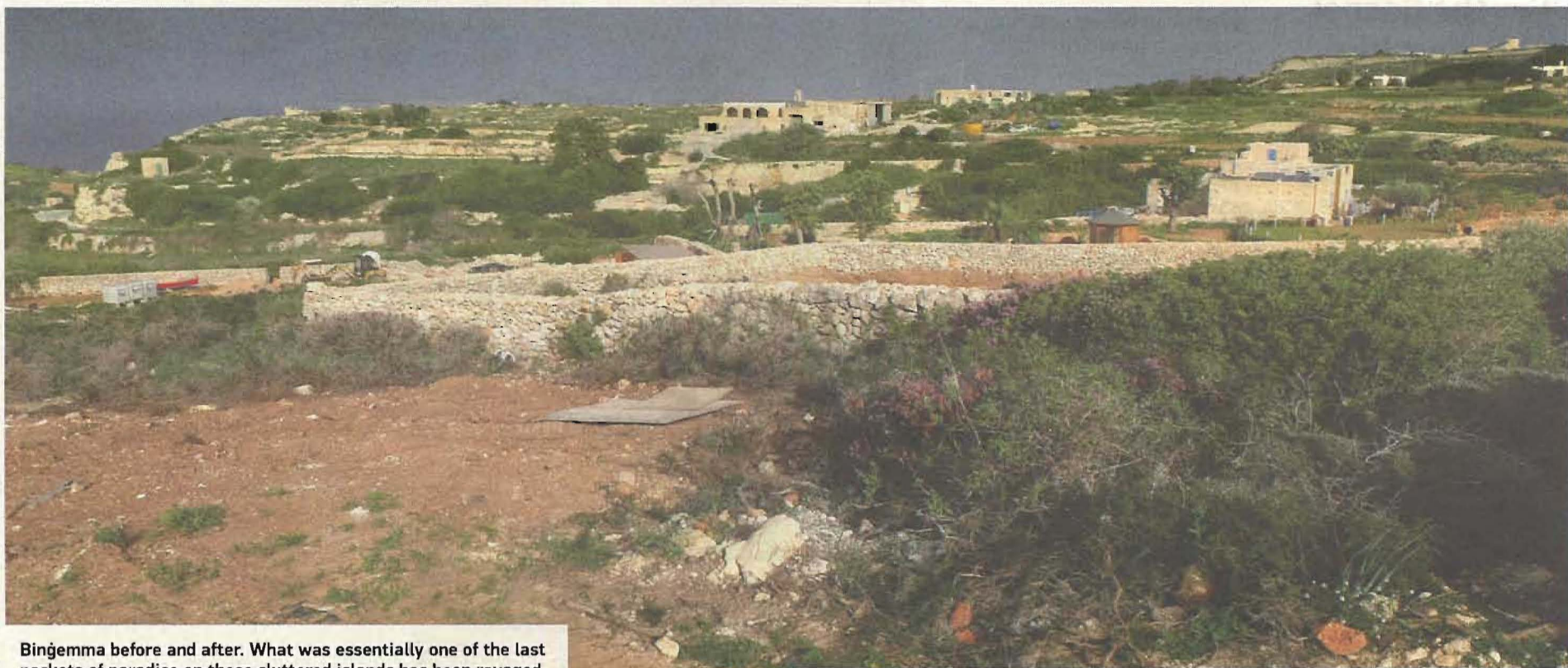


OPINION & LETTERS



Bingemma before and after. What was essentially one of the last pockets of paradise on these cluttered islands has been ravaged through planning permits granted under successive PN and PL-led administrations. Such a loss rarely makes the headlines.

Sliema trumps Bingemma



ALAN DEIDUN

The maxim that ‘no place is sacred’ on these islands, in recognition of the fact that no spot is completely immune from the ravages of development, whatever its designation, has been bandied about for quite some time. Supporting evidence emerges from time to time, further reinforcing the status of the maxim.

Take a corner, or former corner, of paradise at Bingemma (prior to 2009, when the first permit on site was granted), which goes by the outlandish name of ix-Xaghra tal-Girad. ‘Farmhouse B’ occupied a vantage point high up on the ridge, amid a plain carpeted with dense garrigue vegetation, most notably the unmistakable heath ‘Erika’, as evident from the site notice uploaded on the Planning Authority’s own website.

