

All in the name of PR



AS Ronald Bartolo of Naxxar rightly complained (The Sunday Times, December 10), 'improvements' to the countryside are frequently a palliative for the 'bulldozer approach', where every form of vegetation is removed, as happened recently in Wied il-Mielah, above, as part of works commissioned by Gharb council. Local councils should consult experts of environmental monitoring before embarking on projects of dubious relevance, such as this one, in which even parts of rubble walls were destroyed.

About two weeks ago, TV news bulletins showed schoolchildren planting geranium plants and families strolling leisurely along the recently completed 'promenade' over Wied Babu. The reporters, inadvertently or not, made no mention in their footage of the fact that works on site started off with no permits in hand and that permit conditions were breached repeatedly during the works and that such infringements were so glaring that the Audit Office's report on the issue made it to MEPA's Annual Report:

"The Works Division failed to follow an approved permit for the upgrading walkway at Wied Babu, Zurrieq, which permit should not have been issued by MEPA in the first place, since in breach of the Habitats Directive" (p. 33).

The thought that Phase II of 03622/06 (Embellishment works Wied Babu to Hagar Qim) is about to start is very worrying for those who have a smidgen of green awareness. The word 'embellishment' might win political mileage in the minister's constituency but it certainly does not fool those with a trained eye.

How can one call the degradation of a site protected under the Habitats Directive (with the removal of species like Mediterranean heath, wild thyme, lentisk, etc., to replace them with geraniums that will not survive the sweltering summer heat? How can one marshal schoolchildren for political mileage in a gross diseducational exercise which teaches children that ornamental specimens should replace indigenous species and that Bugibba-style promenades with pink concrete are preferable to the harsh, natural environment? A feature of the promenade which has been loudly vaunted is the installation of energy-efficient lighting which also mitigates light pollution - but this pales in comparison with the environmental mess which has been created.

The belvedere over Wied Hoxt on the way to Hagar Qim has been already cordoned off (see photo) although the target date for the application submitted is March 4! How's that for jumping the gun? Will the minister now claim that, while he appreciates that MEPA must do its work, his division cannot wait too long since lives (those of farmers) are at risk, as he did to justify starting works at Burmarrad on the stormwater channel?

Wied Hoxt is one of the very few remaining refuges of *Aristolochia clusii* (green-flowered birthwort) and some rare orchid species which are much more restricted in distribution and are an intrinsic part of the natural heritage than any geraniums planted by the ministry.

This secluded valley had been spared the brunt of proposals in the Seventies to construct a road through the valley down to Wied iz-Zurrieq. In view of the ecological importance of Wied Hoxt, a complaint was lodged with the Audit Office yet again, which, in record time, recommended (Compl. 022 - 07, Report 2007/018) that "MEPA acts vigilantly to ensure that no works are carried out on site given that the Works Division is already preparing the mobilisation

of its labour force on site. It is ensured that the recommendations of the DC-EPD Working Group are followed through."

The Development Control - Environment Protection Directorate (DC-EPD) Working Group on August 4 informed the case officer of its detailed recommendations (13 in all). These were communicated to the Works Division, which ignored them completely. In fact the case officer is still awaiting a reply from the Works Division regarding the 13 recommendations submitted. A reminder was sent in November.

The Works Division should restore its tarnished reputation and avoid another unflattering mention in MEPA's annual report this time next year - will it abide by the conditions laid down this time?

The depths some people stoop to

I have been alerted to the Website www.guidegozo.com/ which calls me a liar and other names.

This is in response to this column exposing the horse-trading by some of the beneficiaries of the zone extension exercise. One of these is Joe Buttigieg from Sannat, who first wrote to me (under a false name) posing as the victim of an injustice thanks to the 1988 zone delineation after trying to build a house for his children - later, it transpired that he is a property dealer!

Unless Mr Buttigieg (or the alias he uses) apologises in this newspaper or on his Website, within a week, for publicly making disparaging comments about me I shall seek legal redress. Needless to say, such insinuations must be removed from his Website immediately.

Profligate use of land - more roads

The North Harbours Local Plan policy NHSG01 states that "MEPA will not allow road widening proposals and will seek to introduce width restrictions along this route of Ghomor Valley to ensure that vehicular traffic, including large vehicles, are restricted from making use of this road". The thrust of the local plan is intended to safeguard the fragile ecological status of this important green lung in an otherwise heavily urbanised area, from 'ad hoc parking', road widening, etc.

Against this backdrop, the ADT illegally initiated widening works on a road cutting through Wied Ghomor, as a temporary respite for motorists while the Manwel Dimech bridge works are going on. MEPA duly issued an enforcement notice on the ADT on December 1 yet, despite this, the contractor commissioned by the ADT carried on with works for a number of days afterwards. Quoting verbatim from the order, "for the unauthorised demolition of rubble walls, removal of soil and other related road engineering works in connection with a road widening project within scheduled property".

