

Loss of islands' rural character



The quaint village of Mgarr in Malta is slowly but inexorably losing its rustic appeal to high-rise eyesore apartment blocks and innumerable conversions of farmhouses to plush villas with swimming pools. The old Thursdays disco complex has mushroomed beyond recognition.

The past few months saw a searing spotlight on the agricultural sector, with the Gozo Minister announcing that the Ministry of Agriculture would be calling for applications from farmers and breeders for European Union funds, and after a yawning 'sabbatical' of 20 years, the agricultural survey for our islands was published.

The two main figures resulting from the survey which caught my eye are that the number of full-time farmers has plummeted by over 65 per cent in the last 20 years and that nearly 12 per cent of agricultural land has been eaten away. So, on the one hand you have more funds in the offing while on the other you have progressively fewer full-time farmers.

In the same vein, I would like to dwell on two vintage bulwarks of the agricultural tradition of our islands. The first is the case for the preservation of traditional Maltese produce given by Helen Caruana Galizia in the latest edition of the *Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti* magazine Treasures of Malta where, besides ruing the fact that traditional Maltese vegetable and fruit produce is being shunned in favour of imported varieties, she also laments the constant loss of agricultural land in our islands, namely the cutting of carob and olive trees.

Secondly, the promotion of traditional Maltese produce in top-notch fora, such as the tomato products of Magro Brothers on Euronews channel, is certainly a boost for the sector which is bedraggled mainly by an amateurish approach and lack of appreciation by the Maltese public, especially by the younger generation.

On a dour note, however, the increasing number of part-time farmers, mainly due to more efficient water-harnessing facilities, is piling even more pressure on rural land through an enhanced number of applications for building of field rooms, which, through successive additions and alterations, end up as thinly-veiled plush dwellings.

MEPA should ensure that development permits within such hamlets are only granted to farmers who can prove that they spend a minimum number of hours a week tilling the land, rather than hiding under the label 'part-time farmers' and putting on a charade to cut corners in the permit-granting process.

It's not enough for us to rest on our laurels by saying that three times as much agricultural land was encroached upon between 1971 and 1987 as in the last 15 years or that the number of vine-committed hectares in our country would be buoyed up to 1,000.

What the agricultural sector needs is a moratorium on further building permits in former rural hubs, such as Mgarr, Mellieha, Rabat, Gozo, which are being profaned by high-rise apartment blocks completely alien to the area's rustic character.

The same sector needs an infusion of confidence; although it contributes just Lm39 million to GDP, it should not be discarded for other sectors, such as tourism, when it comes to taking development decisions. It is only when the farming community perceives that the country is really investing in the welfare of the sector, and not just financially, that they will no longer be bailed out by developers currently rushing to buy their farming properties.

We should not stick an economic tag to everything around us but be receptive to even subtler effects, such as the contribution of the farming sector to tourism, for example - will the taking off of the agritourism sector always be a delusion? Incentives should be provided to farmers willing to host tourists during short visits to their farms to sample traditional produce and

practices and not during weekend breaks in Gozo in converted farmhouse complete with swimming pool.

The case for local wardens

Let us imagine the setting. Some 80 per cent of the respondents to a survey commissioned by MEPA believe that wardens should play a role in environment protection. Wardens only gave out 29 fines for littering in public places, including dumping, in 2002, with another 16 handed out up to June this year.

"The problem with enforcement is that no one litters or dumps things in the presence of wardens or police. We need to have wardens in plain clothes for environmental issues," Dr Ian Micallef, president of the Association of Local Councils, said. Tourism Minister Francis Zammit Dimech stated that he believed there was scope for beefing up of enforcement by all relevant agencies. So we have one reverberating chorus - we need more enforcement.

As usual, however, we only go skin -deep in solving our problems by saying that we simply need stiffer fines for littering or that regulations ensuring that construction works in tourist areas should not start before 9 a.m. and similar trivia.

Local wardens is just a misnomer, since these should be called traffic wardens, what with the disproportionate attention they dedicate to traffic infringements. We need a new cohort - green wardens - who would be posted in the 'hinterland', namely valleys and garigue, which the ruthless use to dump domestic waste or rubble, to shoot protected birds or to collect protected faunal species.

These green wardens would be adequately trained, would have executive powers and would work in close affiliation with MEPA enforcement officers and the Administrative Law Enforcement section of the police. Will any political administration have the courage to introduce such green wardens or are they afraid of losing too many votes? Beefing up of the ALE has either fail to materialise or was too cosmetic at the end of the day.

Bahrija revisited: arson or nature?

The scarring of Bahrija knows no bounds and the cave in Bahrija cliffs, once the dwelling of a hermit, also came under the developers' axe. In fact, inhabitants of Bahrija recount that a hermit used to live in this cave without basic amenities up to the start of the second world war by eating raw fish he caught from the sea, drinking the valley's freshwater and eating herbs.

It is also said that the hermit could foretell the future, including the start of the war and that Malta would be heavily bombed. Romantic notions apart, a staircase and fence have been ruthlessly built into the cave's entrance, all illegally. The whole Qlejgha plateau nearby is peppered with "No Entry" signs, as is the Mtahleb cliffside church site, with tourists enticed to visit such sites by route marker signs along the way left quite slack-jawed as to which jurisdiction such areas really come under - that of some authority or of unscrupulous individuals. Can these ever be evicted by the elusive arm of the law?

On approaching Bahrija from Rabat, one can notice that a bulldozer has dug out a gargantuan parcel of garigue just in front of the village church to make way for a new building. Such developments convince one that it's a veritable free-for-all at Bahrija, where the remaining garigue will slowly but surely be encroached upon by villas and what is not.

During the searing summer, the news bulletins were dominated by arson reports and raging fires all over Europe, with hectares upon hectares of Mediterranean maquis and virgin forest being lost to the flames. In this environmentally oblivious country of ours, similar (although on a much smaller scale) fires go largely unnoticed, with the odd flourish in the media from time to time.

Sensitive sites which bore the brunt of what probably could be labelled as arson include Selmun Valley, where an ages-old carob tree was burned to a cinder, together with hundreds of metres of valley vegetation, Ghajn Tuffieha slopes (as is customary every year), and even the University grounds, where, besides mature pine trees, young sandarac gum trees (the national tree and planted a few years ago) were also destroyed.

All this should be an eye-opener for our authorities for two reasons. Firstly, any future afforestation efforts (these have now ground to a halt) should make provision for fire-mitigation measures to ensure that all the work is not undone. Secondly, more men should be seconded from the glut works division to be trained in fire-fighting duties, besides other duties such as museum attendants and green wardens.

Silver linings

Thumbs up to Ark Publishing for again embarking on the collection of discarded Yellow Pages copies this year after last year 80,000 such copies were collected before the distribution of the new edition.

Also, MEPA should be lauded for its continuous inspections of trucks dumping building material in a disused quarry in the limits of Siggiewi to prevent the inclusion of domestic waste, despite initial derailing action taken by skip owners.

The next article will address the issue of scheduled, heritage and abandoned buildings in these islands, with particular reference to Nadur and Cospicua. E-mail: deidunfever @yahoo.co.uk