

Echoes of Nadur cemetery case



During a recent visit to Mġarr ix-Xini, recently-deposited debris turned the water murky.

The proposed development at Tal-Marga in Qala, Gozo, is reminiscent of the Nadur cemetery case which spelt disaster for aquifer-derived irrigation water pumped by farmers.

PA 07697/06 was submitted in March 2007 for the development of an apartment block with basement garage, while PA 04724/07 was submitted to Mepa in April 2008 for the proposed construction of five houses with pools.

In a few days' time, Mepa will deliberate on the outcome of the former planning application, with the architect for the applicant in this case being asked to submit fresh plans in which no uptake of ODZ land is being contemplated.

Besides the thorny ODZ issue, such an application is bothersome for another reason – the area in question is prone to frequent flooding episodes since it lies upstream of the Tal-Marga valley, which eventually meanders down to Hondoq ir-Rummien.

Thus, any development in this area, as emphasised in a report by Marco Cremona and in a separate report by the Malta Resources Authority, might muck up freshwater resources which are tapped in by farmers further downstream.

The site in question has always been associated with the accumulation of rainwater: 'Marga' derives from an old Maltese word denoting marshland or damp, humid area.

Therefore, such important water passage and catchment areas should not be tampered with if we are serious about preventing another Nadur cemetery-style calamity.

Despite the case officer's recommendation of approval, this application should be refuted so as to send a clear signal of the presumption against further development in the area to the applicant of PA 04724/07.

Such an application refers to a much larger area, just across the watercourse, whose consequences – if approved – on the hydrodynamics of the area, would be much more sobering.

More debris at Mġarr ix-Xini?

Almost 10 years ago, the news that construction aggregate had been dumped at Mġarr ix-Xini by Sannat council shocked everybody.

Most of the aggregate and grit deposited on the beach eventually washed out to sea, turning it milky white.

This had prompted Mepa to issue a statement warning that beach replenishment projects "should be carried out with great sensitivity and only after an environmental impact assessment has been carried out".

During a recent visit to the beach, I saw recently-deposited debris along the seaward fringes, turning the water murky.

I implore Mepa to visit the site and take stock of the situation.

Mepa reform and Wied I-Għasel

This column lambasted the Mepa reform process two weeks ago for the perceived failures within the Wied I-Għasel permit case.

My criticism was intended solely at the way in which the permit was issued back in 2009, when the Mepa reform was still in the pipeline, and not at the authority reform itself, which contemplates stopping all ODZ development for one month once an appeal is lodged.

Such a powerful tool, however, applies only to permits granted after January 1, 2011. One understands the measures introduced in the Mepa reform could not be applied retroactively and that a line had to be drawn somewhere.

Since the Mepa reform got underway, a number of high-profile ODZ sanctionings, such as the Dwejra bathhouses, and applications, such as the Arriva bus depot, have been rejected. Enforcement, especially in ODZ areas, has risen greatly.

Despite this clarification, I believe the Wied I-Għasel permit should never have been issued since it runs counter to a number of Structure Plan policies which long preceded the Mepa reform and since it opposes the spirit of the reform.

Residents have recently submitted to the Mepa chairman a comprehensive list of infringements they claim have been committed by the developer on site since works started, all backed by photographic evidence.

The residents also called for an Emergency Conservation Order to be issued by Mepa in view of these infringements. One waits to see what weight will be given by Mepa to such considerations.

In a world driven more by perceptions and PR and less by objectivity, issuing such a permit, despite preceding the date after which all ODZ development has to stall for one month, is a PR disaster for Mepa, especially since most people are not familiar with the different regimes and dates of pre- and post-Mepa reform periods.

Undoing all the sterling work of recent months in just one fell swoop is an injustice, and should underscore the point that it takes just one granted ODZ permit to undo the legacy of a thousand rejected ODZ applications, whenever they were submitted.

Jellyfish block nuclear power station

The recent drama at Fukushima in Japan, with a nuclear power station being ground to a halt after being battered by a tsunami are probably still vivid in the minds of many.

However, few would believe a threat could be posed to a power station by swarms of jellyfish.

This is exactly what happened in Scotland last week, when both reactors at the Torness nuclear power station were shut down as a precaution after massive volumes of moon jellyfish (*Aurelia aurita*) were trapped in the cooling system, effectively clogging the filters. The shutdown is expected to last at least a few weeks.

A photo published in *The Times* about two years ago immortalises the sheer scale of the problem by depicting millions of mauve stinger jellyfish being trapped in the cooling water filtering system at the Delimara power station.

Way back in 2001, swarms of the alien nomadic jellyfish shut down an electric power station in Israel for a few hours.

50 most endangered plants in the Mediterranean

A recent publication by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature traces the 50 most endangered plant species (including one fungus) in the Mediterranean.

According to the report, available online at [cmsdata.iucn.org /downloads/top_50_mediterranean_island_plants.pdf](http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/top_50_mediterranean_island_plants.pdf), these species are dispersed on 12 different islands or island groups within the Mediterranean, with our islands claiming three of these species.

These are: *Cheirolophus crassifolius* (Maltese rock-centaury – our national plant), *Cremnophyton lanfrancoi* (Maltese cliff-orache) and *Helichrysum melitense* (Maltese everlasting).

All three species are endemic to Malta, with the latter being almost exclusively restricted to the western cliffs of Gozo.

The report lists the threats to the integrity of these 50 endangered Mediterranean plants and, in order of magnitude, these are: urbanisation, tourism and recreation, fires, changes in agricultural practices, invasive alien species and collecting pressure.

For some of the listed species, it may already be too late – for instance, for four of the plant species listed, less than 50 individual ones are known from the wild, with 92 per cent (46

species) of the 50 listed species being classified as critically endangered within the same report.

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