

Why environmental policy may fail



A large population of the gorgonian *Paramuricea clavata* is currently located in Malta's marine dumping ground. Photo: Timothy Gambin

For once I will abandon my usual optimistic stance and highlight factors which may torpedo the recently-launched National Environmental Policy (NEP), and the stakeholders responsible for these factors.

The government

The government's two most glaring faults when drafting the NEP are not of a technical nature, (although some lacunae do exist here, such as no mention of the land reclamation issue), but mainly fall within the political realm.

For instance, other political forces should have been brought on board from the very inception of the policy, rather than being presented with a fait accompli of sorts.

Public perception of environmental issues remains parochial and skin-deep

- Alan Deidun

While giving so much prominence to the Eco-Gozo concept is debatable, another failing of the NEP is that it does not entrench a moratorium on further ODZ development on the sister island.

The NEP stipulates benchmarks for assessment purposes but an independent auditing firm needs to be roped in to periodically review progress achieved, rather than Cabinet or parliamentary committees. A comprehensive stocktake of the policy should be conducted prior to 2014, and with a possible change at the helm of our country's administration, whatever the outcome of this assessment, it will simply be used as political fodder by the Nationalist and Labour parties.

Most of all, the policy needs to be championed by a ministry – the Ministry for Environment – which should be reinstated.

The opposition

No sooner had the NEP draft been unveiled than one of the Labour Party's mouthpieces – It-Torċa – blared that green taxes were on the cards after the next election if the PN were to be returned to power.

Whatever happened to the party's endorsement of the Polluter Pays Principle?

The Labour Party's criticism of the NEP, voiced by its environment spokesman Leo Brincat, is at best vague and shallow, being rich in criticism but short of concrete proposals and alternatives.

Brincat said two key environmental issues Malta had to face were air quality and environmental health. In contrast to the NEP's proposed 39 policies and 207 measures, straddling over six different objectives, Brincat's proposed panacea comes across as somewhat of a dwarf.

What about issues like conservation of protected areas and biodiversity, quality of the marine environment, the construction industry, noise pollution, resource extraction efficiency, environmental education and the myriad other facets of the environmental sphere?

His statement that "a Labour government... would take stock of the existing environmental situation and establish some sort of regular monitoring and review system to draw up benchmarks" rings hollow as it provides precious little by way of detail.

Alternattiva Demokratika, in contrast, actively participated in consultation over the policy, contributing valuable proposals as how to improve the policy.

The public

The public's perception of which environmental issues should be tackled remains parochial and skin-deep at best, revolving solely around environmental health issues. This generic statement applies to most people.

For instance, in another English-language Sunday newspaper, it was reported that the Malta Environment and Planning Authority had given the green light for the reclamation of a garigue area in Naxxar for agricultural purposes.

While environmental health issues, such as the Delimara power station and the quality of our bathing water, hog the headlines and unleash a deluge of online comments, there was barely a tweet regarding the garigue reclamation story.

And the tweet in question was a misguided one, since it questioned all the fuss being made as the reclamation was for a good cause – the generation of agricultural land.

Massive swathes of garigue are being literally blanketed by construction debris and topsoil at Mellieħa, close to Popeye Village at Anchor Bay. However, as environmental health issues are not at stake, this did not cause any ripples among online commentators and in the local media.

This is tacit testimony to the fact that the public's environmental values are mostly anthropocentric in nature. Most facets of biodiversity (except the most charismatic zoo species, of course), with which we humans cannot relate or cannot assign an economic value tag, are being ignored.

The deficit in local selfless environmental awareness invariably incriminates the local educational system, which is still light years away from fostering a generation whose green values are not skin-deep and which do not simply revolve around human needs.

The media

The media's knack for hyping sensational environmental issues and shunning equally important green issues, such as the extermination of a particular species from our islands, leads to different political weighting being assigned to issues of equal importance.

Therefore politicians find it more congenial to speak about rubbish in the streets or smoke billowing from chimneys – since their audience relates to such arguments – than about the myriad species smothered when construction debris and topsoil are dumped over garigue in the name of agricultural reclamation.

I sincerely hope my misgivings do not materialise and that the NEP comes to fruition in a few years' time, becoming the blueprint for a circumspect environmental strategy on these islands.

World Marine Biodiversity Congress

Last week I had the privilege to participate at the tri-annual World Congress on Marine Biodiversity held in Aberdeen, Scotland, to deliver two presentations on the jellyfish-spotting 'citizen science' campaigns in Malta and Spain, and on the recording of rare gorgonian specimens on two different underwater wrecks.

One of the wrecks in question, an early 20th century vessel at a depth of 115 metres, holds a large population of the gorgonian *Paramuricea clavata*, despite being located in the site used

as Malta's marine dumping ground, as testified by the copious amounts of construction debris strewn over the site.

Gorgonians are very rare in local waters, presumably due to the fact that our waters are poor in nutrients.

One of the papers I presented at Aberdeen makes the case for extending the large Northeast Marine Protected Area designated in August 2010 to encompass the above-mentioned area and to cease further sanctioned dumping of debris at the site.

The second paper contrasted the methodologies and outcomes of the Cubomed and Medusa campaigns conducted in Spain and the Spot the Jellyfish campaign conducted in Malta with the aim of improving them.

A staggering 1,200-odd abstracts from 74 different countries and territories were presented at the congress, making it a real showcase of ongoing research on various aspects of marine biodiversity.

Another research team from the University of Malta specialising in fisheries conservation, genetic analyses of bluefin tuna and cetacean population monitoring, was also present at the congress.

Some of the themes featured at the congress included the conservation of marine biodiversity within marine protected areas, marine renewables, marine policy and law, marine fossils, biodiversity in extreme habitats such as the Antarctic, marine bioinvasions, the biology of coral reefs, the impact of high carbon dioxide concentrations on marine biodiversity (a spin-off of fossil fuel burning) and even maritime terrorism.