

## Important questions on Gozo tunnel



Indiscriminate parking at Buskett. Hopefully things will change as an assessment of visitor flows to the area is due to be made. Photo: Martin Galea Degiovanni

We have been assured that the design of the proposed Gozo tunnel would not adversely impact the seabed as excavations would take place on land.

Even if we assume this would be the case the project would still have environmental impacts. For instance, where would the millions of cubic metres of excavated material be deposited?

It is known that Malta's disused quarries are nearing saturation point as areas for the dumping of demolition and construction waste. So would such waste be taken away by barge to the spoil the seabed?

Or would it just be discarded as slightly mounds by the roadside, as has happened with innumerable road infrastructural works – a stretch of the TEN-T road network, close to Manikata, is a case in point.

Obviously, excavations on land would also permanently sacrifice a parcel of land, and chances are that this land would, so far, be unspoilt.

I won't even venture into other aspects, such as the adverse effect the submarine noise generated by the project would have on sea mammals and fish, out of fear of being branded an extremist.

Obviously, it is legitimate for relatives of patients who must be ferried on a daily basis to the hospital in Malta for treatment, to call for a more efficient Gozo crossing. Government should intervene to alleviate the plight of these individuals by subsidising or even financing their daily air trips to Malta.

But for the thousands who cross the channel every day for work purposes, one could argue that many more, hailing from the south of Malta, have to endure on a daily basis gridlocked roads at Marsa, with the travelling time (one way) being prolonged by 75 minutes or more when it rains.

Leaving the Gozo tunnel decision to Gozitans only, as suggested by the Leader of the Opposition, is a populist decision which reeks of clientilism. Why stop here? Why not also delegate to Gozitans all enforcement action to be conducted in Gozo by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority?

Jolanda De Conciliis' letter to the editor (The Sunday Times, February 27) on the issue hit the nail on the head – "A car invasion would certainly not contribute to a relaxing holiday in Gozo". There you have it, straight from a Swiss tourist's mouth.

Predictably, the letter was met with the customary xenophobic online comments.

## **Cast cynicism aside**

The script has been played out yet again. Whenever a member of a non-governmental organisation takes the plunge and assumes an important administration post, the cynics jolt into action, inundating newspaper columns and online comment boards with unpleasant comments whose only aim is to cast doubt over the integrity of the individual in question.

Unfortunately, such cynicism, which considers former colleagues as the enemy once they take up important posts (or even if they merely apply for such posts), can have consequences.

For example, a local NGO president resigned from the Mepa board after being unjustly criticised in sections of the media for taking up such a post, and following the results of the 2009 elections for the European Parliament, none of the new MEPs sits on the EP's Envi Commission, which deals with environmental issues. Is such a price warranted?

Individuals should be judged by their actions, not by their present affiliation.

A case in point is Petra Bianchi's appointment as head of Mepa's Environment Directorate, which is surely a breath of fresh air. As I have reiterated in this column on countless occasions, it's judicious, to say the least, to have environmentalists in top administration posts, as change can be affected from within, not just from the outside.

Mepa is full of ex-NGO campaigners and most of these have not lost any of their enthusiasm or vibe to protect the local environment through their daily work. Bianchi's appointment comes in the wake of Giovanni Bonello's appointment to the Mepa board and is thus another important tassel in the ever more congenial landscape at Mepa.

I wish her good luck and hope that cheap cynicism does not let sap her spirit.

## **Giving up on Armier?**

Mepa chairman Austin Walker's recent comments that "Mepa does not want another Armier" to justify recent decisions taken against Outside Development Zone development are very welcome.

However, what raises a few eyebrows is the air of resignation with which the comments were uttered, as if Mepa has given up completely on the ambitious enterprise of dismantling the illegal, shanty towns along the L-Ahrax peninsula.

Mr Walker's words are slightly ominous since he seems to be conveying the message that, since the Armier boathouses are an inalienable reality that is beyond us, at least we should try to learn from such a failure to avoid repeating it.

I am sure this is not the message Mr Walker wanted to convey. Mepa should allay such fears by stating clearly that it has not given up hope on the L-Ahrax boathouses.

Finally, as an online comment rightly stressed, the boathouse scourge is alive and kicking not just at Armier, but also at St Thomas Bay and Delimara, among other places. In fact, boathouses re-sprouting at Delimara as I write.

## **Our water footprint**

A landmark publication – The Water Footprint Assessment Manual: Setting the Global Standard – has just been released by the Water Footprint Network. It is downloadable from [www.waterfootprint.org](http://www.waterfootprint.org).

The manual standardises water footprint calculations, thus providing a common yardstick by which to assess the sustainability of various activities in terms of water usage, including the consumer choices we make.

The water footprint of an individual, community or business is defined as the total volume of freshwater used to produce the goods and services consumed by the individual or community.

This manual offers a complete and up-to-date overview of the global standard on water footprint assessment as developed by the Water Footprint Network.

It provides a comprehensive set of methods for water footprint assessment; it shows how water footprints can be calculated for individual processes and products, as well as for consumers, nations and businesses; it contains detailed worked examples of how to calculate green, blue and grey water footprints; it describes how to assess the water footprint of a specific product; and it includes an extensive library of possible measures that can contribute to water footprint reduction.

For instance, the manual reveals that 140 litres of water go into making a single cup of coffee, if one were to consider the water usage at all stages, including irrigation of coffee plants.

As a side-note, an excerpt from the manual provides much scope for irony in the Maltese context.

For instance, Coca-Cola is reported to have pledged in 2007 to go 'water-neutral' by (i) reducing water use in its own operations, (ii) returning the water used in its own operations in clean form back to the environment and (iii) compensating for the water contained in the finished beverages through conservation and recycling programmes.

This is all highly commendable, but it is undermined by the fact that General Soft Drinks Co Ltd, the local bottler for Coca-Cola and producer of Kristal table water, extracts annually the equivalent of 26 million table water bottles from its three registered boreholes, although the same company has invested in water-saving measures at its new facilities in Marsa.

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