

The Green Whistleblower

Anti-golfing momentum



Scenes of sprawling bulky rubbish at Triq Guzeppi d`Arena, Ghaxaq, just a stone`s throw away from a residential area. Skips placed on site have been misplaced or burned by louts - the local council removed the waste after it had accumulated over several weeks. The local council should provide alternatives for residents to avoid such eyesores accumulating once more and even contemplate using regular warden patrols or CCTV to combat vandalism.

With the spate of anti-golf letters in our newspapers, it is more than reasonable to start clamouring for a nationwide referendum on the issue before any decision is taken. The Times could ask a simple question, like "Do you agree that Malta should invest in more golf courses, apart from the Marsa one?", rather than a three-pronged question like last time which took the wind out of the sails of the anti-golf camp.

From the latest information available, one can say that:

The current EIA process is flawed, since the EIA for the Xaghra I-Hamra site is well under way, without the TOR (terms of reference) having first been completed.

Doubts exist as to who will foot the final bill should the Xaghra golfing proposal not go through - to date, only the Lm10,000 to be paid to ADI Associates and the Lm30,000 to be paid to Hawthorn Consultants have been disclosed. This time round, there is no hapless Anglu Xuereb to foot the bill, but rather a more than wary taxpayer.

For some reason, the PDS (Project Description Statement) for the Xaghra site overlooked the fact that 60 per cent of the earmarked site lies over what should be a protected aquifer. The Habel Bellu site in the Zebbug/Rabat area was sidelined because of concerns over the underlying aquifer.

What is the point of having an EIA when golfing proponents, like Minister Francis Zammit Dimech, the MHRA, etc., are already predicting the outcome? If such proponents are hell-bent on having more golf courses (as openly stated by the PM months ago), what will their response be if the conclusions from the various site EIAs are negative?

Government has taken on the travesty of a real-estate developer, using public land as a pawn.

Although the EIA process is well under way, no formal application has yet been submitted by the Malta Tourism Authority, which is in charge of the entire process

Mentioning just a few among the informed correspondents/journalists who took pains to inform the public regarding the shortcomings of our country's golfing stance:

A Special Correspondent - "...one thing is already clear: that the golf course idea is either the outcome of confused minds or an elaborate fudge to hoodwink the paying public" (The Sunday Times, October 23).

Edwin Lanfranco (a leading botanist) - "The site being proposed at Ix-Xaghra I-Hamra includes some of our best remaining garigue and it would be foolish to waste our typical countryside to something which, after all, is banal" (The Times, October 22).

Marco Cremona (hydrologist) - "In other words, this area is simply unavailable for the development of a golf course. This resource (underground water) is now under the direct protection of the EU Commission, beyond the grasp of unappreciating local politicians" (The Times, October 20)

Edward Mallia (Professor of Physics at the University of Malta) - "So the Mizieb tunnel is bound to play havoc with the catchment feeding the water table. But then again, the profits from those 30,000 golfers should ease all these concerns. After all, nothing is impossible to him who believes: Francis Zammit Dimech and Lawrence Gonzi do believe in the 30,000" (The Times, October 26)

Joseph Farrugia (member of the committee to safeguard rural Ghajn Tuffieha and a full-time farmer) - "With the impending land speculation, loss of natural habitat, destruction of farmers' livelihood and the negative impact the proposed golf course will have on Manikata, we fear that the project will develop into a clone of the Santa Marija Estate" (The Sunday Times, October 23).

All the above are not dyed-in-the-wool environmentalists - they are simply individuals who can think with their heads. Such wisdom rankles contradictory statements made by Dr Zammit Dimech who, in the recent EU tourism ministers' forum in Malta (co-hosted with Gunter Verheugen), stated that "A balance must be found between certification and high quality tourism, between development and the environment. Sustainable tourism concerns the future of humanity". Is golf a sustainable 'sport'?

The MHRA also seems to be lying in a deep slumber, when clamouring for a third golf course at Pembroke (despite the known ecological value of the area and a previous application having already been rejected) and a parallel EIA (to the Xaghra I-Hamra one) to be carried out (October 20), as if the process was not being fast-tracked already!

