

## Dire need for enforcement



Msida pruned trees - the gulf between the improperly pruned tree stumps in the foreground and the lush trees in the background couldn't be more gaping at Msida, a fact which has irked motorists and locals alike

Enforcement has always been our islands' proverbial Achilles heel, with laissez-faire and complacency fuelled by the need for electoral votes stamping out any effective attempt at curbing this phenomenon - the environment is no exception to this.

The Malta Environment and Planning Authority's ranks have been buoyed by recent recruitments and from this I take the cue to highlight the dire need for enforcement in our country. The monthly statistics issued by MEPA are quite elaborate in the message they convey - it issues between 50 and 100 stop and enforcement notices, on average, each month.

Quoting from the figures for September, 94 such notices were issued, and a staggering 41 sanctioning notices were meted out. The term sanctioning is quiet elusive - although derived from Latin *sanctio*, meaning a decree or law, it resides uncannily close to another dictionary word, 'sanctimonious', which means to make a pretence of holiness.

This is to mean that, although you are in foul of the law when building illegally on so-called 'green areas', for example, if you possess some legal ace or any other asset, you might end up one fine day with your development being branded as perfectly legal.

One of the most commonly resorted to ploys is the purchase of a field room and slowly but surely extending its precincts to a fully-fledged country villa, complete with swimming pool.

We all concede that today's planning infrastructure is a far cry from the murky wheelings and dealings of the late Seventies and Eighties, but resting on such laurels won't prevent all those wishing to flout the law in obtaining vintage properties at the expense of unobstructed country and sea views.

NT has recently received reports of a flagrant development in San Martin Valley on the way down to Xemxija from Mgarr is a case in point - a bungalow and pool were illegally built behind a very high rubble wall, acting as a convenient smokescreen in this case, and were later sanctioned after an initial enforcement.

With the string of illegal buildings ever more on the increase, once remote areas, such as Manikata, Zebbiegh, Xemxija, Bahrija and Wardija, have mushroomed so that they nowadays can even clamour for an identity separate from that of Mgarr, St Paul's Bay, Rabat or Mosta.

Legal proceedings should be winnowed down to prevent perpetrators from clutching at straws and the Development Control Commission (DCC), the MEPA Board and any other board bestowed with an iota of authority should be consistent in their decisions rather than contradicting each other. Only then can they hope to instil some form of public confidence.

With the coastal garigue at Pembroke being safeguarded under the cap of Level 1 and Level 2 scheduling (which helped ward off the former golf course application for this site), one wouldn't expect the wanton destruction of the garigue through its clearing and soil dumping to make ways for archaic bird trapping devices, as highlighted by Nature Trust earlier this month.

This and other related incidents, such as the permitted construction of a gargantuan water reservoir right in the middle of garigue at Mellieha just before Popeye Village, raise some eyebrows about our purported love for our island's Mediterranean character.

NT has long been clamouring for garigue parks to pay tribute to this local habitat encompassing almost 10 per cent of our islands and which is always on the decline. In addition, the protected sites in our islands include woodland, sand dunes, saline marshland and underwater marine areas (soon) - hence, the proposed garigue parks would be a welcome addition to such a welter.

Hunters are certainly not falling shy of making their demands as clear as possible on the eve of the election in our typical clientelism system. They are clamouring for them to be bequeathed the management of L-Ahrax and Mizieb without any exhaustive, scientific data on the two sites in the form of management plans having been drawn up.

One can only predict that, being left to their devices, hunting lobbies would simply smother the already artificial sites with even more exotic alien species, such as Eucalyptus trees.

The word "referendum" is again hoarding the limelight, this time not due to the EU saga but due to the proposed Qala Creek project at Hondoq ir-Rummien. Although the developers claim that they are unimpressed with the referendum held in the Qala locality last weekend, I am certainly impressed by two facts: the momentum for 'self-determination' and the figures opposing the project.

In fact, 74 per cent of the Qala electorate voted, out of which a resounding 84 per cent voted against the project. This case, together with others, such as the Lija elderly people's home and the Tal-Wej pastoral centre l/o Mosta, are heralding an ever-increasing public mobilisation over the fate of the last few open spaces in our country.

Since I have been boisterously opposing such a project from the very start and during such a political administration, I have been branded as being pro-Labour - so short-sighted from people who intertwine anything, including the environment, with political mileage. I sincerely hope that the Moviment Harsien Hondoq keeps faith to its principles, even if there is a political reshuffle to disperse such unfounded claims.

What boggles my mind is why at Hondoq, in order to rectify the gaping hole left by the quarry on site, we need to construct a yacht marina and sacrifice the rocky coast and the vintage bathing water quality of the site, and then use the proposed orchards as a ploy to legitimise the project. If the BICC's proposed heliport on the coast near Mgarr Harbour and the Qala Creek project are both approved, then we could well witness an Mgarr-Qala concrete conglomerate.

With the next budget looming ever more closer, one only hopes for last year's promises of planting a massive 170,000 trees to be fulfilled as the whole project seems to have been bogged down in a quagmire, with not even the sites having been definitely identified. More follow-up measures in this regard are needed in this budget.

## **Silver linings**

The beginning of November saw the first rumblings of the ball rolling for the introduction of marine protected areas in our islands with positive statements in this regard from the Parliamentary Secretary for Home Affairs and the Environment, George Pullicino.

NT has been lobbying for such Marine Protected Areas for the past 12 years. Also, recently, sent some of its members on courses abroad on the implementation of MPAs and is even actively participating in the introduction of two of such areas.

With our island status, it is high time that Malta took the cue from other Mediterranean islands to protect part of its marine resources, such as Ustica, the Balearic Islands, Djerba and the Tuscan archipelago.

Our beloved Buskett has over the years borne the hallmarks of improper management, such as collapsed rubble walls, dumping and an exacerbated rate of soil erosion. Through the newly fledged private-public partnership dubbed as Environmental Landscapes Consortium Ltd, Buskett may be receiving its due amount of attention.

The accent here should be not to emulate mistakes perpetrated in the past as part of ill-conceived embellishment schemes, such as the Risq il-Widien in the Seventies and many others. NT will stress that no more alien species be introduced at Buskett and that the emphasis should be on mitigating soil erosion and wardening against dumping and vandalism.

The new consortium, buoyed by the 326 government employees seconded to it, has certainly the manpower necessary to achieve its goals. One must also laude the circumspect decision to keep the consortium on a one-year probation to be able to assess its progress.

MEPA's plans to use crushed inert waste to introduce a submerged artificial reef at a depth of 26 metres at il-Qaliet off Bahar ic-Caghaq is also worth mentioning, since this is a concrete effort to compensate for the damage wrought by the Hilton developers to the marine environment at St Julian's.

Let's only hope that the Lm50,000 forfeited by the Hilton developers, together with the Lm200,000 by the Solemar Hotel developers, serve as a deterrent for future infringements.

Finally, as charity begins at home, I would like to exploit this space to advertise Nature Trust's annual tree-planting event, as part of its Green 2000 campaign, on December 7 at 9.30 a.m. at Wied Ghollieqa near University. Anyone wishing to sponsor a tree is urged to contact Nature Trust (Malta) on 2124-8558 or 7947-2950 (Annalise).