

The Green Whistleblower

The building frenzy



An all too familiar sight - a carob tree, which should be protected, with exposed roots on a construction site in St Julian's. Stiff fines should be imposed on those unable to protect scheduled trees on such sites.

The Times' editorial of October 1 certainly deserves praise for highlighting the current building frenzy in this country, and referring to some findings of the Central Bank's Quarterly Review (2005:1), which analysed housing prices. It states that more money is being invested in housing since there is a perceived lack of alternative local investment outlets (although average returns from bonds and equities quoted in the stock market over the last ten years have been higher than those from property).

The term 'frenzy' is certainly not an overblown one, when one considers that the amount of housing units built in 2004 is said to have been almost treble the amount of five years ago and that MEPA had already reported in a previous topic paper that the housing stock would be over double that required by 2020 (139 per cent oversupply).

This took into account the increase in population, the reduction in the average number of members in a household, the rise in living standards, which could lead to more second homes, and other factors. Extrapolating the 2004 figures to 2020, there would be 130,000 new units added to the supply, three times as many as would be required.

It is evident that an urgent restructuring of the construction industry is needed to find alternative jobs for the 8,000-odd workers in the industry. The arguments that the construction industry is the motor of the economy does not hold water, especially since it is known that construction accounts for just four per cent of GDP.

Minister Austin Gatt also deserves to be lauded for appealing to the public not to limit themselves to real estate when considering making investments. The sentiment of The Times is echoed in a letter by Jenny Carter in the same paper, of which I will quote a snippet: "They (construction cranes) are in every village and around every corner, blocking almost every street and inconveniencing everyone. The great season of development is obviously with us again. Just take a look out of the window right now." When will our head honchos take heed?

The authorities' current predilection for justifying construction rates just to prop up the industry when there is no need for so many new dwellings needs to stop.

Golf... straight from the horse's mouth

A letter by Charles Daly (The Times, September 10) should be considered as a Magna Charta for the pro-golfing lobby, especially since he is a golfer and hence, potentially, one of the 30,000 (purported) extra golf tourists to the islands. Tourism Minister Francis Zammit Dimech must surely have been rankled by the extensive list of improvements that Mr Daly mentions for our country to aspire towards higher tourism dividends. Strangely enough, even though Mr Daly is a golfer, the need for more golf courses does not feature in his wish list - how's that for a thunderbolt?

Rather, Mr Daly mentioned the poor level of education of Maltese waiters and drivers, the poor toilet facilities on our beaches and tourist areas, the lack of investment around historical sites

and events, the dire need to refurbish hotels, the Stalinisque City Gate in Valletta and the lack of countryside walk signage.

Eureka... so actually there are tourists who clamour for proper ecotourism facilities! Mr Daly's vexation is more than justified; tourists trying to venture along the Ta' Cenc walking trail or the Bahrija one, advertised by the MTA itself, are in for a harrowing experience - RTO signs, hunters and trappers and the lot.

Mr Daly's letter should make for some useful brainstorming at MTA, now that its restructuring exercise is almost done with.

Misconceptions about garigue

Hugh Arnett (The Sunday Times, October 2) and Frans Said (The Times, October 3) chose to enter a veritable cul-de-sac when making statements on issues about which they evidently know nothing. Mr Arnett, with typical British aplomb, starts his research on a particular topic by consulting an English dictionary and even expresses surprise that two of his dictionaries do not provide any insight on garigue, saying that Collins, however, refers to garigue, leading Mr Arnett to conclude that it is "scrubland which may or may not be of interest or value".

(Actually, The Collins English Dictionary, sixth edition, 2003, defines garigue as: "Open shrubby vegetation of dry Mediterranean regions, consisting of spiny or aromatic dwarf shrubs, interspersed with colourful ephemeral species").