The MHRA should take a page out of the letter, written by a tourist (hence, one of the potential sponsors of the MHRA), who wrote: "For a government to even consider destroying some of the remaining countryside is contemptible." (The Times, October 22).

A green budget?

Tomorrow is Budget Day, with each of us scrambling with calculators to see how his/her purse strings are being affected. One can only hope that amid the economic pall that is gripping the fossil fuel-dependent Western world, our economic gurus spare a thought for the environment too. Nature Trust has made a number of green proposals to Government, within the ambit of the impending budget, namely:

Higher financial incentives for those buying energy-efficient equipment, such as solar power heaters, installing them on built-up houses, not necessarily on new ones only. Such financial support should span successive years, rather than be a one-off event.

Cheaper electricity night-time charges should be introduced, so as to whittle down the day-time strain on our power stations

Households using their wells for their freshwater consumption, rather than energy-intensive RO water, should be rewarded economically and the dormant law stating that every new building should have a well should be enforced and developers that do not comply should be fined to the hilt.

Farmers should be actively encouraged to dig wells in their fields, rather than abusive bore-holes which are wreaking havoc with our underground water resources

Public transport should be made more attractive to those who use it most, like students and the elderly, through low-cost tickets, while subsidies should be in place for those opting to own low-cc cars (below 1,000 cc) and clean scooters and motorbikes (below 250cc). Electric cars and scooters should also be made more affordable for those bogged down in daily low-distance commuting.

Fines from the Litter Act and from MEPA should be funnelled in concrete ways into the Environmental Fund and green wardens should finally see the light of day. NGOs should be given financial help to manage protected areas and set up garigue parks, etc. The ranks of the ALE and MEPA's enforcement sections should be beefed up.

Representatives of environmental NGOs should be included in the MCESD since they too are playing a pivotal role in improving the quality of life for all Maltese.

Xemxija yacht marina

Aidan Xuereb (The Times, October 24), as a boat owner, echoes Minister Censu Galea's optimism that a yacht marina will soon be built at Xemxija. The minister (The Times, September 30) in fact also highlighted the possibility of 'more beaches' in the area. While I have no axe to grind on the need for such a yacht marina in the north of the island per se, I can provide some food for thought:

Are floating pontoons going to be used, just as MEPA proposed some time back, to safeguard the Posidonia meadows characteristic of the NE part of the islands? Incidentally, marina proponents never mention such meadows.

Are existing breakwaters (i.e. the Veccja and the Fekruna ones) going to be extended and used for the new marina or rather is a large jetty being envisaged, running from Fekruna all the way to Bugibba, enclosing most of St Paul's Bay?

Is a Cottonera-style large yacht marina being proposed for Xemxija

Are boat warehouses being planned for the cliff side just beneath Fekruna point, a site long within the sites of developers?

Is a quayside in the offing for the Fekruna-Mistra area, similar to the one at Mgarr, Gozo?

Proponents of a yacht marina at Xemxija should check if they are being used as a smokescreen by those whose real aim is to turn Xemxija into another Msida or Vittoriosa, catering for super-yachts and encroaching upon the last pristine swathes of land along Xemxija - i.e. the Fekruna, Rdum lrxawn area. MEPA and the MMA in particular would do well to quell the rumour mill by publishing any concrete plans for the area so that the public stakeholder can become involved at an early stage.

Malta's score on the transparency/corruption scale

According to Transparency International, the global watchdog devoted to curbing corruption, Malta ranks as the least corrupt country among the new EU member states, scoring a value of 6.6, which is safely above the score of 5.0, which is deemed acceptable for EU member states.

While the results of such an index are certainly buoying, some doubts still linger as to Malta's real placing. In a country renowned for the collusion between politicians (from both sides of the fence) and businessmen (the construction industry in particular) and for the prevailing omertà, it might just be that there is more than meets the eye.

Reporters without Borders recently published for the first time a worldwide index of countries according to their respect for press freedom. This index can be viewed at www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/freedom_of_press.htm and has been glorified in Celentano's RealPolitik programme on RAI Uno last Thursday week.

