

Ta' Cenc... fenced out again

Hardly had the Maltese authorities taken the positive decision to include part of Ta' Cenc cliffs as a Natura 2000 site than Victor Borg, owner of the Ta' Cenc hotel, decided to cordon off the area to a non-invasive archaeological trip to the site led by David Trump.

This comes hot on the heels of a similar fencing off exercise, complete with police presence, in response to a planned rambling exercise on site (see accompanying photo). Mr Borg's latest action is a faux pas on two counts. Firstly, this is surely a case of bad public relations on his part. Secondly, this could be a sign of things to come, no matter how much Mr Borg tries to reassure us that he will retain public access to the area.

As argued by a reader, Roger Flett (The Times, October 24), "their refusal suggests what they intend to do in future with Malta's heritage at Ta' Cenc and public access to it - namely they will make it all a no-go area". The public and the authorities appear to be in total agreement on the need to protect the site - only Mr Borg is missing.

NGOs as bones of contention

NGOs (non-governmental organisations), after years of being given the cold shoulder, have suddenly become bones of contention, with both major political parties vying for their support in the run-up to the next election.

A case in point is the recent rumpus over what Minister Pullicino stated exactly at the Nationalist Party's General Council on October 15. In fact, Mr Pullicino was quoted by some Labour media as saying that environmentalist NGOs had a hidden anti-government agenda, an interpretation strongly rejected by the minister's PA (The Sunday Times, October 29).

One is indeed impressed by the pains taken by political forces in this country not to alienate NGOs, but one hopes such pains are now translated into a political resolve to pass a bill through Parliament aimed at regulating NGOs and giving them legal recognition, a bill which, according to Minister Dolores Christina, is due to be submitted to Parliament in the coming weeks, albeit over seven months late.

Party financing

Aaron Farrugia's piece "Clean break in party financing" (The Times, October 13) is an exercise in innovative thinking indeed. Mr Farrugia makes proposals which this column (and even Alternattiva Demokratika) has been partly hinting at.

He rightly suggests that all political parties should be accountable, and made to produce a statement at the end of the year listing all those who have made contributions. The onus is not to expose John Citizen here, who periodically and faithfully contributes his Lm5 to the party he supports, but to bigwigs, such as contractors and businessmen who fork out thousands of liri in lucrative 'donations' (or rather, wise investments). Once such a system is in place (probably light years from now), then we can truly say where loyalties lie and smaller parties can be allowed into the political fray.

Besides this obligatory disclosure, other commendable suggestions made by Mr Farrugia are that there should be limits imposed on party spending (especially in view of the massive sums being borrowed by parties) and on party financing (with 'donations' in excess of Lm10,000 being prohibited), and that parties should rely more (not solely) on voluntary work and focus more on policing and research.

Lija developments?

PA 05850/06 refers to the proposed demolition of part of an existing building, the construction of a basement garage, eight flats at ground, first and second floors and penthouse at third floor.

I am all for making the best possible use of available property, especially in committed built-up areas to minimise land use pressures elsewhere. However, quaint urban cores, such as this one in Lija, should be spared eyesores.

Update on San Pawl tat-Targa

This update follows my article on an application for a high-rise block in San Pawl tat-Targa, Naxxar. Just a stone's throw from the site of such an application, in narrow Trejquet G.B. Morton, PA 06561/05 has been filed for the construction of a penthouse (with an initial recommendation for refusal by the case officer), on a building which was (or probably still is) the object of an enforcement notice (ECF01393/98).

NIMBYism threat

The letter by Mark Lavelle (The Sunday Times, October 22) shows the extent of NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard). Mr Lavelle laudably laments the planned extension to the Pergola Hotel, which will scar the Wied il-Madonna area - this column has supported calls to refute such an application a couple of months ago.

However, contrary to other letters published on the subject, written out of a sense of civic pride to genuinely safeguard Mellieha against further development, this letter sounds a rather 'selfish' note, since Mr Lavelle claims that the planned development "will not only block this view but will also result in more heavy service vehicles thundering down the road" and that he is facing the prospect of having to retire elsewhere.

Proponents of the development will make mincemeat out of such opposition - those opposing all genres of irresponsible development should do so on more judicious grounds if the green movement is finally to gain more credibility. Besides calls from Mellieha residents against the development, calls by residents from other parts of Malta and Gozo would bolster the cause in no uncertain way. NIMBYism remains one of the most serious threats to the green cause.

