location of the new holiday complex near the village of Varvara on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast is nothing but idyllic, where the thickly forested Strandzha Mountains lie almost directly on the Black Sea. Little wonder that holiday homes have already been snapped up by foreign investors, even before construction is completed.

The problem - of which investors are unaware - is that the complex is being built illegally within the Strandzha Nature Park, without the consent of the park authorities. Mr Mizzi will counter that properties offered by Maltese agents in Bulgaria are all covered by a permit - this might be true; however, one must also concede that the natural heritage of cash-strapped East European countries is being sold to the highest bidder, courtesy of estate agents.

The pen is mightier than the sword

The collection of Maltese poems by Louis Briffa, published recently under the title Bil-Varloppa is set on seven different tiers, with the third being dedicated to the natural environment.

The entire collection is a *cri de coeur* by the poet who decries the inexorable despoliation of our natural heritage at the hands of speculators. The environmentally-themed poems are queued so as to regale the reader with the highlight - the poem F'Ta' Cenc ilfiq il-bies, in which the poet rightly chastises architects who have drawn up plans and effectively fragmented the stunning scenery into a 'jigsaw puzzle' the cut-throat race for monies which is flawing our appreciation of the priceless natural heritage.

One phrase from this poem reverberates in my mind: "Bla mhabba ghajr biss tal-flus jtkattru ghal tal-qalba", which can be roughly translated as: "With no love except for the money being generated for those in the inner circle". This anthology is certainly worth buying.

Wied Infern case

We might have the luxury of the Aarhus Convention and of a generally-perceived freedom of speech but some occasional kinks in this perfect armoury sometimes crop up. Take aptly-named Wied Infern (Hell's Valley) which leads to Qbajjar in Gozo - John Mizzi, an AD councillor from Sannat, was fulfilling his civic duty as a conscientious citizen by taking photos.

I concede that MEPA enforcement officials might not wish to reveal their identity so as not to risk their immunity but such a maladroit manner is not the correct way of doing things. Officials on site might have alternatively explained their justifications to Mr Mizzi and then offered some form of compensation by providing their own photos to him later on. After all, the clearing of a public area from illegally dumped debris, at public expense, is a matter of public interest, I believe.

St Michael Foundation - as expected

This column, when lambasting St Michael's Foundation for building a school in an ODZ area in San Gwann and then even applying for an extension to the same school, had rightly predicted almost two years ago that the school's administration would one day seek to restore their green credentials.

In fact, they so did, getting involved in a Comenius project with German and Portuguese school partners, with students observing and evaluating the human impact on the world and how Nature has been affected. The students will make suggestions on how they can effectively contribute towards improving the environment.

All this is highly commendable but talk should be translated into practice - the fact remains that the school was built in a former ODZ site, albeit by parliamentary decree. One hopes that the few pockets of greenery around the school are safeguarded from further encroachment. An analogy is offered by the San Anton and San Andrea schools, built on the upper reaches of Wied Qannotta. The siting of schools has a more compelling educational value than any educational programme can offer.

Moving at two different tangents

This column has repeatedly lauded the Church's Green Commission for its multifarious green initiatives, the latest of which is the "The World is in my hand" essay competition for secondary schools launched in conjunction with MediaToday.

However, the Gozo Curia seems to be moving at a different tangent altogether. First it was Nadur parish proposing a gargantuan cemetery in an ODZ area, which raised concerns about the integrity of groundwater reserves in the area. Now it's the Citadel car park extension.

As rightly expounded by George Cremona of Victoria (MaltaToday, March 11), the proposed extension to the de facto car park as proposed by the Gozo Cathedral Chapter, beneath the Citadel, is unwarranted.

Although the site has been earmarked by at least two previous studies as the most adequate for siting a car park close to the Citadel and a number of mitigating measures being proposed in the Project Description Statement (PDS), such as the use of natural materials, landscaping with indigenous vegetation, the maintenance of the terracing system and not using the upper level, the area is still a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and an Area of High Landscape Value (AHLV).

One also questions the actual need for such an extension - the same PDS contains no feasibility studies nor any similar justifications, but claims that the project "will attract further visitors to the Citadel". Hence, despite repeatedly bandying the 'pastoral' nature of the project and that "the economic aspect of the project is not of fundamental and primary importance", the proponents of the project are also latching on to touted higher visitor numbers to rally support.

