

## The green whistle-blower



The makeshift storing of building material against the breathtaking rustic backdrop at Burmarrad - will the authorities act?

Mosta and its ever-mushrooming environs were cause for concern for Nature Trust during September. The town has simply become a conglomerate of isolated residential areas, such as Ta' Sriedak, Ta' Zokrija, Tal-Wej, Santa Margerita and I-Blata I-Gholja.

The precincts of the town even encompass the hamlet of Bidnija, which has become a haven for the nouveaux riches, such as building contractors, indulging in plush villa construction, as mirrored in the Targa Gap area. Complacency over the years has ensured that such residential areas sprawl over their rural environs with no restraint placed on the nature of development - a case in point is Ta' Zokrija, where a gargantuan showroom block has been constructed just in the backdrop of the picturesque San Pawl tal-Qlejja chapel.

A school is also in the offing for the area, which is also plagued by mounds of rubble in fields bordering Wied I-Isperanza. The fact that, being privately-owned, such fields can be used for the dumping of rubble by an individual with no hounding by the authorities, raises more than one eyebrow.

One of the most painful legacies from our "complacent" recent past is the permitted construction of sumptuous villas at Targa Gap, which are as profligate with our limited land resources as the Americans are with their fossi fuels, with a single classical era bungalow occupying a footprint as large as that normally taken up by two or three family residences.

Such villas serve to instill grudges in ordinary citizens against the authorities at the perceived disparity in the issuing of building permits and inspire them to flout the law so that their cause is vindicated. Such villas also epitomise the typical Maltese attitude of exploiting for personal gratification even the most public things - such as breath-taking views from the Targa Gap area.

Figures of as much of 84 per cent of our waste being composed of building waste are harrowing, to say the least, but not so for the powers to be which have allowed the construction of kilometres of roadside walls at Burmarrad and T'Alla u Ommu using virgin stone from our quarries without batting an eyelid.

With all our clamouring regarding the need to economise on our mineral resources and our countryside and dumps chock-full with building rubble, the construction of such walls would have been a golden opportunity to construct walls using 'blemished' stone (gagazza style), similar to the one used in rubble wall construction.

This would have been highly commendable for two reasons - it would have consumed and consequently cleared fields smothered with building rubble and would have certainly been more endearing to the eye rather than the alabaster-white wall in place which does not blend with the surroundings. The only explanation for this seems to be the attempts, yet again, to keep our building industry afloat with pressures being brought to bear to keep the production of stone from our quarries as high as ever. All this undermines the recent commendable work by MEPA to curb offences by our quarry operators in the Siggiewi area.

An initiative which for now is still a white elephant but which would surely benefit our environment greatly would be the awarding of contracts to road contractors on the merits of their green credentials.

At the start of this year, a storm was rightly raised about the gruff treatment of old trees by the same Burmarrad contractor near the parish church. The same act is being emulated now further up with mounds of sand and discarded stone stifling the lush roadside vegetation.

In addition, worrying inroads have been created from Burmarrad Road (just before the junction leading to Bidnija) into surrounding fields verging on Wied Ghajn Rihana to serve as a makeshift store for building material. Before further encroachment occurs, one can only augur that the authorities take action.

Nature Trust also commented about car statistics issued by the National Statistics Office (NSO), whereby they revealed that the total number of licensed vehicles has risen by almost 8,000 over the June 2001-June 2002 period, reaching a staggering 258,045.

Such a stock of vehicles is totally unsustainable for our islands, and the time is ripe, especially in view of the recent Forum on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, to start introducing measures to curb such an increase, rather than encourage the car-owning mentality by offering plush cars as lottery prizes.

Besides the toxic fumes associated with car emissions, one also mention the increase in land use associated with a greater need for access roads and the increase in time spent in traffic queues. The abnormally high incidence of asthma in this country should serve as an adequate caveat for all of us, while auguring that the much heralded restructuring of our transport system would be adopted in the coming years.

## **Silver linings**

September also witnessed a welcome pulling up socks act by MEPA whereby it embarked on a number of enforcement notices. Most notably, one could witness the closing down of all the 11 makeshift scrapyards on Gozo, despite some uncivil behaviour by a bystander bent on throwing spokes in the enforcement works. What boggles the mind is how could any individual conceive of publicly hampering works for which there is such a dire need in this island.

Also laudable were MEPA initiatives to clear the mounds of rubble in the Ta' Gerzuma area at Bahrija, just a stone's throw from the church and residential areas, a site which had been highlighted by Nature Trust since February 13.

MEPA also served as a buttress for the ecologically important Qortin area in Nadur, when it promptly stopped heavy machinery being used to illegally construct rooms used as hunting hides.

In the wake of the notorious jetty demolition at Comino, MEPA also embarked on the demolition of a boathouse at Mistra and the removal of jet-skis illegally hired in a scheduled part of Ramla, Gozo. Such a momentum should be pursued by tackling coastal zone developments which have mushroomed greatly over the last few years, in particular the illegal structures at White Rocks, Bahar ic-Caghaq, as such ramshackle structures are both an eyesore and also impinge on the gently sloping fertile fields on site and public access to the sea.

Nature Trust has been clamouring incessantly for the authorities to rectify the situation at St Thomas Bay where a small fishing village has grown into a dust-swept maze of caravans and eyesore buildings. Only by biting the bullet at an early stage at these two sites can a carbon copy of the Armier situation be avoided.

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