Hondoq - clean bathing water

The Sebbah Pajjizek campaign, which has been held for quite a few years now, provided some more ammunition against the Hondoq ir-Rummien project.

A press release by the Ministry of the Interior, dated July 25, 2003, described Hondoq ir-Rummien as the best location for "rocky, accessible coastline for bathing purposes". In view of this, any proposals for a yacht marina cannot improve on this achievement and should thus be rejected.

Air passage to Gozo... what now?

Predictably (in view of the exorbitant Lm50 fare), the helicopter service to Gozo has floundered. No sooner had the announcement been made that the Gozo Tourism Association (through its secretary Joe Muscat) renewed its calls for a fixed-wing service to be developed through an extension to the existing runway.

Some readers have also clamoured for such a development, while others are arguing that a bridge to Gozo should be built to ensure all-weather communication.

Whatever the outcome (if there is one after all), transport and the environment appear to be locking horns again - environmental considerations rarely (if ever) feature in the calls made by these various entities.

The ferry service, which operates dozens of trips every day, and, contrary to perception, cancels trips only rarely (in the most inclement of weather) appears to be insufficient for the proponents of the bridge.

And another thing, what guarantees are there that the fixed-wing service would cost much less than the apparently defunct helicopter service? If this fails too, who will shoulder the responsibility of rehabilitating the area?

EU news

Mercury ban - Environmental and health NGOs welcomed the European Commission's proposal for a regulation to ban EU mercury exports and ensure the safe storage of surplus mercury, so that it will not re-enter the global market.

The NGOs believe this sends a clear message both to governments attending the European Commission International conference today and tomorrow, and to participants at the forthcoming UNEP Governing Council meeting in February 2007. NGOs however regret that the proposed implementation date may be as late as June 2011, when the necessary action could be taken much faster. NGOs have been seeking a 2008 export ban, whereas the European Parliament resolution of March 2006 sought implementation by 2010.

Kyoto commitment - the European Commission has urged member states to intensify their efforts to make the Kyoto Protocol grade. Latest projections indicate that the 15 states of the EU before 2004 will only just reach their Kyoto Protocol target for cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

The EU-15 are committed to reducing their collective emissions in the 2008-2012 period to eight per cent below the levels of the base year (1990 in most cases). The Commission's annual progress report shows that an eight per cent cut can be achieved in 2010 - the period's mid-point - provided that all actions planned by member states are fully implemented and deliver the emission savings anticipated.

Seven EU-15 member states reckon that they will exceed their individual emission limits, which are binding under EU law. For the 25 current member states (EU-25), the overall emission reduction by 2010 would be 10.8 per cent.

WWF News

Tuna news (crash, etc.) - New data released last week by WWF, the global conservation organisation, claim that blue fin tuna (BFT) has almost been fished out of some of the Mediterranean's oldest fishing grounds. The data also reveal that Mediterranean bluefin tuna

farms - which would usually be filling up by this time of the year - have experienced substantial decline.

Of this year's catches of wild Mediterranean tuna, some 22,520 tonnes have been put in captivity and farmed - a 25 per cent reduction compared to 30,000 tonnes farmed last year. "Six Spanish tuna ranches have already ceased operating altogether because there were simply no more tuna," WWF comments.

Against this backdrop, the European Parliament's fisheries committee has pinpointed Malta as a "magnet" for tuna ranching operators shifting to the last breeding grounds for blue fin tuna in Libyan waters.

"Malta... is definitely not (to blame) for the situation," Parliamentary Secretary Frans Agius said on the report. Dr Agius said that warnings of a collapse in tuna stocks "may be a little exaggerated", although he concedes it is "definitely time to take proper stock of the situation... All the time we are told that the stocks are collapsing and yet every year these reports continue quoting that catches are always higher than the officially reported ones," he said.

Silver linings

EU4U - From October 10 to 15, the EU4U Information Roadshow was set up on Freedom Square, Valletta, to create public awareness and provide information about EU Structural Funds and the various Fund projects currently under way under the auspices of the Planning and Priorities Co-ordination Division within the Office of the Prime Minister as the Managing Authority for the Structural Funds 2004-06 Programme.

Around €29 million of the total Structural Funds Programme allocation have been earmarked for the effective protection of the environment and will be invested in the environment infrastructure, particularly waste management, improvement of drinking water, sewage transmission infrastructure, air monitoring and nature protection.

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