

## The unsung heroes - December 30, 2007



A photo taken in 2004 showing pools of untreated sewage in Comino. The situation remains unchanged today. Photo: Annalise Falzon.

Justifiably or not, the vilification of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and its employees has been deeply rooted in our ethos. This column has highlighted the shortcomings of the authority over the years, but it has also underscored the merits too.

Three separate enforcement cases will further illustrate my point. At the end of October, Mepa closed access to a dwelling and garage built without a permit in Delimara. This site had already been sealed off but the seals on the premises were broken.

Therefore, Mepa took the matter a step further by placing concrete barriers in front of all accesses to the dwelling and structures. The illegal development consisted of the construction of a totally new dwelling, wooden structures, a boundary wall, gate and paving, all without the necessary permits.

The site was served with several stop and enforcement notices.

In August 2006, the site was subject to direct action and the accesses to the dwelling and garage were sealed off. Meanwhile, the owner submitted a planning application and appealed against the action. The planning application is currently being recommended for dismissal at re-consideration stage, after being refused by the DCC.

In the meantime, in Burmarrad, just below the statue of St Joseph, on the way down to Burmarrad from Mosta, the topsoil from a site had been removed, and heavy machinery and vehicles were being parked illegally by the owner. Through painstaking negotiations, Mepa managed to convince the owner to clear the site and revert to agricultural use.

In a third case at Wied I-Ghasel, within the valley system (more specifically, at Dhar id-Dwieb and at Santa Katerina), Mepa's Environment Protection Directorate instructed six different batching plants operating at the site to literally clean up their act by removing layers of consolidated sludge (camura) they had been discharging indiscriminately into the valley over the years.

As part of the massive restoration process, scrap metal was also removed, the stormwater channel was reinstated and an ecologically important site with Tamarisk (bruk) trees was safeguarded. This is yet another case that did not make the headlines.

Some might argue that such cases are a flash in the pan and that much more is needed. In fact, it transpires from the recently-released Mepa annual report that only 24 direct actions were carried out in 2007, and just eight were executed outside development zones (ODZ).

These were made up of action at Ta' Kandja, where illegal stables were sealed; the removal of inert waste at Għarb; the 11-day operation at Żebbuġ, Gozo, to remove building material dumped at Wied Infern; the removal of a scrapyards and illegal rooms at Burmarrad; the removal of an illegal container and clamping of two trucks at Fontana; the removal of a

scrapyard and heavy plant machinery at Mġarr; the removal of concrete plants at Żebbug; and sealing off access to a truck depot site with concrete blocks at Nadur.

The lion's share of the direct actions were, in fact, carried out within scheme areas, and involved the sealing off of properties or existing operations - this is also partly attributable to the fact that some of the ODZ illegalities were removed by the perpetrators themselves to avoid incurring further expenses.

The number of cases involving monitoring of ODZ sites (in terms of fire detection, illegal works, littering, sewage spillage, scrapyards, and so on) was 84.

Some modicum of credit must be given with the objective of prodding the top brass - and recommending further direct action.

## **The Comino sewage**

Despite being a Special Area of Conservation of International Importance and a candidate Natura 2000 site, Comino is still blighted of raw sewage from the pig farm flowing over garigue and right into the sea, just a stone's throw away from the Santa Marija Battery.

Authorities were first alerted to such a dire situation by Nature Trust over five years ago - yet few have batted an eyelid or tried to rectify matters. The island should theoretically be safeguarded by a Comino Steering Committee and the pig farm should have ceased operations long ago. Therefore, the mind boggles as to why the putrefication on the garigue and in the surrounding waters has been allowed to proceed unabated. To compound matters further, the sewage discharge is close to a fish-farming site.

One hopes that urgent action is taken, now that three separate sewage treatment plants around the island are being developed. Rectifying the Comino sewage problem would complement such a development.

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