Mr Arnett must surely have Internet access to plumb the panoply of ecology Websites or the time to consult an ecology textbook at one of our libraries to get a fuller picture of what garigue actually is. When stating that there are vast stretches of garigue left on the islands, maybe he would care to note that, according to the two successive State of the Environment reports, the percentage of garigue land coverage went down from 10.1% in 1998 to 9.7% in 2002 - the figure in the upcoming third SoE report will surely be even more sobering.

Mr Arnett also states that there are vest areas of garigue "absolutely right for sensible redevelopment". Does "sensible redevelopment" mean turning a habitat harbouring as many 300-400 floral species into a "biological desert" (as golf courses are also known) composed of a drab monoculture?

In addition, garigue is characterised by a high degree of endemic species (i.e. species restricted only to our islands). In fact, the largest endemic plant species of the Maltese Islands is also a beacon of our garigues - the Maltese Spurge (*Euphorbia melitensis* - tenghud tax-xaghri) - forming rounded dense mesmerising shrubs.

The most exotic plant species to inhabit our garigues must surely be orchids. Of the 12 or so species found in our islands, some are extremely rare (such as the 60 cm-high Giant Orchid represented by only a handful of specimens, and the mirror orchid), and two species are purported to be endemic to our islands. These are the Maltese Spider Orchid (*Ophrys sphegodes* spp. *melitensis* - *Brimba sewda*) and the Maltese Pyramidal Orchid (*Anacamptis urvilleana* - *Orkida Piramidali ta' Malta*).

Mr Said, to his credit, seems to have invested more time in his research, even though he completely missed the point. When stating that "garigue as such was never an original natural process" and that it is mainly the result of "bad human intervention", he is committing a veritable ecological faux pas.

Garigue forms an intrinsic part of the sclerophyll series which is such a hallmark of the Mediterranean region and whose climax is the woodland, followed by maquis and its lowest expression is the steppe (the most degraded habitat of the series) which is preceded by garigue. Dry climatic conditions and a high level of human degradation on our islands ensure that steppe and garigue never make the quantum leap to becoming a woodland. Such a process is called 'ecological succession' and proceeds entirely by Nature's will.

Most probably, Mr Said has confused garigue (xaghri) with karstland (*blat samm*). The two are not the same, with karstland being composed of exposed outcrops of hard coralline limestone, eroded by rain such that a rough texture, with many furrows and holes, results. Pockets of soil are then trapped in such furrows, which are then tapped by garigue plants. Hence, garigue plants normally colonise karstland - Mr Said must have been referring to barren, uncolonised karstland only. Edwin Lanfranco, Malta's leading botanist, would surely provide a much better insight.

Both Mr Arnett and Mr Said use the term "human intervention" flippantly in their pieces. Natural habitats do not necessitate any such intervention or embellishment. In the same way that I would not dream of drooling on esoteric topics like Japanese cuisine, pro-golf proponents should stray away from ecological minefields, for the sake of their own credibility.

Lack of manpower - ALE and MEPA

I recently transpired from one of the audit reports on MEPA's operations drawn up by British consultant Lesley Robinson and whose findings were recently announced by Minister George Pullicino that Maltese case officers have three times the workload of their English counterparts. This is despite the recent spates of enrolment by MEPA.

The Times of October 4 reported: "The police administrative law enforcement unit was informed but as they only had two cars available and these were deployed elsewhere, officers were unable to reach the area on time" - this is the sobering reply many birdwatchers and members of the public receive when trying to alert the Administrative Law Enforcement unit to hunting infringements.

With hordes of supernumerary public sector workers kept on the payroll, is the adequate beefing up of our country's environmental enforcement sections such an insurmountable hurdle?

Conference on land use in Malta

An international conference was held in Malta on October 3, entitled "The Impact of EU policy on Maltese countryside", with the aim of providing the EU Commission with an impact assessment tool to gauge the environmental impacts of its operations in member states as part of the Sensor project. The EU Commission is responding directly to criticism levelled at it that some of its policies, especially those fuelling the road-building frenzy, is increasingly straddling over undeveloped land, especially in East European member states like Poland and Hungary.

