

Dissecting the proposed fireworks factories policy



While clearing illegalities at Delimara, Mepa should also turn its sight on the sprawling mass of rooms at Il-Kalanka and other locations along the peninsula.

The proposals recently launched by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority for the enactment of a holistic policy on fireworks factories are yet more grist to the surging mill of policies and proposed policy revisions that the policy-weary public and NGOs must already contend with. When one considers the multitude of proposals issued concerning building heights in touristic areas, the floor-to-area ratio, the Outside Development Zone policy revisions and the local plan revisions, one word springs to mind – overkill.

This aside, the proposals on fireworks factories are meant to address a current vacuum in policies concerning such factories, which to date have always been assessed on an ad hoc basis.

The framework of the policy is sound – for instance, ecologically sensitive sites (including Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas, which were anomalously omitted from the proposed ODZ policy revisions) and sites of archaeological importance, will be spared the bane of new factory development, while a greater onus has been placed on safety (through respect of minimum distances from existing development).

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However, flaws in the policy include the fact that only buffer zones around archaeological sites have been spared new factory development, while buffer zones around ecological sites (namely, Areas of Ecological Importance and Sites of Scientific Importance, levels 3 and 4) were completely omitted, in a repeat of what is being proposed for the ODZ policy revisions.

Secondly, new factory development, which has not been ruled out by Michael Falzon, chairman of the committee that drew up the new policy, will not be completely barred from high quality agricultural land, such as farms that have access to a source of water all year round (saqwi, sites designated as protected in a local plan or buffer zones close to a Water Services Corporation potable borehole, as these will be decided upon on a case-by-case basis.

This is a contradiction in itself, as the policy's main aim is to create a level playing field for all applicants and to address a policy vacuum while still not dispelling uncertainty and ad hoc measures completely through such a provision.

The policy will hopefully not herald in a wave of new fireworks factory applications in uncommitted areas. These factories obviously need to be situated in remote areas, but in a crowded place such as our archipelago, many people understandably covet these areas for other reasons, such as rambling.

After all, there are already 35 existing fireworks factories, which is not an insignificant number.

Do a complete job at Delimara

I have always commended Mepa enforcement action in ODZ areas, especially when the areas in question are of a high scenic and landscape value. So I welcome the recent action taken by Mepa at the tip of the Delimara peninsula, close to the lighthouse, to demolish three illegally built rooms, mainly used for bird trapping (according to a Mepa press release), and remove several truckloads of inert waste illegally dumped on natural ground.

It transpires that the perpetrator of these illegalities even brazenly lodged an appeal in the courts for a prohibitory injunction, a standard procedure embarked upon as a last resort by those aiming to put a spoke in the wheels of enforcement. Luckily, the action on site had been completed before the injunction came into effect.

For consistency's sake, Mepa should now turn its sights to the sprawling coastal 'village' mainly at Il-Kalanka, consisting of unsightly rooms used as summer residences, located just a few kilometers from the site of the recent enforcement action. The accompanying photo shows that concrete foundations have even been laid for further extensions of the sprawl.

Update on Għar id-Dar quarry, Qala

Following the justified uproar that arose last summer when excavations at Għar id-Dar quarry in Qala extended beyond its legitimate precincts, Mepa claims that a stretch of the quarry rock-face had collapsed naturally at the time, with a fatality being only narrowly avoided.

Stabilisation works have been undertaken on the rock-face, mostly within the legal precincts, although there are still doubts whether a small section lie within or outside the precincts. The works have now been completed.

Hopefully the quarrying activity on site will not spill over again in future and the operator will start reinstatement works on this massive coastal sore.

Dreaded jellyfish moves further west

Ever since first entering the Mediterranean Sea in 1977 through the Suez Canal, the dreaded nomadic jellyfish (*Rhopilema nomadica*) has formed extensive blooms in the eastern Mediterranean, in some cases stretching for hundreds of kilometers. Massive outbreaks have crippled fisheries, closed beaches and even shut down power generation plants in summer in Israel as a result of the jellyfish swarms blocking cooling water inlets.

The tropical species of jellyfish, which is listed among the as one of the 100 worst invading species in the Alien Invasive Species Inventories for Europe (www.europe-aliens.org/), has moved west, with two individual specimens even being recorded a few years ago in local waters.

In a recent publication in the journal *BioInvasions Records* (www.reabic.net/journals/bir/2013/4/BIR_2013_Yahia_etal.pdf), it transpires that the nomadic jellyfish has moved further west in the Mediterranean, blooming regularly along the Tunisian coastline, at concentrations of 10 to 100 individuals/1,000m³, both in the north of the country (Gulf of Tunis) and the south (Gulf of Gabes), with dead specimens even washing up on the shore close to Tunis.

Maltese coastal waters should be monitored regularly for any increasing presence of this jellyfish species in view of its detrimental ecological and economic impact.

The unstoppable coastal squeeze

A report released recently by the European Environmental Agency draws attention to the constant onslaught on Europe's coasts by the various pressures, mainly urbanisation. Malta is listed, along with Cyprus and Norway, as having one of the highest rates of coastal urbanisation, with an increase of over 10 per cent in the extent of impervious coastal surfaces (such as concrete replacing soil, in most cases).

Considering the extent to which Malta's coastline is already committed (over 90 per cent of the islands' accessible coastline is encroached upon by tourism or industry), Malta's ranking is somewhat alarming as one would have expected that our country would be trying to preserve what precious little remains of its unspoilt coastline.

Other interesting, albeit sobering, statistics emerging from the same report refer to the socio-economic importance of Europe's coastal areas and to the deteriorating condition of European coastal waters. For instance, it emerges that:

- These coastal areas are responsible for 40 per cent of the continent's GDP;
- Forty per cent of the European population lives within 50 kilometres of the coast;
- In some areas, such as southern France and parts of Spain, the percentage of the population living along the coast has shot up by 50 per cent between 2001 and 2011;
- Seventy-five per cent of Europe's trade is conducted via maritime routes;
- *Posidonia oceanica* meadows, considered a bulwark of the health of coastal waters, have been declining by five per cent each year in the Mediterranean;
- Only 10 per cent of marine habitats were found to have a 'favourable' status;

2/12/2019

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- Just three per cent of marine species had a favourable conservation status.
- Despite 10 years having passed since the EU's first recommendations on Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM), only 50 per cent of these principles have been implemented.

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