

## **Summer nonchalance sets in**

Sand dunes are nowadays, even with the uninitiated, synonymous with conservation efforts and this for obvious reasons – such a sensitive habitat is replete with plant and animal species with a highly restricted distribution on the Maltese Islands and large extents of sand dunes have been obliterated on these islands over the decades as a result of all forms of human encroachment on beaches, from opening of roads, to internet cafes, to sunbathing and renting of beach furniture and to camping. In view of the high conservation value of such a habitat, the undersigned, along with Nature Trust, decided, between 2003 and 2006, to bite the bullet and embark on proactive conservation at White Tower Bay (Ramla tat-Torri), at the tip of I-Ahrax Peninsula, which still harbours the best preserved sand dune remnants on the island of Malta. We applied for UNESCO Participation Programme grants which were successfully deployed to install a chain-and-link fence around the perimeter of the dunes at White Tower Bay so as to stall the camping and vehicle parking so virulent in the area. The hard work, which was marred by numerous incidences of vandalism such that the fence had to be frequently replaced in the sweltering summer heat, paid off, with the parking of cars and plonking of tents on the sand dune being a distant memory. After the termination of such a conservation stint, the site was literally left to its own devices by those whose responsibility it is to safeguard such sites – namely, MEPA, despite being occasionally alerted to the ramshackle state of the site. In fact, during a recent visit to the White Tower Bay sand dune, I was gobsmacked at the run-down state of the same dune remnants and their environs, with parking of vehicles during weekends being the order of the day and with the rusted vestiges of what was once a complete chain (or wire rope in successive years) and link fence only left in place. It's fine to formally designate as protected such sites (the sand dune remnants at White Tower Bay are enclosed within the Rđum tal-Madonna Natura 2000 site) but at the end of the day, without tangible implementation and enforcement in the field, such designations are simply a house of cards or a line in the sand. Where's all the concern about biodiversity, so loudly trumpeted in the media, evaporated? One can only imagine how disillusioned Nature Trust and myself are at seeing the hard work invested in the past in protecting the sand dune at White Tower Bay literally going down the drain, simply due to nonchalance by those who have the power to change the course of things.

## **Let's act at Mgarr ix-Xini**

The marine area enclosed within Malta's five Marine Protected Areas (MPA's) is, at least on paper, impressive. In fact, an estimated 5%, or 18,000 hectares, of Malta's territorial waters are enclosed within the five MPA's. The proviso 'at least on paper' is mandatory since very little implementation of management measures is witnessed on the field, effectively turning the same MPA's into clawless tigers. The smallest of the five local MPA's is Mgarr ix-Xini, whose size should be conducive to more tangible management measures. One of these most direly-needed measures is the establishment of a permanent mooring site at the entrance to such an inlet so as to legislate against the cluttering of large recreational vessels within the same inlet which results in the perpetuation of detrimental anchoring impacts on the seagrass meadows colonizing the seabed in the area. A number of diving clubs who operate in the area and who are attuned to the conservation importance of such an inlet have long been advocating for such a permanent mooring which would spare the MPA untold damage. All the catalysts which should, at least in theory, spur our authorities into action, are in place – the conservation importance of the site,

the importance of the diving industry to the local economy and what not. Hence, what's precluding MEPA, Transport Malta and others from acting on site?

### **Two wrongs make one right at St. Thomas Bay**

The submission of a Project Description Statement (PDS) and planning application to MEPA for the development of a caravan site in St. Thomas Bay has rightly raised the heckles of hundreds of Marsascala residents who oppose such a development. In justifying the need for a caravan and mobile home parking sites, a swimming pool, play area, parking and storage facilities, the PDS states that the site in question, which extends over almost 6,000 square metres, is flanked by illegal boathouses and hence this makes it ideal for a caravan site. This is tantamount to condoning the dumping of tons of rubble on an ODZ parcel of land and then applying to develop the same plot whilst claiming that such development would bring along an improvement in the visual amenity of the site. Since they are shorn of any legal title, such boathouses should not be used as leverage by the applicants in this case. As for the claim in the same PDS that the development would be reversible and environmentally-friendly, similar claims were made when the green light was given to the sprawling eyesore known as the 'camp site' in L-Ahrax. Reality advises otherwise.

### **Illegal development at Xlendi**

A few weeks ago, this column alerted MEPA to an ongoing illegal development within the Xlendi Valley, just opposite La Grotta discotheque, in what should be a scheduled area. Enforcement officers duly visited the site and meted out to the owner enforcement notice 186/13 for illegal construction of rooms, paving area with franka stone slabs, BBQ structure and franka and concrete walls. A daily fine was also instituted for such illegalities, exploiting the laudable mechanism set in place by MEPA last November. MEPA enforcement should be commended in this case for the decisive and prompt action they took at Xlendi. Intriguingly enough, when members of the public flagged such a development to the Munxar local council, all they got was a non-committal reassurance that nothing amiss was underway on site and that most probably it was simply a case of dividing walls being constructed.

In another twist to the never-ending La Grotta Discotheque saga, despite the court ruling handed out on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2011, in connection with Enforcement Notice 893/99 (issued twelve years earlier) which stipulated that illegal structures pertaining to the same discotheque must either be demolished or sanctioned, no action has been taken so far, two years down the line.

[www.alandeidun.eu](http://www.alandeidun.eu)