

## Redefining ODZ in 'the south'



The land from Żonqor Point in Marsascala to Smart City is one of the few undeveloped stretches of coastline in an otherwise concrete monologue which should be spared an onslaught by developers. Rather than being privatised the site should be thoroughly cleaned up and rehabilitated to promote its natural features and its continued enjoyment by the public.

Earlier this year, I had commended the former president of the Malta Developers Association (MDA), Michael Falzon, for explicitly stating that the MDA was against any development in ODZ areas and against further relaxation of the existing development boundaries.

Basically the same views were expressed by current MDA president Sandro Chetcuti, who told me personally that ODZ areas were not in the MDA's sights.

This unexpected statement was encouraging and, to a certain extent, deceiving, as I was momentarily induced to believe that the MDA were not the crane and concrete-toting bunch we make them to be.

The peace of mind was short-lived, however, with the announcement of the preposterous proposal by the Consultative Council for the South, led by Silvio Parnis, for the 'regeneration of the south' through the development of three hotels on ODZ land. The hotel development was the only proposal it made, as if 'regeneration' of the presumably economically wayward 'south' (wherever that is) hinges solely on building hotels on ODZ land.

Chetcuti sits on the same council. Fortunately, there are other members on the council whom I consider to be more judicious in their approach and who should attempt, however meek their voice is, to drive some sense into Parnis and Chetcuti.





Chetcuti said the coastal stretch in question is “a shabby and unused” area where development would be of benefit. But the South Malta Local Plan (SMLP), which covers the precincts in question, seems to disagree with Chetcuti’s unedifying opinion of this stretch of land. I quote from policy SMMS05 of the plan:

“The TPS (1988 Temporary Provisions Scheme) shows the southern section of a new road adjacent to the coast, extending northwestwards from the development boundary at Żonqor Point, Marsascala, towards Xgħajra. There is no strategic need for such a road, and since it is ODZ it is not required for development. This coastal stretch is indicated as an Area of Ecological Importance and therefore the construction of the road would adversely affect this area whilst encouraging further pressures for development ODZ.”

Referring to concerns that the Żonqor-Xgħajra coastal stretch might metamorphose into yet another Buġibba, Chetcuti said they have learned from past mistakes.

I find his reassurance somewhat hollow. If developers did indeed have such hindsight, they would not attempt to defend the indefensible in the first place and go for further ODZ encroachment.

Similarly hollow is Chetcuti’s second assertion – namely that he is against residential development in the area. But such development cannot be ruled out completely since, if the proposed hotels are built but subsequently close, as happened to the Jerma Palace Hotel, would the developers take it upon themselves to demolish the structures and reinstate the site? Or would they explore the possibility of converting such defunct hotels into residences, as already happened at other former hotel sites in Gozo, for instance?

*Our islands should be the last place where we even consider further private encroachment along the coastline*



Eminent anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain, whose connections with the Maltese islands date back to the 1950s, immortalised the ongoing privatisation of our coast in his landmark book *Contesting the foreshore*, downloadable from the following link: [www.oapen.org/download?type=document&docid=340221](http://www.oapen.org/download?type=document&docid=340221).

The council's proposal is essentially privatisation of the coast, with Parnis submitting his request resorting to the Privatisation Unit.

But the Maltese islands should be the last place where one even considers further private encroachment of the coastline.

According to a study conducted jointly by the University of Durham and the University of Malta in the early 1990s, over 90 per cent of the accessible coastline (namely low-lying coastal stretches where a person can walk unhindered to the sea) is taken up for industrial and touristic purposes. This statistic has inevitably notched up further since then.

Mark Anthony Falzon hit the nail on the head last Sunday when he wrote that the north-south divide was simply being used as a ruse to sneak in more construction madness.

This column has repeatedly highlighted the problem of dumping scarring the coastal stretch in question, with the dumped items ranging from sofas to construction debris to the ubiquitous refrigerator. However, such dumping should certainly not be used as an excuse by the developers to advocate the privatisation of the coast along the Żonqor-Xgħajra coastline.

Terming the area 'shabby' and calling for its development in the same breath is typical of the strategy often used by developers who first engage in all sorts of dumping on ODZ land only to clamour for permits to develop the land as a way of 'improving' the amenity of the site.

If Parnis has any notion of the aspirations of residents in his beloved 'south', he would backtrack on the odious proposal and instead call for government intervention to rehabilitate the entire coastal stretch (for example, by clearing debris and preventing vehicular access) to bequeath it back to the real proprietors of the stretch of land – namely the Maltese people.

There are much more pressing grievances vexing 'southerners' and one does not necessarily have to hail from the 'south' to identify them. Two obvious problems that spring to mind are the perpetually gridlocked roads, with access through Marsa to areas further north being a nightmare, and the relative lack of public recreational spaces. These are laudable battles Parnis should take up, rather than playing second fiddle to the MDA.

If Parnis and Chetcuti care to visit the coastal stretch in question on a Sunday morning, they would witness a flow of 'southerners', mostly from Marsascala and Xgħajra, jogging, walking or strolling along the stretch, enjoying the rare coastal break from the concrete ribbon development meandering around the islands' coast.

By doing so, Chetcuti would perhaps realise how blinkered he was when he said the stretch of land was currently "unused" and "not enjoyed as open countryside".

On another note, some ODZ areas should be just that – 'unused sites' – since they are linked with informal recreation that does require the installation of formal amenities such as lidos, beach furniture and pink concrete. I am sure Marsascala residents would prefer being able to enjoy the stretch of coastline rather than see it being privatised under the guise of creating more employment but which might turn out to be another three white elephants.

## **'Save the countryside' campaign launched**

Din I-Art Helwa has launched a 'Save the countryside' campaign, funded through the EEA Grants NGO Malta Programme. The campaign aims to highlight on the importance of preserving Malta's open spaces for the biodiversity they harbour and for the natural and cultural heritage of these areas and landscapes. It will make extensive use of social media to foster awareness about such issues and to act as a portal where the public can exchange and obtain information about countryside and biodiversity-related issues.

The campaign's Facebook page is <https://www.facebook.com/savethecountryside> .

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