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### **Will the subsea tunnel feed land reclamation?**

The current hype revolving around the development of a permanent Malta-Gozo link has touched briefly upon environmental concerns as well, with the tunnel option being touted by many as having a significantly lower environmental impact than the bridge since the former option does not impinge directly on the seabed. Whilst this conclusion is, to a large extent, factual, other environmental considerations must be made when assessing the environmental footprint of the same link options.

For instance, excavation of the tunnel will necessarily generate profuse volumes of C&D (Construction and Demolition) Waste, probably to the tune of volumes exceeding half a million cubic metres, if one assumes an 11-km-long tunnel, with a width of 10m and a height of 5m. In order to contextualise such a volume, one must crunch some numbers.....according to the national waste management plan for 2014-2020, in 2011, which strangely represents the most recent year for which such statistics are available, slightly over 700,000 tons of such inert waste were generated, of which 61% was backfilled into quarries, 21% was disposed off at sea at the only operational marine spoil ground located off the Grand Harbour, whilst only 18% was recycled or recovered. Such figures jar with the target Malta set upon itself of recovering 70% of its C&D waste by 2020, and reveal the real magnitude of the inert waste volumes which will be generated through the tunnel excavation.

There are limited options on the plate when it comes to managing the envisaged surfeit of debris emanating from the tunnel project. Either the debris is backfilled into existing quarries, which will entail the mobilisation of thousands of trips by heavy vehicles on land, or it will be disposed of at sea. If the latter avenue is embarked upon, one presumes that such disposal will not take place in close environs of the tunnel excavation site itself (in order to substantiate the claim that the tunnel option will impinge less on the seabed than the bridge option) but will involve the ferrying away of the waste, via barge, to the marine spoil ground located some twenty-five kilometres away from the excavation site. Such a long trip and our own track record when it comes to disposing of such waste at sea raise eyebrows as to the real impact of such a disposal route, with spills of the same waste along the route being very much on the cards.

MEPA commissioned, in 2008, an underwater survey of the marine spoil ground located off the Grand Harbour, at depths ranging between 93m and 115m. Some unsavoury findings of such a survey were that, contrary to popular perception, there isn't a single mound of debris resting on the seabed, but rather a total of 171 mounds spread over a staggering marine footprint of 15-20 square kilometres. One particular mound was reputed within the same study to extend vertically for 20m (equivalent to 6 storeys). Sobering as these results might sound, they date back to 2008, before other major coastal construction projects came on stream, such as the MIDI one (Tigne/Manoel Island), which entailed the dumping of millions of tons of waste at the same spoil ground. A recent chinwag session with a contact at Transport Malta revealed how the sea depth in sections of the spoil ground has gone down to 75m, revealing that the mounds of waste have projected even higher vertically.

The unwieldy volumes of inert waste set to be generated by the subsea tunnel excavation must also be framed within the context of other large-scale excavation projects which are on the cards. For

instance, according to the EIS for the proposed high-rise Mriehel Towers, this development alone is set to add a further 166,000 cubic metres of inert waste.

A more ominous destination for these copious volumes of inert waste from subsea tunnel excavation might be the marine sites earmarked for land reclamation, which again, are located at somewhat prohibitive sea distances from the excavation sites. One augurs that the tunnel excavation does not pave the way, indirectly, for land reclamation schemes at sea by generating the fodder that the same schemes sorely need at the moment.

### **Bird callers rule the airwaves**

One of the first amendments to the hunting laws ushered in upon the change in government was that the illegal use of electronic bird callers to attract wild birds no longer makes one liable to court proceedings but is only punishable through an administrative fee. This slap on the wrist seems to have emboldened hunters, with the use of these devices within the countryside, even at short distances from inhabited areas, is rampant, especially during the early hours of the morning. It's difficult to fathom how law enforcement is not managing to come to terms with such infringements, given that they are so blatant and easy to spot. Coupled with such widespread flouting of the law are the infringements linked with bird trapping, with golden plovers even being sold on the web in preparation for the upcoming trapping season (despite the Damocles sword of the EU infringement proceedings hanging over our head). Here again, how is it possible that one openly publicizes the sale of these birds on the internet with such impunity, without anyone actually batting an eyelid?

[www.alandeidun](http://www.alandeidun); [alan.deidun@gmail.com](mailto:alan.deidun@gmail.com)