One also fails to see the urgency of the project - the same PDS claims that there is an "urgent need for the project", when the de facto car park on site is rarely full.

What happened at Xemxija?

Time erodes everything, especially puerile memories. This cap certainly fits for the notorious Xemxija mudslide, for which no cat (individual or company) has been bagged. As aptly queried by Carmel Ellul (The Sunday Times, February 23), "Whom will the police take to court for such a dangerous practice? Driving malpractices are immediately taken to court, and rightfully so. Why is the same not practised for building site malpractices?"

Has no one being identified as a culprit in view of his/her stature or position? Yet again, things have been conveniently swept under the carpet.

Rambling... taking the lead from the UK

While local ramblers feel snubbed at being left out in the cold by both major political parties, with proposals for the opening up of illegally-cordoned off areas shelved off indefinitely, ramblers in the UK are basking in repeated successes.

In fact, as reported in the UK Independent, a number of once 'private beaches' and other cordoned off coastal areas, are now within walkers' reach after a decision by Natural England (NE), the government's statutory adviser on the environment, to propose a coastal corridor around Britain open to all. The corridor will not include salt marshes and mud flats where there are environmental concerns about human intrusion, but it does promise to bring an end to the stop-start experience of walking the 2,733 miles of English and Welsh coast.

The proposal, expected to be approved by NE's board, must go to public consultation before England and Wales can come in line with Scotland, where there is already the right to walk and enjoy the foreshore. NE's proposal, after two years' consultation and lobbying led by the Ramblers' Association (RA), has run into opposition from the National Farmers Union (NFU) and the Country Landowners' Association (CLA). Both have said they will have to be compensated for the removal of private land, a cost they put at £100 million, and added that a voluntary system would prevent that expense.

Richard Leith from the NE said: "So many times people try to walk along, particularly the tops of cliffs, and find themselves squeezed between very intensive agriculture on one side and an eroding coast with a barbed-wire fence right up on the other, and at some point that path runs out entirely."

NE's report found that only 50 per cent of the coastline could be accessed, and highlighted how some parts of it are being removed for commercial gain, including the £200 million scheme to build a holiday village at Carlyon Bay in Cornwall. About half of the foreshore - the land between high and low watermarks - is owned by the Crown, the National Trust controls 500 miles and the local and national parks a total of 300 miles.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds also backs greater access, despite the presence of redshank on salt marshes and little terns on shingle - both of which are in decline and easily disturbed.

Silver linings

BPC re Ghadira - Three HSBC employees who had been previously involved in Earthwatch expeditions around the world, decided to put their experience and expertise to good use by actively helping in the rehabilitation of a stretch of land, running along Mellieha Road just parallel to the Ghadira Nature Reserve. This stretch was once a sand dune. Unfortunately this land was used as a rubbish dump, especially in the summer months when the beach is heavily frequented. BirdLife Malta regularly cleaned up the site but within days, the place was littered up once again.

The project was partly funded by HSBC "Investing in Nature" programme. A fence was erected and the area was cleared from the numerous acacia trees, a species not native to the Maltese Islands. The mounds of accumulated rubbish were cleared from the area and two species of shrubs, namely Sharp Rush and Golden Samphire were planted in the cleaned up area. A number of "do not litter" wooden signs and a board showing the involvement of HSBC Bank Malta and Earthwatch Institute were placed in the area.

Morocco bans drift net fishing - The King of Morocco last week put his signature to an agreement which will subsidise the phasing out of driftnets in Moroccan waters. WWF, the global conservation organisation, welcomes this major milestone in the banning of destructive fishing methods in the Mediterranean.

An indiscriminate and wasteful fishing gear, driftnets are fishing nets which drift with the tide or current - buoyed by floats or attached to a boat - and can stretch for up to 14 km long. They are known to cause the accidental death or injury of many marine species.

Five years on

It is hard to believe that five years have passed since this column first appeared in March 2002, but they actually did. Over this period, this column has been featured 105 times, has carried about 1,000 photographs and tackled around 500 different planning/environmental issues and themes.

Needless to say, as long as the wanton flouting of planning and development laws continues unabated in this country, there will be no shortage of stories.

May I take the opportunity to thank the editor of this newspaper for the prominence he gives to environmental issues and to all its readers for the steadfast support they give to this column.

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