

History is repeating itself



Some seem bent on flouting the rules that explicitly prohibit all forms of offroading at Ghajn Tuffieha.

The sand dune remnants at White Tower Bay in Marfa do not set too many houses on fire; they do not elicit the same strong emotions as say, Valletta's City Gate or the Dwejra boathouses. In fact, even many local environmentalists are oblivious to what is happening in what they consider as essentially a backwater.

This explains why when this sensitive and rare habitat was despoiled last week, no eyebrows were raised and there were no protests by environmental groups. This might indicate that we are getting our priorities wrong, and that local environmentalists need a higher degree of scientific and technical proficiency.

In a nutshell, when a bulldozer was deployed to clean the beach at White Tower Bay of seagrass debris deposited over the winter months it encroached and flattened part of one of the last sand dune remnants on our islands. To rub salt further into the wound, recycling bins were recklessly placed on the dune itself.

One cringes to think of the operator of the service - Green MT - boasting about the green credentials of its service, completely blinkered to the environmental damage its skips are actually causing at White Tower Bay.

Would it have ruffled too many feathers if the skips were to be sited on the other side of the road in front of the boathouses? Or are we giving a higher priority to the boathouses owners' interests than to the preservation of these dune remnants?

While almost every local sandy beach presumably harboured a sand dune in the past, by the 1990s only five beaches were considered to still have some form of dune remnant - Ramla l-Famra, Għadira (within the precincts of the bird reserve), Santa Marija (Comino), Ramla tal-Mixquqa (Golden Bay) and White Tower Bay. These habitats were damaged both by the authorities (e.g. through the construction of coastal roads) as well as by private individuals (e.g. by constructing an internet café at Golden Bay).

White Tower Bay is considered to be the last refuge for a number of endangered plants, but the driver of the bulldozer in question, and those commissioning him, were obviously unaware of this. Better liaison between the beach cleaning authorities and environmental NGOs and constant monitoring of their actions on site is needed to avoid such incidents in future.

My instinctive reaction was to point an accusing finger at the tourism authorities for the misdemeanour - it transpires that the coupling of the environment and tourism portfolios under one secretariat is reaping dividends, since tourism authorities were not responsible for the desecration. Beach 'cleaning' authorities were the perpetrators of the condemnable behaviour.

This latest incident undoes, in one fell swoop, what Nature Trust has been striving to do ever since 2002. The NGO's actions, backed by a Unesco financial grant, included the installation of a chain-link fence around the dune to curb illegal parking and camping on it, and the fixing of educational signs, which were invariably vandalised.

Ironically, few realise that history is repeating itself at White Tower Bay, in quite an uncanny fashion. In the late 1980s, the last remaining local population of marram grass was bulldozed at White Tower Bay, marking one of the most recent instances of plant species extinction on the islands. Twenty years later, we still seem to have a knack for bulldozing beaches and dunes.

Mirage 2010

Various strategies of different types and timeframes (2015, 2020) are constantly mentioned, but few realise that this year has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year for Biodiversity. Though it has been emblazoned on Mepa's website, it is not backed up by tangible safeguarding of biodiversity resources, with the authority's environmental enforcement resources remaining thin on the ground.

New fireworks factories

Fireworks detractors normally limit their criticism to denouncing the cacophony caused by petards during village feasts.

While the noise inconvenience is manifest, a more persistent impact of fireworks manufacturing exists - that of fireworks factories in areas of conservation, landscape or rural value. The requirement that fireworks factories must be sited at least 150 metres from areas inhabited by more than 100 people means that proposed new factories are being pushed into the remotest of areas.

Two cases illustrate this phenomenon: Planning applications have been submitted to Mepa for the development of fireworks factories at Ta' l-Għajn in Mellieħa, close to Anchor Bay, and at Landar ta' Ġeriska in Għarb, Gozo. The sister island seems especially prone to such applications, with at least two other similar pending applications - one in Munxar (at Tas-Sanap, close to the Ta' Ċenċ cliffs) and one close to Victoria.

A presumption against the development of new fireworks factories in rural areas is entrenched in the Gozo and Comino local plan. Therefore, one hopes common sense will prevail, especially since some of these factories already occupy privileged positions along Gozo's coastal and inland areas.

A welcome initiative

Earlier last week, Mepa held an information session for journalists interested in getting to grips with the Mepa website. This initiative is in line with one of the objectives of the Mepa reform - that of 'facilitating and defining the access to planning and/or environment related information'.

Although those leading the meeting were very proficient in their delivery it was, unfortunately, poorly attended. Never-theless, keep such initiatives coming.

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