

The green whistle-blower



Developers would be brought to heel for the dumping of rubble just outside the precincts of the scheduled part of Wied Ghomor in Swieqi/San Gwann. Such rubble is smothering the carob trees present on site. The scheduling of the this valley is essential to prevent its wanton destruction witnessed further downstream.

With all the well-intended resolutions and auspices which accompany the start of every year we never seem to be able to iron out all our environmental flaws. If anything, the end of December and the start of January witnessed more blatant cases of environmental degradation.

The San Martin Valley is well known for its quaint wayside grotto sanctuary dedicated to Our Lady and St Bernadette. With its lush vegetation and majestic Aleppo pines, it has always been highly coveted by those seeking to acquire or illegally develop a property in this desirable locality.

Large chunks of the site are owned by a single landowner who had bought it at a ludicrously low price and who, at one time, sought to develop a golf course complete with all tourist amenities.

The same landowner was even blessed by the sanctioning of his swimming pool, built illegally a mere 100 metres away from the watercourse and cleverly curtained off by the surrounding vegetation.

The latest chapter in the San Martin desecration involves the illegal building of a bungalow using stones from a demolished rubble wall and during whose construction Aleppo pines were ruthlessly cut down.

Such a bungalow does not appear on any satellite images or any survey sheets - not even an enforcement notice had been issued in its regard at the time of writing. The perpetrators obviously are oblivious to the ecological importance of the watercourse upon which their properties abut.

Wied Ghomor revisited

January also witnessed a further resurfacing of a case which has aroused much public fervour - that of Wied Ghomor in Swieqi. The valley, which meanders beneath the towering urban encroachments of San Gwann and Swieqi, is a asset highly valued by local residents.

One must laud MEPA for its scheduling after years of unbridled development along the valley sides. A 'Regional Park' has also been declared in the Tal-Franciz area of the valley and is managed jointly by the Countryside section of the Ministry for Resources and Infrastructure and the St Julian's Scout Group.

All these commendable initiatives however come against the backdrop of the dumping of rubble from the ongoing construction down the valley sides, just outside the scheduled area, as if the boundary of scheduling empowers one to turn the area into a dump and an eyesore.

As part of its many proposals, Nature Trust (Malta) is suggesting that developers be asked to deposit financial bank guarantees against potential environmental degradation they might cause even when minor construction projects are involved, such as at Wied Ghomor, not just for

mega projects, such as the Portomaso one. Doubtlessly, such a bank deposit would have been forfeited by the Wied Ghomor developer.

Gnejna and its environs

Visitors to Gnejna Bay who wish to venture up the rocky plateau of Ras il-Pellegrin to the left of the bay are prevented from doing so by the usual RTO sham.

The claims laid by the various Riservato (RTO) signs draping our countryside usually cannot be substantiated since they usually cordon off what in fact is public land.

All this seems to be accepted. However, when you speak of an entire hillside being cordoned off for hunting purposes, then eyebrows start being raised.

To further rub salt into the wound, a concrete pathway has been grafted illegally on the clay slopes of this hill so as to spare hunters the gruelling walk to the hilltop.

The final straw must surely be the massive planting of alien tree species, such as eucalyptus, up the hill, for hunting purposes and the purported demolition of archaeological remains once found on the hilltop (hence the name Ras il-Pellegrin, which is referring to this place being once a place of religious worship).

Considering these circumstances, one can understand why hunters' lobbies are so keen to maintain the status quo in our country regarding hunting, but not why EU negotiations were tailor-made to suit their needs!

A highly original proposal (not my brainchild but that of a colleague of mine) is for the authorities to embark on a systematic scheme of assessing the validity of RTO signs all around our islands and either confirming them or rejecting them by declaring that the land is public by affixing signs on site.

Gnejna Bay itself is in dire need of a management plan before the next summer season. The makeshift car park literally sits on the remnants of a former sand dune, with motorists struggling to prevent having their cars bogged down in the sand and the opening of the watercourse being turned into a dump.

More industrial development and marinas?

Hot on the heels of proposals for an industrial park at Wied il-Ghasel, more industrial development for Mosta was announced through a dubious application by an individual for industrial garages on the verges of Mosta Valley in the area known as Ta' Qares.

The area in question, which lies outside a development scheme, had already been ravaged by drainage works, which had been officially stopped by the authorities but which had been carried out all the same. Let's hope that such a preposterous application is rejected outright.

Angelo Xuereb's suggestion for a speedboat marina at the Salina salt pans at the end of last year is yet another proof of our developers' infatuation with marinas.

The latest fad seems to propose a marina for an ecologically important coastal site. Why Salina, with its proximity to so many hotels, including those owned by Mr Xuereb, was earmarked is understandable to all.

At least, this time round, he admits that a certain degree of damage will be wrought through such a project, but (quoting his very words) "sometimes one has to balance out and sacrifice certain features in order to ensure a sustainable project".

Silver linings

After all the palaver generated by the Kronviken case, when it was alleged that hazardous oil sludge was dumped at Maghtab, MEPA announced that new procedures on the management and disposal of oil sludge and other hazardous waste at the Maghtab landfill were to be introduced.

These involved the storing in rigid containers of the waste, proper marking and transportation to a designated site at Maghtab. Such a site, provided by Waste Management Services Ltd, will be laid with material that prevents leaking and will have ground contamination monitoring facilities.

All oil sludge off-loaded from ships will now be stored in rigid containers, which will be properly marked and transported to a designated site at Maghtab.

One can only augur that local private and public entities take the cue from Malta International Airport (MIA) which announced that it would be spending Lm2,500 on afforestation in the new year.

The MIA car park is already endowed with a sizable olive grove adjacent to McDonald's.

Finally, let's all hope that, with the prospect of a hectic political agenda looming ever nearer, the environment features high on the agenda of both political parties and that green-washing of the parties' principles does not become the latest craze. Predictably, the environment will take a back seat in the coming power struggle.

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