The devastation all started pretty innocuously – in 2006, an application (PA 6650/06) was submitted for the “extension to an existing residence”. Hardly anything to flag, at least *prima facie*. The case officer duly referred to all the relevant policies and recommended a refusal as a result of the massing of the existing building in a way that was incompatible with the nature of developments in Outside Development Zone areas and which detracted from the rural landscape value of the area.

More tellingly, the case officer in question was anachronistic and well ahead of her time by anticipating that the development had the potential to cause overspill onto the surrounding natural vegetation communities, something that in fact definitely happened, as can be seen in the accompanying photo.

Despite the valiant attempt of case officer, the permit was issued in 2009 and even

renewed in 2015. Two further planning applications were submitted in 2015 and 2016, for further alterations and extensions, both of which were granted, despite the case officer’s opposition to the former. What started off as a seemingly innocuous proposal ended up as a full-blown construction site in the middle of dense garrigue.

Last month, when planning officials were alerted about this sorry state of affairs... following a site visit, they ‘convinced’ the applicant/owner about the need to reinstate the garrigue to its former state. Calling this a tall order is an understatement, to say the least, as you do not just plant a complex natural community like garrigue as if you are planting crops in a field. My opinion is that the damage wrought on site is irreversible and that heavy pecuniary fines should be imposed to set an example to other future loose cannons who decide to embark on similar farmhouse ‘rehabilitations’.

It is very frustrating to see that the destruction of natural habitat, such as this flagrant example at Bingemma, attracts much less media attention compared with the loss of buildings of architectural and

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historic value in places like Sliema. In fact, while the newspapers were literally agog with reports about the demolition of Villa St Ignatius in St Julian’s, hardly anyone bat an eyelid about the extensive loss of natural habitat and landscape value in one of our prime undeveloped sites at Bingemma.

From this sorry state of affairs, I reach two conclusions mainly. For starters, we are most probably getting our priorities wrong. The loss of tumoli of natural vegetation in a relatively pristine part of the island should get us all worked up for the simple reason that such spots are an indelible part of our national identity, along the same lines that aspects of our built-up heritage are.

There is also the ecological importance of such locations, namely the rich biodiversity that they support, but I won’t even tread there since this argument is poorly understood, let alone embraced nowadays.

Secondly, and this is perhaps even more disquieting, I get the impression that most of us rarely venture beyond the safe confines of our urban surroundings such that we are oblivious to the sheer annihilation of natural areas in the remote countryside.

Don’t get me wrong: although I don’t have the relevant competence, I still believe the way developers are treating Malta’s built-up heritage, especially colonial period residences in prime areas like Sliema, is utterly reprehensible. But we definitely need to be more aware of what is happening in the countryside. It is quite telling, for instance, that it took us a full eight years to get wind of what was happening at Bingemma, at a site that is literally just off the only asphalted road in the area leading down to is-Santi from Kuncizzjoni.

Given that our enforcement system is a reactive rather than a proactive one – in other words, enforcement officers mainly respond to reports of possible infringements from the public rather than conduct

regular patrols – the onus is on us as custodians of our open spaces to keep our eyes peeled and to submit such reports.

Transport Malta taking people for a ride at Mistra

Driving on a daily basis through Marsa has become an even more harrowing experience than the signature traffic gridlock imposes, courtesy of the husks of defoliated and chainsawed oak trees (*ballut*) gracing the pavements of the factory demolition site.

One learns to turn a blind eye to such environmental transgressions as we are constantly told that ‘it is for the greater good’, in reference to ongoing works to build a flyover to ease traffic congestion in the area. But the restraint to protesting over such desecrations in urban areas fizzles out when the attention then turns to mature trees in areas of natural importance.

For instance, 25 majestic Aleppo pine trees (*znuber/prinjol*) along the Mistra-Mellieha road have been earmarked to be transplanted in a road-widening exercise that will shave off another 4.5 tumoli of roadside natural vegetation.

The term ‘transplanted’ has a soothing effect to many, allaying fears that we are losing precious tree cover. But the devil is invariably in the detail. Not all tree species withstand transplantation equally well, and the Aleppo pine, unfortunately for Transport Malta, in general does not survive such a procedure. The shrivelled-up transplanted Aleppo pine trees at the recently-downsized Qormi roundabout are a case in point.

So how will Transport Malta respond? By ploughing ahead regardless or by thinking about alternatives?