

No place for peace and quiet



This concrete platform in Burmarrad, built illegally on public land, is conveniently taken over by vans.

Every summer, I find myself criticising the way public areas such as beaches are usurped for private functions.

I used to be quite a fan of barbecues but my enthusiasm has been somewhat dampened by the sheer cheek of some people.

While at Ghadira, in the area cordoned off specifically for barbecues, we were recently treated to an orgy of decibels belching from two massive speakers, which continuously pounded our ears for three hours.

The irritation felt by bystanders was palpable as faces contorted and cringed. What should have been a balmy night spent gazing at the sea's night-time sheen and star-studded sky while sipping a cold drink was transformed into an evening of loathing at the gall of others.

The Malta Tourism Authority recently issued commendable beach codes that prescribe against the setting up of tents on beaches and similar encroachments. However, the use of equipment such as loudspeakers and generators on beaches should also be made illegal.

Beach-goers already have to contend with the occasional mass invasion of English language students for bacchanal revelries lasting till 11 p.m., or with the letting off of fireworks from beaches, as happened during the Birżebbuġa parish feast.

A semblance of peace and quiet on our beaches should be maintained for all those who yearn for it on this congested and perpetually noisy island.

Illegality by the roadside

Illegality is so deeply rooted in our mindset that we literally drive by it every day without even realising it.

For example, take the parking bay at Burmarrad flanking the main roundabout leading into Buġibba.

After I enquired about the topic, the Malta Environment and Planning Authority revealed that this parking bay, or rather, concrete platform, was constructed in the mid-1990s without a permit.

The platform does not even feature in the approved plans of PA 1055/97 issued on April 14, 1997, which permitted the upgrading of the adjacent road junction and the traffic lights system. But here's the rub. While one might be annoyed at the encroachment of farmland to develop

the platform, what irks the most is the way Birmarrad Commercials perpetually plonks a number of trucks on the platform, which completely jar with the surrounding rural environment.

To add insult to injury, the land in question is owned by the Lands Department – that is, it is public, and was never expropriated for any public infrastructure works.

Thus, Birmarrad Commercials, besides turning the quaint village of Birmarrad into an extended lorry and truck sales depot, have a perpetually free parking space on public land.

At long last, Mepa has initiated enforcement action ECF 473/10 against the contravention.

Four steps forward, one step back

The recent declaration of four new marine protected areas (MPAs) within local waters is obviously a long-awaited step in the right direction. In fact, despite the identification of 14 candidate MPA sites in the Structure Plan in the early 1990s, Malta to date has just two such MPAs, which cover a mere 0.3 per cent of local territorial waters.

The four new proposed MPAs, lying in the northeast of the islands from Ramla down to Pembroke, between Filfa and Ghar Lapsi, at Mgarr ix-Xini and at Dwejra in Gozo, encompass a staggering 180 square kilometres, or almost five per cent of our territorial waters. One has to wait for the corresponding government notices to better appreciate what is being proposed for these marine areas.

This landmark development is partly blemished by the indecorous dumping of construction debris at Żurriq during the recent renovation works on site.

Such dumping betrays a certain short-sightedness, with rehabilitation works focusing simply on above-water facilities to improve access to Blue Grotto, while the welfare of underwater assets, important from an ecological perspective and for the diving amenity, has been sadly overlooked.

White Rocks and planning gain

Much has been written about the White Rocks proposals, with many rightly expressing concerns over the development of real estate on public land. Others have questioned the choice of sports facilities envisaged for the site.

Few, if any, have actually mentioned anything about any eventual planning gain to assist in the management of the protected Natura 2000 site at Pembroke on which the earmarked area abuts.

The proposed development is set to encroach on a sliver of 97 hectares or so of the Natura 2000 site at Pembroke, which is scheduled as a Level 3 Area of Ecological Importance (AEI). According to Mepa policy guidelines this is mainly a buffer zone in which no tourism development is condoned.

This sliver of land is currently very degraded and consists of a partially excavated area punctuated by mounds of construction debris and shallow soil. If the proposal were to forge ahead, I would recommend the construction of a low rubble wall around the perimeter of works to avoid the familiar spill-over of construction works through the dumping of debris and parking of heavy machinery in surrounding areas of high ecological value.

The same wall could easily be dismantled soon after the completion of the construction works.

In addition, the developer should be bound to restore the delapidated sections of the Natura 2000 site in various ways, such as the removing of the mounds of debris and rubble recklessly dumped over time by individuals or contractors, the careful landscaping of the Reverse Osmosis plant brine discharge pipe along the coastline, and the financing of the amenities, such as interpretation panels and an interpretation centre, needed to attract ecotourism to the proposed garigue park at Pembroke.

Through such constructive proposals, the Pembroke garigue park could finally take off the ground from the fall-out of the much-maligned project.

A ray of hope through enforcement

For many, Mepa has frequently been a local whipping boy, and rightly so, I would add, on many occasions.

However, its enforcement arms are increasingly proving their mettle as they forge ahead, relatively undeterred by legal contortions resorted to by those contravening the law.

The clearance of illegal development at St Thomas Bay, Gudja, and Marsalforn, which have been publicised in the media, are just the tip of the iceberg of the reams of cases currently being addressed in this thankless job.

And judging from the cynicism spewing out online from comments submitted by those who are only good at warming their armchairs, a thankless job it will remain. Plough on ahead, Mepa enforcement – your endeavours are not going unnoticed.

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