Quoting from the Structure Plan Review process documents, "over-designing wastage = 800 tumoli". This means that a staggering 800 tumoli of land have been frittered away due to chinks in the design and planning of roads - rather than seeking to mellow such a figure, the ADT ensues with opening more roads in sensitive areas.

Two new supermarkets

While consultation is still going on re PA 01591/04/GF 00122/04 (Outline application to consolidate existing construction plant and including extensions and improvements to existing facilities, Triq ta' Hal-Farrug, l/o Siggiewi), it has transpired that the Polidano Group has submitted over the last six months two applications to develop supermarkets in ODZ (Outside Development Zones) sites, one in Luqa and the other in Zebbug (close to St Dorothy's School).

The recent furore over the scheme extension exercise yielded assurances from the authorities that the minimal 0.4 per cent increase in the perimeter of development would not be tampered with for at least 10 years. Is the footprint of these two proposed ODZ supermarkets being added to the 0.4 per cent figure?

The recent zone extension was approved on the premise that no more ODZ development would be rubber-stamped.

Nadur cemetery

While the Church Green Commission is making headway with its pro-environment educational initiatives, some elements of the Gozo Curia are still in the Dark Ages when it comes to environmental awareness.

Nadur parish has pushed ahead with its plans for a new cemetery in the locality, even though the site is in an Area of High Landscape Value, which is exploited for agro-tourism purposes (Ager Foundation), could jeopardise underground water supplies and is vehemently opposed by farmers.

The cemetery project was recently approved by MEPA, even if no EIA has been conducted for the project (despite MEPA seeking advice on the agricultural and landscape value and hydrology of the site) and despite the EPD remarking that the proposed oversized 160 square-metre chapel is 'intrusive' and 'jarring against the natural surroundings' (such a chapel as proposed is actually twice the size of the one in the Victoria cemetery).

In addition, the Church bulletin has already featured the issue of tenders for the construction of the cemetery, although MEPA has not yet issued its final decision notice giving the full permit conditions. The Gozo Curia would do well to take a page out of the Green Commission's books.

EU news

(This section compiled with the help of the European Commission Representation in Malta and BPC International Ltd)

Climate change - Over 200 Form II students are currently participating in the second phase of the nationwide campaign on climate change, launched in schools this month. The aim of the campaign 'You Control Climate Change' is to raise awareness among young people about climate change and about individual and collective responsibilities towards the environment.

Eight classes of secondary students studying environmental science, from Government, Church and private schools, have pledged to make small changes in their daily habits and keep track of their efforts to combat climate change. These include switching off unnecessary electrical appliances, switching off the TV rather than leaving it on standby, recycling waste and walking instead of using fuel-powered transport.

Biodiversity - The European Commission hosted in Brussels on December 6 the Mediterranean Bio-geographical Seminar for Cyprus and Malta. The proposals of the two member states have been evaluated and assessed by the Commission supported by the European Environment Agency's Thematic Centre for Biological Diversity.

The Commission has welcomed the efforts of the services of both countries to prepare coherent lists based on scientific data and to take major steps forward in establishing Natura 2000, the EU's network of sites protecting threatened and vulnerable species and habitats in their states. The proposed list for Malta contains 27 sites, covering 48.5 km² or about 13 per cent of the land area of the Maltese Islands, while Cyprus proposed for designation 36 Sites of Community Interest amounting so far to an area of 711 km² or around 12 per cent of its territory.

REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals) will oblige producers and importers of some 30,000 chemicals to give the public information about the chemicals, promote their safe management and find safer alternatives to the most dangerous ones. It will also curb animal testing in a significant manner.

This new directive was voted in last week by a large majority following tough negotiations between a Parliament side led by Italian Social Democrat Guido Sacconi, Council and Commission. The final compromise was criticised by both industry - which is seeing these rules as additional burdens - and environmentalists who wanted stricter regulations with immediate effect.

Silver linings

MEPA promotes natural heritage - A calendar and a series of appealing posters published by MEPA contain information on a number of indigenous Maltese species. Work on the posters was carried out as part of the EU-funded Parks Network Project while the calendar was co-funded by the National Lotteries Good Causes Fund. This material is being distributed to local councils and schools.

Bolstering enforcement powers - On December 6, Environment Minister George Pullicino said he was not satisfied with the level of law enforcement by MEPA and it appeared that the authority's officials were not making full use of their powers according to law. Mr Pullicino added that although he was not excluding amendments to the law to further improve the authority's enforcement powers, there was need for existing powers to be used fully.

Car importers and tree-planting - The Malta Transport Authority, the Ministry for Rural Affairs and Environment and the Association of Car Importers have launched the 34CleanAir initiative, which aims to contribute to a cleaner environment. Members of the Association of Car Importers are donating 220 trees to be planted at Kennedy Grove. Customers buying new vehicles will be encouraged to participate in the initiative by making a social contribution of Lm6 for a tree that will be planted along the arterial and distributor roads to further improve the landscaping on the road network infrastructure.