

OPINION&LETTERS



Flower Power site in Attard: The derelict Flower Power facility in Attard is slated for conversion into a sports village. The built-up footprint of the development should be restricted given the landscape sensitivity of the site.

A sofa for your boat

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Preposterous online adverts by real estate agents featuring 'boat-houses' at Armier have been doing the rounds on social media.

Preposterous is perhaps an understatement in the circumstances given that what is being peddled as a 'boathouse' is in reality a fully-fledged residence equipped with all the comforts one would expect of a seaside apartment. The most glaring lacuna within the property on offer is the one involving boat-handling and storing facilities, which are completely absent from the converted structure.

To cap things, the advert also made a dog's meal of the same property having access to government electrical and water supply.

Two scenarios reeking of illegality spring to mind – either the property in toto is illegal or else its secondary conversion to a residential apartment from an original permitted (or probably sanctioned) boathouse is. Such speculation is only understandable given the derisory asking price (€110,000) for a seaside property, with such misgivings being confirmed once the advert was promptly taken off the web when a number of questions were fielded to the estate agent in question.

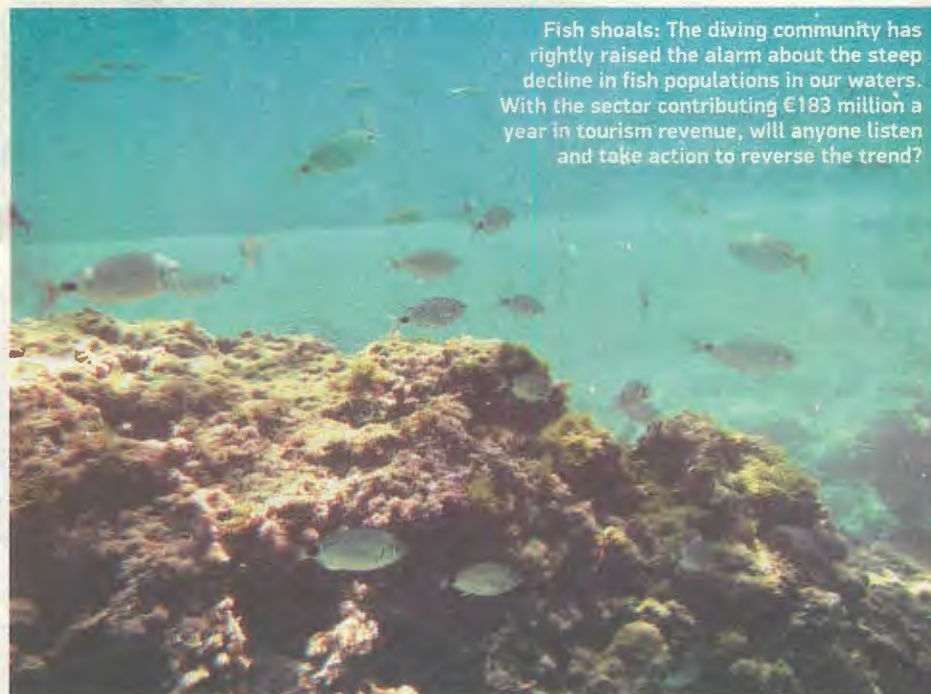
Where are the regulatory body for the sector (estate agents) and the planning watchdog in all this, given that the commercialisation of illegalities is a very serious offence in itself?

Where's the fish?

A recent press statement by the Federation for Underwater Activities Malta (FUAM) and the Professional Scuba Diving Association (PSDA), welcoming the inclusion of two additional wrecks within a Government Notice listing all no-stoppage zones within local waters, but at the same time denouncing the sharp decline of fish populations in the same waters, has hardly been picked upon by the media.

That such a sobering statement fails to make the headlines is already cause for concern, since it demonstrates how disenfranchised we are from the marine environment. It is the mother of all ironies considering that we live on a minute archipelago.

The statement has rightly highlighted the fact that admitting more wrecks (acting as



Fish shoals: The diving community has rightly raised the alarm about the steep decline in fish populations in our waters. With the sector contributing €183 million a year in tourism revenue, will anyone listen and take action to reverse the trend?

de facto artificial reefs, thus aiding in the replenishment of fish populations) to the no-stoppage list without completely excluding all forms of fishing from these sites is an exercise in futility. The inclusion of a site in this list, in fact, does not bestow the status of a strict non-take nature reserve since a number of fishing techniques which don't involve stoppage (e.g. trolling, conducted from a moving vessel) are still permissible.

The analogy adopted by the PSDA and FUAM in this case – that allowing fishing from a moving vessel over a wreck is equivalent to opening a motorway within a family park – is a fitting one and goes to show the sheer disparity between our efforts to designate protected areas on land and in the

sea. No one in his right mind would contemplate siting the motorway within the family park, even in development-addicted Malta.

A strict (no-take) nature reserve is completely unheard of in Maltese waters. No site is sacred enough to preclude all forms of fishing. Coupled with a suite of other detrimental activities, including impacts from shipping and recreational boating (most notably, anchoring within seagrass meadows which are important fish spawning and nursery areas), this absence of no-take zones in our waters has resulted in the inevitable – a drastic decline of fish populations in most shallow-water (less than 50m) locations around the islands.

This observation, made even by diving tourists who are vowing not to return as a result, still fails to jerk us into action and to designate effective no-take zones which come with no strings attached and which would result in positive spill-over effects within contiguous, fished areas.

If the environmental argument does not wash, there is an equally legitimate economic one. For instance, an in-depth assessment of the economic turnover of diving tourists visiting these islands conducted by the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) on 2017 data underscores the importance of such niche tourism, which is often overshadowed by talk about mainstream tourism.

For instance, 155,000 tourists were engaged in scuba diving tourism during their stay, totalling an excess of 1.32 million

bed nights, with the total estimated expenditure attributable to this tourist cohort reaching a considerable €183 million. Does this figure make enough ripples?

Plant to football nursery

The derelict gargantuan (extending over a quarter of a million square metres) ex-Flower Power site, straddling Attard and Mosta, has been proposed for the development of Malta's first ever sports village, which would entail the carving out of numerous facilities such as football and rugby pitches, tennis courts, a sprint track, an indoor sports facility and even a sports rehabilitation clinic.

All well and good, especially considering the dire shortage of such facilities on an island blemished by fever-high obesity levels. The Ta' Qali Action Plan, within whose mandate the site squarely falls, specifically permits such a foreseen change of use from horticulture and agriculture to sports and recreation.

This proposal's gloss wears off somehow when one considers the residential, office and retail aspects which are also part and parcel of the same development and which are not legitimised by current policies. One concedes that, given that the private sector is peddling this development, the onus is on the financial sustainability of the project and that stand-alone sports facilities with no adjunct profit-making facilities are a pie in the sky.

Given the flat profile of the site, its status as a strategic gap between the built-up areas of Attard and Mosta and its visibility from Mdina, every sinew must be strained to ensure that the built-up footprint is kept to a bare minimum and that the landscaping resorted to is top-notch.

Rare silver lining

A proposed fireworks factory within rural environs in close proximity to Popeye Village in Mellieha, which was extensively reported upon by this column, has been rejected, for the umpteenth time, by the planning watchdog.

There were, in fact, a myriad legitimate justifications (for example, ecological and landscape value of the site, its proximity to ongoing farming activities and to a public road) for which this proposal, first presented in 2011, could not be given the nod.

Given the legendary perseverance of Maltese applicants, one would not be overly surprised if this is not the definite bottom line of the entire affair.