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Not seeing the wood for the trees



Mepa enforcement should be commended for taking immediate action by stopping all works and duly issuing ECF332/14 after being alerted to illegal works at this site on the way down from Żebbuġ to Xwejni Bay in Gozo.

The environmental movement, both locally and in the rest of Europe, has, in a rare show of unison, collectively given the thumbs down to Karmenu Vella's nomination as EU Commissioner for the Environment, Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, and to his performance in his scrutiny by the EU Parliament. The main motivation behind the position taken by the movement has been Malta's abject record in the environment sector and Vella's lack of proficiency with the subject and possible conflict of interest with the Maltese government's pro-hunting stance.

All well and good, but virtually no mention has been made of the other half of the portfolio – fisheries and maritime affairs – which would serve Malta in good stead if and when Vella is confirmed in his post. During Joe Borg's 2004-2008 stint as commissioner for these areas, new concepts such as the integrated maritime policy and marine spatial planning emerged in what was a highly productive spell.

'Blue growth', namely sustainable expansion of maritime sectors, is increasingly being bandied about by the EU Commission as a legacy of Borg's tenure and as one way to bolster EU employment, although these considerations seem to elude most of the Maltese public who are oblivious to the maritime sector's economic importance to our islands. The current Italian EU presidency is, in fact, organising a 'Blue Day' conference at the end of the month to discuss the potential of the 'blue economy' in the Mediterranean, which lags behind the Atlantic and North Sea in this area.

Having Vella as Commissioner responsible for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs and holding the EU rotating presidency in 2017 should ensure that Malta draws some welcome limelight to the Mediterranean Sea and to its potential, keeping sustainability as an important cornerstone throughout.

Proving the Structure Plan's validity

A few days ago, in the midst of the usual deluge of bad environmental news, there was a rare silver lining – the outright refusal of two planning applications that sought to encroach on more pristine coastline at Sliema to set up private lidos. The decision was heartening, as was the fact that the Mepa board was unanimous in its refusal.

The Planning Directorate had paved the way for the outcome by recommending refusal on the basis of what the Structure Plan explicitly states about the public access to the foreshore. This case has clearly shown how a revised Structure Plan, not watered-down replacement like the proposed Strategic Plan for the Environment and Development (Sped), can serve as a formidable tool for decision-makers inclined to safeguard local natural resources.

The same zeal in safeguarding public access to the foreshore should be shown regarding beaches, which are perpetually colonised by beach furniture, in some cases right to the waterline. The solution is simple – plant stone pylons in the sand on the beaches in question, at a mandatory distance from the waterline (say, five metres), and draw a line between these landmarks. This would create a benchmark that would be easily enforceable since beach furniture extending beyond the line would stick out like a sore thumb.

This has already been proposed by some enlightened tourism officials but has yet to be implemented. What's holding it back? Some people's vested interests?

Gozo's southwest coast off the map

It has not been a good summer for aficionados of Gozo's southwest coast. The current filming at Mġarr ix-Xini has effectively cordoned off the inlet, along with Ta' Ċenċ and the nearby Feszej Rock, three flagship sites for Gozo's 12 diving clubs, especially during strong northwesterly winds. The date by when the sites will be reopened has effectively been pushed back to mid-November, despite earlier claims that the disruption would last much less. As reported in this column two weeks ago, the filming has not just impinged on the diving activity but also on anyone wishing to stroll along the Ta' Cenc promontory, which has also been sealed off.

Another contentious issue is the poor water quality regularly observed at Ras il-Ħobz (the entry point to three wrecks) as a result of the discharge of treated sewage from the plant on site, all the way up to Mġarr ix-Xini. Diving clubs

have flagged the issue in the media on numerous occasions and the Gozo Ministry's Tourism Directorate officially wrote to the diving clubs a few weeks ago with details on the situation.

Most Maltese are oblivious to the maritime sector's economic importance to our islands

According to the Water Services Corporation the sewage treated plant is not malfunctioning, with the treated sewage rising to a depth of 20 to 30 metres (not to the surface) after being discharged at 60 metres, and thus not impinging on the area's surface water quality. This is the situation one would expect under 'normal' circumstances. But due to the prevalence of agricultural waste on Gozo, and in view of the enforcement of the Nitrates Action Plan, a surfeit of farm waste is ending up at the Ras il-Ħobz plant, resulting in occasional malfunctioning.

In its latest correspondence to the diving clubs the Gozo Ministry has pledged to install in the coming months a septage receiving station (SRS), which effectively separates solid from liquid waste, to rectify or at least alleviate the situation. Time will tell if the plan will work.

Putting bacteria to good use

The term 'bacteria' elicits ominous thoughts of a grimy environment and purveyors of disease. Few realise that bacteria are so diverse that they cannot be tarred with the same brush. The human gut hosts zillions of bacteria that bolster our ability to absorb nutrients from food and to produce others that are not normally found in food, such as vitamin K. Bacteria are also increasingly being studied by scientists and industry who are coming up with novel applications for the prodigious growth rates and properties of these primitive creatures.

The Safebag project is developing a chemical-free decontamination system for fresh fruit and vegetables that meets consumer demands for safe, nutrient-rich produce within minimal environmental impact. In order to eliminate all chemical residues currently used during decontamination by food packing industries, Safebag passes food bags between two high-voltage electrodes, with the high voltage ionising gas contained in the package, effectively turning it into plasma (the so-called 'fourth state'), which has an antic-microbial effect.

So far, the novel system has managed to increase the shelf life of packed spinach, cherry tomatoes and strawberries, with results being less promising for leafy green vegetables. The prototype is currently undergoing industrial testing and might be commercialised in two to three years. Bacteria are also being investigated in the Biocorin project for their potential to fight the war against corrosion.

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