

Is ODZ development being curbed?



Xwejni Tower dwarfs Qolla l-Bajda at Xwejni Bay in Gozo. The legal battle to return the tower back into public ownership resumes this month.

With the aim of analysing the geographical spread of all Outside Development Zone (ODZ) applications pending at the Malta Environment and Planning Authority, I have scoured the Mepa website to find the total number of ODZ applications in each locality in Malta and Gozo.

It transpires that there are currently still a total of 1,199 ODZ applications pending, of which 719 were submitted in 2009 and 2010.

If one considers the statistics on ODZ applications mentioned in the Mepa reform document currently available on the website of the Office of the Prime Minister (<https://opm.gov.mt/mepa?l=1>), a total of 5,411 such applications were received for the 2000 to 2008 period, or an average of about 600 per year.

If one also assumes that all ODZ applications submitted over the past two years still remain pending (thus, that there were no other ODZ applications besides those shown on the Mepa website for the 2009-2010 period), then an average of about 360 ODZ applications have been submitted to Mepa over the 2009 to 2010 period – which is considerably lower than the average of about 600 ODZ applications per year covering the 2000 to 2008 period.

So as a deterrent against ODZ development, the Mepa reform seems, at least prime facie, to be working. In other respects, I reserve my judgement on the Mepa reform, for now.

The top four Maltese towns with the highest number of pending ODZ planning applications are Rabat (97), Naxxar (91), Mellieħa (77) and Siġġiewi (71). The corresponding Gozitan localities are Xagħra (31), Xewkija (20) and Għajnsielem (19) and Qala (19).

Perhaps with the exception of Naxxar, the result is hardly surprising when one considers that these localities have the largest territories and, consequently, the highest percentage of area classified as ODZ.

However, if one were to go beyond first impressions, and focus on spatial density statistics, a different scenario emerges. For instance, with just seven pending ODZ applications, Kirkop is dwarfed by the 97 of Rabat – but the spatial density of Kirkop's ODZ applications is almost double that of Rabat.

If one were to apply this perspective across the board, it emerges that whereas the highest number of ODZ applications are found in localities in the north and northwest of Malta, the highest spatial density of such applications are to be found in localities in the south of Malta.

Contrary to public perception, Malta has a higher spatial density of ODZ applications than Gozo, despite the fact that the latter has a higher percentage of rural land. In fact, just 17.5 per cent of all pending ODZ applications hail from Gozo, which in turn constitutes about 21 per cent of the surface area of the Maltese archipelago.

However, the disparity is redressed and even reversed when one considers such applications on a per capita basis. Just seven per cent of Malta's population lives in Gozo. So on a per capita basis, Gozo's rate of ODZ application is roughly two-and-a-half times that on its larger counterpart.

However, yet another statistic is even more sobering. Gozitan localities constitute over 22 per cent of all ODZ applications submitted over the 2009 to 2010 period, indicating that ODZ areas are still coveted for development on the sister island.

According to the aforementioned Mepa reform document, 13.71 per cent of ODZ applications submitted over the period 2000 to 2008 proposed new residential development, while 8.24 per cent were for infrastructural works (e.g. roads).

Industrial development accounted for 3.46 per cent of the applications, 2.27 per cent were for the development of warehouses while 1.37 per cent were for quarry extensions.

A stunning 103 applications, or 1.9 per cent of all ODZ applications, proposed the development of private swimming pools, while the lion's share of such applications (1,597 applications, or almost 30 per cent) referred to agricultural-oriented works, such as pumping rooms.

"Only" 39 tourism accommodation-related ODZ applications were submitted, although the spatial extent of such applications could doubtlessly be much bigger than this low figure suggests.

The battle for Xwejni Tower

A legal battle has been raging since 2003 over the ownership of Xwejni Tower, located next to the Qolla l-Bajda at Xwejni Bay in Gozo.

The tower, which is also known as The Rook, was formerly leased to a private company but the lease expired in 2003, and since then the government has been cranking up the pressure to regain control of the tower.

In fact, Din l-Art Ħelwa was earmarked by the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage to take over the administration of the tower, before Rooks Ltd contested the planned eviction on grounds that it has been denied the opportunity to legally contest the eviction before an independent court.

The Lands Department finds itself in a quagmire since, as long as court proceedings are ongoing, no action can be taken. This tower is one of just three towers in Gozo currently held in private hands, with the other two being Ta' Kenuna Tower in Nadur and a tower in Santa Luċija.

The next court hearing of the appeal filed by the former leasee is set for January 24. One hopes this silent sentinel will finally be returned back into public ownership. But the question remains – why do such legal proceedings need to be so drawn out?

Jellyfish news, and new jellyfish

Over the past few weeks, shores on our islands that are exposed to the northern winds have literally been blanketed with beached mauve stinger jellyfish (*Pelagia noctiluca*), with reports submitted to the Spot the Jellyfish campaign (www.ioikids.net/jellyfish) hailing mainly from Marsalforn, Mistra and Sliema.

Other central and southern Mediterranean countries are experiencing a similar phenomenon, which is fuelled by mature mauve stinger jellyfish rising from deeper waters into warmer, shallower waters. This event precedes their sexual maturity and the release of zillions of larvae into the sea and the eventual death of the adult jellyfish. In a month's time, the ephyrae (larval stages, similar to miniature jellyfish) will be visible. Scooping up these mature jellyfish now before they reproduce might be one way of reducing the number of mauve stinger jellyfish next summer.

A new species (to science) of jellyfish, said to be of Indo-Pacific origin, has been recorded for the first time last summer in the eastern Mediterranean, specifically off the coast of Israel. The species has been given the name *Marivagia stellat*. This is only the second time an alien species recorded in the Mediterranean has also been new to science.