

SOS Qala



As if the Wied Babu, Salina, Mixtla, numerous valley `embellishment` projects, etc., were not enough, fertile land in Burmarrad is now under threat as a floodwater channel is being proposed for the area

Fr Lawrence Theuma's cri de coeur (The Sunday Times, September 17, p. 16) deserves a resounding accolade since it comes from an individual who is going against the grain. In fact, while some in the Church are laudably involved in pro-environmental initiatives, like the Green Commission, others, like the Augustinians who owned the land at Hondoq ir-Rummien or the Church authorities in Qala, are sitting on the fence, effectively undoing all the commendable work done previously by Mgr Karm Refalo who has managed to marshal Qala's residents against the project.

This comes hot on the heels of revelations that the Gozo Curia had asked for more land to be included in the recent scheme extension, despite Bishop Emeritus Nikol Cauchi's views on the need for sustainable development (The Times, July 15).

How can the Church look the other way when the prospect of bathers having to swim against the backdrop of yachts, rather than pristine waters, or of thousands of truckloads of hard rock excavated on site trundling their dusty way through tranquil Qala, is becoming more likely?

In a nutshell, a 170-bedroom hotel, as well as 25 villas, 260 dwelling units, 10 shops and five restaurants and a yacht marina accommodating 100-150 yachts are being proposed. If proponents of the Qala creek project have Gozo's tourism industry so much at heart, why don't they remove any mention of the villas and dwelling units from their proposal, since Gozo is already replete with these (as the recent closure of L-Imgarr Hotel shows) and lobby just for the yacht marina?

One slight consolation offered by the pro-scheme extension camp was that no more ODZ developments would be condoned and that a minimal 0.4% increase was being proposed - if the Hondoq ir-Rummien, Ta' Cenc, Hal Ferh, Smart City and any other developments still in the pipeline do materialise, the 0.4% figure would have to be revised and any comfort it offered would have petered out.

Despite a few still equating environmentalists with Flower Power, the green movement has diligently organised itself - regarding the Ta' Cenc and Xaghra I-Hamra projects, the objection has led to the creation of a Website, where one can sign an online petition - <http://soshondoq.blogspot.com> - hosted by the Moviment Harsien Hondoq.

Alternative to MEPA

Beleaguered MEPA is currently dogged by yet another problem - a relentless drain of human resources. Bjorn Bonello's defection from MEPA to set up his consultancy firm might have stolen the limelight, but the current defection of key MEPA people to pastures new is more than a trickle. Planning consultancy firms seem to attract MEPA employees, and who can blame them? Such firms offer higher salaries but, better still, they provide an ambience where employees, even if low-ranking, do not feel continually let down by a lack of resources within the institution or by political interference, not to mention painstakingly compiled reports being shelved or ignored.

So one wonders whether the role of MEPA's Planning Division could be taken over by private consultancy firms. This role would be to oversee the rule of planning law, impose fines and issue enforcement notices where this is warranted, process planning applications, etc., similar to the warden system.

Such a scenario would certainly obviate any allegations of political discrimination and probably also of ineptitude since it would be in the interest of the consultancy firms, being profit-making entities, to collect infringement money, bank guarantees, etc. These firms would also be obliged to invest part of their profits in the welfare of our natural environment, such as sponsoring the purchase of land for posterity.

End to illegal buildings?

The public statement made by Minister George Pullicino pledging to change MEPA's regulations whereby a building in an outside development zone would be immediately demolished, rather than giving leeway for a prolonged process which could stall the process, certainly breaks new ground. This is a principle which environmentalists, including NGOs like Nature Trust, have been long clamouring for, since it would eliminate the current situation in our green areas, with sanctioning of illegalities being the order of the day and Reconsideration and Appeals Boards overturning a suspiciously high percentage of decisions.

On another note, Mr Pullicino's suggestion would slightly relieve MEPA, which is under such pressure that it takes two or three days to even acknowledge an e-mail from the public on possible illegal developments in green areas, let alone to come up with some replies (despite asking for the public's co-operation in curbing illegal development) - all this plays in the hands of illegal developers who manage to come up with a *fait accompli* (e.g. a finished dwelling) and apply for sanctioning.

Mr Pullicino should be given credit for coming up with the proposal, as for sounding the swan song (hopefully) for the Mgarr ix-Xini development at Ta' Cenc - yet this carries a responsibility to carry out such a pledge.

Lost opportunity

The current crusade against reckless building contractors came to a head recently, with MEPA being pressed to publish the list of recurring 'offenders' - i.e. contractors who have notched up an unenviable track record of enforcement notices, say 82 (reputedly by Polidano).

Despite pledging earlier in the year to draw up the list of 'permanent contravenors', MEPA is refusing to confirm whether such a list has been compiled or to publish its contents, seeking refuge behind the Data Protection Act or behind a curt "the information it contained was of an administrative and confidential nature" or "all enforcement notices are site-specific... what is in the public domain is published on the Website".

Well done to Mark Micallef, the Times reporter, for taking MEPA to task on the matter and asking the Audit Office to investigate. Repeat 'offenders' should not only be publicly shamed but also precluded from submitting any tenders for a defined period (e.g. one year).

Yacht marina drive

I happened to come across the "Yachting Potential Subject Study, Public Consultation Summary", compiled by the MMA and MEPA, which critically assessed a number of sites around the Maltese Islands for their yacht marina potential.

