

## More encroachment in Mosta Valley



The well-preserved corbelled stone hut on the upper reaches of Wied I-Isperanza, an area earmarked for a block of new apartments and garages.

A planning application submitted in 2005 proposing the construction of 24 apartments and 26 garages along Constitution Street, Mosta, and bordering Wied I-Isperanza was approved on January 20. It was originally refused by Mepa's Development Control Commission in 2007.

In 2004, a permit had been issued to construct an old people's home on the site. However, due to vehement opposition the plans were never implemented. At the time, the areas of land where development could take place had not yet been revised and the site in question was classified entirely as Outside Development Zone (ODZ).

The latest application seems to fall, at least partly, within the revised development schemes. I stress 'at least partly', since the Mepa mapserver suggests that the site's rear end encroaches onto land classified as ODZ.

According to the Central Malta Local Plan (CMLP), the priority issues for Mosta are the "potential to develop a heritage trail and valley walkway along Wied il-Għasel and the Victoria Lines together with a district level recreational area" and the "need to safeguard spaces for recreational use".

By further encroaching on the Wied I-Isperanza stretch of Wied I-Għasel valley, its value for recreational use is further undermined since this approval is further hemming this stretch of the valley into a mere sliver of greenery snaking its way through urban areas.

By developing the fields above the valley, the volume of water passing through the valley after heavy rainfall will increase because more land covered with soil is being converted into a footprint of non-porous concrete and buildings.

Who can vouch that debris and rubble from the development will not spill into the valley below?

As the photo shows, a well-preserved corbelled stone hut (girna) graces the site destined for development. Was it really missed during the site inspection? Is it destined to be destroyed?

### Alien invasions

The term 'invasive alien species' (IAS) might conjure up images of extraterrestrial life from outer space. Two glaring examples of such 'alien invasions' in Malta - the Cape Sorrel (Faxixa Ingliża) and the Red Palm Weevil - have almost become household names now.

But as EU Commissioner for the Environment, Stavros Dimas, aptly said in the December issue of the Natura 2000 newsletter, "The economic impact of invasive species can be massive... cause, hundreds of millions of euros, damage every year. Unless action is taken to eradicate or control these invasive species, the damage they do will only increase, and the trend is almost certain to be exacerbated by climate change."

The EU Commission is treating the spread of such species as a 'high risk' to ensure this problem receives the attention it deserves. In fact, while the Commission is to some extent already taking measures to address climate change, pollution, habitat loss and species, over-

exploitation, which are major causes of biodiversity loss, it is not tackling the fifth cause - the spread of IAS at the expense of indigenous species.

Now the Commission is literally putting its money where its mouth is and has funded, through its Sixth Framework Programme funding mechanism, the Daisie project, which is a comprehensive inventory of the staggering 11,000 alien species currently in Europe.

Meanwhile, the International Maritime Organisation has identified the introduction of IAS as one of the four greatest threats to the world's oceans. Malta is not immune to such 'invasions', especially marine ones, as a result of the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the relentless warming of the Mediterranean.

A recently published research paper by Sciberras and Schembri puts the number of marine alien species in local waters at 48, to which two others have since been added. Of these, around 16 per cent are harmful and tend to spread very quickly. Among these is the green algal species *Caulerpa racemosa*, which has now spread to the marine area around the islands below a depth of 40 to 50 metres.

A government-funded effort to monitor the presence of such alien species in our waters and land is to start shortly.

## **Media-shy marine news**

While Malta's surface area is small, our territorial sea is roughly 20 times our land area. Against such a statistic, it is perhaps odd that our country gives so little attention to our marine environment. For example, the following three local marine-related developments received very little media coverage, despite their importance:

1. The Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs issued guidelines to amateur fishermen on the minimum size of fish that may be caught from particularly vulnerable fish species, including the Dusky Grouper, the White Sea Bream, the Common Sea Bream, the Horse Mackerel and the Common Pandora.

The list of species included in the inventory was not comprehensive enough, since it excluded popular fish species such as Saddled Bream, the Dentex and the Grouper. However, the initiative is still a laudable one, especially since it implements guidelines first laid out in Regulation no. 35 in 1934.

2. Statistics were recently published on the volume of inert waste deposited in an officially-designated dumping ground off the entrance to Grand Harbour. While the government has well and truly tackled the Maghtab problem, we are still in the dark as to the extent of this submarine dump.

Statistics show that around 1.25 million tonnes of inert waste have been dumped on site since 2003, but it is not possible to calculate how much was dumped prior to this date. We also don't know whether anyone is ensuring that only inert waste is being dumped on the site. For this information, we have to wait for the results of a Mepa-commissioned survey of the site to be announced.

3. The EU Commission's unveiling of a lifeline for shark species in European waters is good news indeed. The so-called Shark Action Plan seeks to regulate the catching of around 1,000 species of cartilaginous fish in European waters, which includes sharks, skates, rays and chimaeras.

The move was welcomed by the Sharkman Worldwide Organisation and local NGO Nature Trust, which is currently conducting a local shark research project.

Between 1984 and 2004, world catches of sharks grew from 600,000 to over 810,000 metric tonnes annually. The EU fleet now takes about 100,000 tonnes of sharks and related species each year.

Despite their reputation as voracious predators, some shark species are tottering on the brink of extinction.