What is particularly intriguing about such an index is that only 139 countries are listed out of the over 200 out there, the reason being that the countries from which the information gleaned was deemed 'not reliable' were omitted. Malta happens to be one such country - the index was compiled by asking journalists, researchers and legal experts to answer 50 questions about the whole range of press freedom violations (such as murders or arrests of journalists, censorship, pressure, state monopolies in various fields, punishment of press law offences and regulation of the media).

Urbanisation - "Candidus" and Ramblers

"Candidus" (The Times, October 17) should be commended for the item "Stone walled", in which he lifts the lid on the lackadaisical approach to illegal buildings. As he rightly puts it, it's been quite some time since we have been regaled with images of an illegal building being torn down, despite no obvious lull in the number of illegalities sprouting up. This is only partly due to perpetrators agreeing to remove the illegal constructions themselves and mostly due to sanctioning procedures which whitewash the perceived illegality.

In fact, quoting from MEPA's statistics, last September, 63 enforcement cases were sanctioned by the issue of a sanctionable permit. Another 32 cases were resolved since owners decided to remove illegal development following enforcement action, while 12 cases were withdrawn by MEPA.

Many of MEPA's enforcement staff lament their lack of clout - in fact, on many of their daily site inspections, such staff have only a limited amount of ammunition at their disposal to curb planning illegalities. This does not include confiscation of vehicles being used for dumping of rubble, for example.

I could not empathise more with Lino Bugeja when he states (The Times, October 22) that "there is no longer an area where you can roam freely in these islands" and that they (the Ramblers' Association) are considering adopting the apt monicker of "Roadside Walkers' Association of Malta".

Ramblers face an uphill struggle to wallow through the hard crust of inertia at the various governmental departments and agencies responsible for our land resources. As always, promises by politicians turn out to be no more than hot air - no wonder, the Maltese are increasingly disillusioned with their politicians. In fact, according to a Eurobarometer survey published a couple of weeks ago, the level of trust in the Maltese Parliament had fallen to 38 per cent from a high of 56 per cent in the Spring of 2003.

Malta - deserving the biscuit for once!

FOR once, Malta does not deserve the wooden spoon but rather the biscuit for a locally-bred green initiative which is having huge success - bio-diesel. In fact, bio-diesel consumption reached a record high last month with sales exceeding 250,000 litres, according to the company producing it (Edible Oil Refining Company - EORC - based in Marsa).

The success has been such that if such a momentum can be maintained in the coming months, Malta would be meeting the target of 2% annual bio-diesel consumption set by the EU. An accolade to those behind the initiative, namely MRAE, EORC and all the participating catering outlets, government agencies and the public.

Silver linings

EMS course at Malta Standards Authority - The Malta Standards Authority and the European Commission are organising yet another free training course on the Implementation of Environmental Management Systems (EMS). The course, which is part of a two-year M&EMS project, consists of a series of workshops and tutorials aimed at helping organisations implement an EMS within their organisation or part of their organisations (e.g. a department/section/unit). It focuses on the food, hotel, construction and chemical industries, light engineering industries as well as on government entities, departments, authorities and local councils.

HSBC tree-planting session - as you read this, HSBC staff are yet again confirming their green credentials by planting a staggering 2,000 indigenous trees at the fledgling park at Salina (extension of Kennedy Grove) - well done, indeed!

In addition, HSBC has become the first major bank to go 'carbon-neutral'. It has reduced its carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions to zero by reducing energy use, buying green electricity and then offsetting the remaining CO₂ emissions by investing in carbon projects. The bank made the announcement on October 6, three months ahead of schedule!

The littering problem being tackled at St Aloysius - With the advent of heftier littering fines, St Aloysius College Sixth Form, within the ambit of the EU's Comenius project, will be actively contributing towards rectifying this national malaise in that some of its students will be monitoring on a regular basis a spot within their neighbourhood of tell-tale littering events, cataloguing information such as quantity and nature of the refuse and publishing regular bulletins.