In the 'site sieving' exercise conducted for such a report, 23 sites were considered, either for a marina location or for a yard/hard standing site. Interestingly, Qala quarry site was listed in the report as an unlikely site, while the short-listed sites were Dockyard Creek, Lazzaretto Creek, Kalkara Creek, French Creek, Malta Hydrofoil site (Marsaxlokk) and Xemxija Bay. If view of this technical report, why are the Qala Creek proponents trying to revive the project?

The report objectively compares the pros and cons of every site. For Xemxija, advantages include the fact that it is protected on three sides, does not present any navigational problems, boats are already a feature on site, water is already polluted, a large water area is present and there is space/potential for a large marina and site offers existing tourism/catering facilities.

On the other hand, a marina development at Xemxija would not be financially feasible on its own and would be the most expensive to develop of all the short-listed sites, with a 300-berth marina costing around Lm3.2 million (i.e. double the cost for developing a marina at Kalkara or Dockyard Creek).

In addition, opportunities for developing other income-generating infrastructure, such as tourism and residential units, are limited due to space restrictions and Structure Plan policies SET 1 and SET 11, which limit additional accommodation or ancillary development in the area. To crown it all, the envisaged traffic impact would be significant, the site is exposed to north-easterly gales and a large marina would monopolise the inner part of the bay.

Sardinia's coastal managers setting the pace

Sardinia has taken a giant step towards saving its coastline for posterity when the island's regional assembly approved a law banning construction on 1,760 km of land near the sea.

The law is expected to kill off plans to build a huge tourist complex on the Costa Turchese on the east coast, near Olbia. The plan, which envisaged 500 hectares of villas and hotels, and moorings for 2,000 yachts, was rejected by successive island governments.

The Costa Turchese, home to a marine nature reserve, is to be rigorously protected from all construction. The measure to protect Sardinia's coasts had first been imposed by decree two years ago, but this week a more carefully refined version was enacted as a law.

The island's governor, Renato Soru, billionaire founder of the Internet service provider Tiscali, who has made the preservation of the island's exquisite environment a personal crusade, was beaming. "The government and the majority have kept faith with a commitment made in our election campaign that for us is a fundamental point in our programme," he said. "Now Sardinia is safe: there is a strip of coastline covering on average three kilometres from the sea where it is not possible to build anything. Sardinia's territory will no longer be consumed."

Despite protests from the island's building industry, so far Mr Soru seems to have succeeded to retain public support for his dream of hanging on to the island's natural beauty for the next 500 years.

The new law allows construction work already under way to be completed, and reconstruction to be undertaken in existing resort areas. The Californian tycoon Tom Barrack, who owns much of the Costa Smeralda, one of Sardinia's marine jewels, will, for instance, be allowed to rebuild in areas that are already built up, and to replace the naval shipyard with a hotel, but not to expand beyond the resort's existing limits.

The new law brings an end to a period of anarchy on the island, when the striking down by a regional court of 13 out of 14 local development plans left a planning vacuum into which developers rushed to build new tourist facilities. Mr Soru commented: "All that has been saved from assault during the previous decades will remain intact.

"The beauty of nature is a patrimony that can be exploited only if it is not violated. We were given the task of turning the page, and we have done so. The island's Wild West period is over."

Such decisive action here in Malta is wishful thinking indeed! Imagine the political repercussions, locally, of such a move, with building contractors threatening to lay off thousands of people and holding government to ransom!

The author acknowledges the help of Dr Mario Tabone Vassallo in reporting this item.

Mgarr ix-Xini incident resurfaces

The dust (or rather the sand) has barely settled on the Mgarr ix-Xini misdemeanour (involving the indiscriminate dumping of sand by Sannat council in an ill-conceived beach nourishment project) than the deplorable incident has surfaced again with Labour councillor Anthony Mercieca, responsible for commissioning the works without seeking a MEPA permit and never being charged for the scar he caused, being appointed mayor.

Of course, everyone should be given a second chance - hopefully, Mr Mercieca is nowadays a wiser person (environmentally-speaking) and such uncouth forays are a thing of the past. What raises a few eyebrows is that Mr Mercieca's appointment was supported by Labour's Green spokesperson, John Mizzi - maybe, Mr Mizzi is confident of Mr Mercieca's conversion?

Church's Green Week

The Church's Green Commission is organising a Green Week (Gimgha Ambjent) from October 2 to 7, involving the release of a theme-related book, the inauguration of St Francis Grove at Ta' Qali and the holding of the second National Conference on Faith and the Environment. For more details visit www.maltachurch.org.mt

Silver linings

Beverage recovery legislation - In a move that is causing considerable friction with the GRTU, Government has started the ball rolling on a scheme aimed at recovering used beverage containers, by using catering outlets as temporary storage depots and giving a financial incentive to those bothering to return the used container.

Biodegradable items at Sainsbury's - Ready meals from Sainsbury's will in future come in trays that can be composted and fed to the rose beds instead of filling up the dustbin. The retailer began what has the makings of an environmental revolution by extending the use of

compostable packaging, made from maize, sugar cane or starch, from 15 product lines to 500. Sainsbury's says this will remove 4,000 tons of plastic from landfill each year.

Though the store has sold organic food in compostable trays since 2001, the move represents a vast cut in plastic packaging and seizes the lead from Marks and Spencer, which has also pioneered compostable packaging. Sainsbury's say that, in tests, most of the compostable packaging broke down quicker than a banana skin.

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