

Feeding a kiosk frenzy



Laying the concrete foundations for yet another kiosk at Ghadira, without due environmental assessments having been done on a beach where public space is already at a premium. Photo: Caroline Muscat

The placing of a fast food kiosk, cheek and jowl with the statue of Jean de Valette in Valletta, rightly raised a furore, as it was seen as the epitome of disrespect towards the capital city's cultural identity. But while the perceived denigration of cultural assets attracts contempt from various quarters, the installation of new kiosks in areas that are important for their natural assets barely causes a ripple.

The laying of concrete foundations on a fresh patch of the beach at Ghadira Bay last week does not seem to have unduly perturbed the Malta Environment and Planning Authority. When Caroline Muscat, a journalist at this newspaper, alerted Mepa about this development, the reply was that such the development could be given the green light through a simple Development Notification Order (DNO), which is normally the preserve of 'small-scale' developments such as balcony restorations. This was made possible by the revision of legislation, which has expanded the scope of developments that can be permitted through DNOs.



While the placing of a mobile kiosk next to the statue of Jean de Valette rightly raised a furore, the installation of new kiosks at Ghadira Bay has barely caused a ripple.

Ghadira Bay is part of a Natura 2000 site, and so enjoys Special Area of Conservation status. This means any form of development, especially that involving substantial disruption to the natural environment, necessitates rigorous screening, assessment and monitoring, all crucial phases that seem to have been watered down in this case.

While all and sundry are happily tweeting about the need to protect Malta's biodiversity assets, including Environment Minister Leo Brincat and Din I-Art Helwa's fledgling Save the Countryside campaign, Mepa deems it fit to wave through kiosks in protected areas, giving flimsy consideration to assess the development's environmental impacts.

Face value considerations, such as the impact a new structure will have on the beach's morphodynamics, wind transport of sand and runoff from the sanctuary on the other side of the road, or on populations of burrowed fauna in the sand, seem to be lost on those whose duty is to strictly regulate development in Natura 2000 sites.

This case at Ghadira is the umpteenth swipe taken at the ecology of the island's beaches, and is reminiscent of the extensive excavations conducted at Ramla I-Hamra in Gozo two years ago, which had been vehemently defended by Mepa and, strangely enough, by the NGO Gaia.

Ecology aside, there are other issues worth mulling. The Maltese coastline is not exactly carpeted with sandy beaches; in fact, it is estimated that just two per cent of the coastline is sandy. That makes public space on sandy beaches a premium. So the mind boggles as to why the authorities felt inclined to approve yet another kiosk, and thus restrict public space even more, on a beach that is already overcrowded in summer – to use an understatement – and where numerous other kiosks already fringe the same beach.

Truth be told, this is all part of a current relocation of at least five existing kiosks on the same beach which will also involve giving the kiosks a facelift, such as replacing the unsightly aluminium ones to timber. This comprehensive exercise involved consultation with the Lands Department and other important stakeholders. However, while this

relocation is welcome as it will improve the aesthetics of the place, it has encroached on fresh space on the beach – the location of the latest concrete foundation suggests that the kiosk has been pushed closer to the sea. The rationale behind the development may be sound, but why couldn't the existing kiosks to be given a facelift simply be demolished and rebuilt in timber on the same footprint rather than taking new space on the beach?

One has to consider this latest development within the context of additional proposals for other parts of the beach, such as the proposed lido in the General Workers' Union's concession and the perpetual colonisation of large parts of the beach right up to the water's edge by beach furniture concession holders.

This kiosk case also underscores Mepa's inconsistency approach towards the conservation of natural assets on different beaches. For instance, in a long-overdue move by Mepa enforcement, the internet café occupying the sand dune remnants at Golden Bay for over 10 years has finally been forced to relocate to the side of the beach and dismantle the flight of steps meandering through the remnants.

Mepa's commendable action at Golden Bay jars with its lackadaisical approach at Ghadira, where excavation works and the laying of concrete foundations for yet another kiosk were simply waved through.

And the kiosk frenzy is not restricted to Ghadira or Valletta. A pending planning application is proposing the installation of an obtrusive kiosk in a belvedere along Congreve Road at Wied iż-Żurriq, obstructing views of the sea and of Filfla by encroaching on what should be a place for the public and tourists alike to soak in the views.

The proposed kiosk at Wied iż-Żurriq is being opposed by the Qrendi local council and by MP Anthony Bezzina, who highlights the hazard it would pose to oncoming traffic and to pedestrians in the absence of a pavement. If Mepa gives this kiosk the green light, it would be another victory for the commercialisation of belvederes on these islands, following on the heels of the kiosk approved in a belvedere at St Paul's Bay a few months ago.

There is yet another pending application for a kiosk along the Marsalfornpromenade, as if areas of this bay that should be public, such as pavements, have not already been sufficiently encroached upon by restaurant tables, chairs, adverts and similar paraphernalia.

Blowing in the wind

While Malta seems to have decided to give up on wind power, the UK is investing heavily in this renewable energy sector.

Last week, the UK government said it would support the development of the world's largest offshore wind farm costing £6-8 billion pounds (€8-11bn), after getting the necessary permits. The Dogger Bank Creyke Beck project would be the world's largest, spanning 500 square kilometres (one-and-a-half times Malta's size) and housing 400 wind turbines (20 times that planned at Sikka I-Bajda).

The site is not close to shore – it lies 130km from the UK coast, at a depth of 30 metres. This alone highlights the constraints the local offshore wind market has to grapple with – a paucity of shallow-water expanses, especially at large distances from the coast. Once the project comes on stream it should power two million UK homes and provide 2.5 per cent of the country's total energy needs. Impressive.

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