

Mellieħa deadline approaching



A concrete platform laid next to a caravan at St Thomas Bay. For how much longer can we allow the foreshore to be privatised?

At Ġhajn Żejtuna in Mellieħa Bay, trouble has been brewing for the past few years, and things seem close to boiling over.

Albert Mizzi, on behalf of Cenmed Ltd, has been soliciting boathouse owners in the area to either pay an annual fee by August 15 to make use of a concrete platform in front of their boathouses or else foot the bill of removing the platform and subsequent legal expenses.

So far, you might dismiss this as just another case of litigation between two parties. The plot thickens when it transpires that an application (PA 07534/07) was submitted two years ago for building development to sprawl further towards the sea by constructing bungalows on the footprint taken up by the concrete platforms in question.

Hence, uncommitted coastal resources on site are being used as leverage by one side in order to force its case. Further development on site should certainly not be permitted, especially since rampant development has already pillaged the area beyond recognition. Mr Mizzi has another pending application for the opposite flank of Ġhadira Bay for a number of bungalows in an ODZ area behind the Mellieħa Bay Hotel.

Bahrija Valley: What now?

Every time Mepa auditor Joe Falzon speaks, everyone concerned with the environment holds their breath and pricks their ears. And for good reason. His declaration that the Bahrija Valley permit was null and that it should never have been issued vindicates the many environmentalists who stridently asked for the site's integrity to be preserved.

The question is: What now?

If Mepa follows Mr Falzon's advice the disturbed land should be returned to its previous state. However, as a country we are still in the Dark Ages when it comes to reinstating disturbed areas.

Or will the gash in the land persist?

Blocking the development is not enough.

Number crunching

The much-hyped Mepa reform is now out and it has revealed a number of interesting statistics. For example, the number of direct action cases pending at Mepa stood at a staggering 4,000 at the end of 2008, with just 31 cases being taken off the backlog in 2008.

Mepa attributes this inability to execute direct action notices to a lack of manpower dedicated to this function and the reform rightly stresses this point.

Despite the much higher number of 'inside scheme' developments, in 2008 a similar number of enforcement actions were taken in outside development zone (ODZ) areas as in 'inside scheme' areas.

Fort San Leonardo update

Two weeks ago this column featured a few details about the massive land reclamation taking place in front of San Leonardo Fort, I/o Żabbar. After liaising with Mepa's hard-working enforcement team, it transpires that on December 16, 2003, enforcement notice ECF 776/03 was issued for unauthorised land reclamation for agricultural purposes at the site.

This means that the activities taking place at the site have already been subject to a 'stop and enforcement' notice dating back six years! To add insult to injury, the land in question is government-owned and the infringements are being carried out by the person leasing the land.

The recent soil crushing and shifting activities, and the construction of rubble walls, exacerbates matters and the enforcement notice will now be listed for 'direct action'. The developer/operator has also been ordered to stop all works on site.

One hopes it will not take another six years for the illegality to stop.

Biodiversity what?

In 2002, when the world committed to reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010, Europe went one step further and pledged to halt the loss completely. A set of 26 indicators, known as 'Streamlining European 2010 Biodiversity Indicators' (SEBI 2010), was compiled to measure change.

The first assessment based on these indicators was recently published by the European Environmental Agency (EEA) in one of its reports titled Biodiversity Loss: Where does Europe stand?

The reports' key findings indicate that progress has been registered to safeguard habitats across Europe. Some 17 per cent of the EU's land area is now included in the Natura 2000 network, which includes 25,000 sites and is the world's largest habitat conservation network, stretching over some 700,000 km².

Nevertheless, biodiversity loss still proceeds at an unremitting pace across Europe.

The report states that the loss can be attributed to three major causes: overexploitation of marine fisheries, with some 45 per cent of assessed European stocks falling outside safe biological limits; the spread of invasive alien species (IAS); especially in marine systems, and urban sprawl and abandonment of agricultural land.

An alien species (also known as an exotic, introduced, non-indigenous, or non-native species) is defined as a species that has been transported intentionally or accidentally by human activities into a region where it does not naturally occur. Over 50 alien marine species have been recorded, with at least three being recorded over the past few months.

On land, aliens are implicitly or explicitly being given a helping hand by people who should know better - the massive carpeting of roundabouts with *Carpobrotus edulis* (Hottentot Fig) by the entrusted landscaping consortium is nothing short of lunacy.

Locally, despite efforts by environmental NGOs, Mepa's Environment Directorate and the Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs, biodiversity does not seem to interest the public. In fact, as some rightly observed, the May 22 commemoration of the International Day for Biological Diversity received little media attention locally. The issue was probably swamped by the multitude of other issues that the local press deemed more important.

The 'ecological footprint' measures how much bioproductive land and water area a population needs to produce the resources it consumes and to absorb its wastes, using prevailing technology. This demand on ecological services can be compared with the available biocapacity - nature's ability to provide these services.

The EU-27 alone has a footprint of 4.7 hectares per person, twice the size of its biocapacity. In other words, we are consuming resources at twice the rate they are being replenished - this 'deficit' was first observed in 1970 and has widened since then.

It seems a lack of familiarity with the term 'biodiversity' is not just a Maltese phenomenon - Gallup has found that two-thirds of EU citizens have no clue of its significance, with 34 per cent never even having heard the term before.

Hands-on marine course

For the second year running, a short, intensive marine biology course consisting of three two-hour lectures on the main elements of the Mediterranean marine environment combined with hands-on experience through scuba diving, will be held in the second week of September by Malta University Holding Company (MUHC).

For people who have never dived before the course includes some introductory PADI-accredited dives, while deeper dives will be planned for experienced divers.

So if you would like to try out scuba-diving while getting to grips with the basics of marine biology, contact Ruth Debrincat on e-mail ruth.debrincat@muhc.com.mt or Joanna Hauge on joanna.hauge@muhc.com.mt or call on 2123 4121/2.

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