I did not attend the conference - had I been present, I would have pointed out the vast swathes of countryside being encroached upon by the new roads developed with EU money, especially at Mgarr and Zebbug, with mounds of topsoil and rubble left lackadaisically standing by the roadside. To be fair, the roads are top-notch, but was it necessary to include a gargantuan pavement?

It was announced recently that EU funds will be available to resurface Xlendi Road. Will the newly developed road expand sideways into the ecologically important Xlendi Valley? Scenes of mounds of topsoil and rubble smothering riparian vegetation should be avoided.

Still holding the wooden spoon

Malta's EU accession has increasingly turned the limelight on our environmental shortcomings. In fact, it was announced recently that, for the second year running, Malta has missed the bus when it comes to making use of EU environmental funds. Of the 717 proposals submitted by member states under the LIFE programme, only two came from Malta and neither of them made the grade, as opposed to the 143 which did.

The right to know

Hats off to Andrew Galea Debono for making me aware of the occurrence of the Right to Know Day on September 28, which is based on the maxim that freedom of information is a fundamental human right and is the touchstone for all freedoms to which the UN is consecrated. Despite great advances in local press freedom, there are still thin-veiled attempts by individuals to curb the right to ask questions.

Thought of the week

The Maltese are among the most obese people in the world with 75 per cent of men and women over the age of 30 considered to be overweight, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), being nipped to the top spot only by countries like the United States, Kuwait, Cook Islands, Niue Island, Palau and Samoa.

Ever thought of rambling? Join the mushrooming rambling lobby in this country to pile up pressure on authorities to safeguard the integrity of prime rambling sites, like Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra.

Silver linings

Yellow Pages and National Women Council - thumbs up for the latest initiative by Ark Publishers who again this year decided to collect the previous copy of Yellow Pages when distributing the new version. The National Council for Women should also be commended for announcing a new competition for secondary schoolchildren with the object of creating gifts composed of discarded material.

HSBC is once again one of the green pacesetters in the country by putting the environment at the forefront in its campaign to entice students. For example, one initiative involves the planting of a tree for every new account opened with the bank.

Littering reports - A green civic sense seems to be taking root in this country, finally. It was recently announced that a significant increase in the number of littering reports posted by the public has been registered - in fact, 158 littering reports were received during the month of September, as compared to a sluggish 19 in March.

Turtle rescue - Yet another stranded loggerhead turtle specimen (which had ingested a hook) was collected and aided by Nature Trust's Marine Rescue Unit, which had been alerted to the stranding site by MEPA and the police. In this respect, Nature Trust is aiming to open a wildlife clinic and rehabilitation centre at the Xrobb I-Ghagin park.

The centre is being supported in part by various foreign organisations however a lot of funds are required to have the centre fully operational within the shortest time possible. Those wishing to donate Lm2 to help in the setting up of this centre can send a blank SMS to 5061-8062 for both Vodafone and Go Mobile or can send in their donations by cheque addressed to Nature Trust (Malta) Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre Project, PO Box 9, Valletta.

Marine Roadshow - The Marine Unit of Nature Trust (Malta) is planning to take a long established roadshow on a tour of Malta for two weeks during November/December. The roadshow features life-size and life-like inflatable models of marine wildlife such as whales, dolphins, sharks, seals and turtles, which will be packed flat and carried as excess baggage on commercial flight to Malta.

The roadshow will visit schools as well as public venues during the two-week period. Its aim is to raise awareness of the diversity of marine life in the Mediterranean Sea around Malta, and the importance of conservation in maintaining this wealth of wildlife.

The roadshow tour of Malta will use existing wildlife models from the Whale Workshop, a UK-based independent conservation organisation. Sponsors willing to support such a laudable venture are urged to contact Ms. Sarah Muscat from Nature Trust on mlcg@waldonet.net.mt.

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