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Editorial

A walk in the countryside

The Minister for Rural Affairs and the Environment, George Pullicino, recently declared that the government intends waging an all out war to eradicate the existing illegal structures that mar the countryside and to make open spaces of natural beauty more accessible for people to enjoy.

Those of us who have at one time or another left the urban overpopulated south of the island for the more rural north to enjoy the cleaner air and the joys of a good brisk country walk know that what the minister speaks about is no easy matter.

Many times one is chased off by an irate farmer under the impression that his precious crops may be tampered with or, even worse, threatened by a hunter or trapper in his makeshift bunker. Of late, many once public footpaths have been blocked off with unauthorised "no entry" signs written in a brand of English that would probably make Owl in Winnie the Pooh blush.

A dip in Nicholas de Piro's comprehensive International Dictionary Of Artists Who Painted Malta will reveal that the Maltese countryside has a special beauty of its own which has, for many centuries, attracted artists from all over the world. The plunging cliffs were immortalised by no less a personage than Edward Lear; the fields, looking like kaleidoscopic patchwork quilts, have been lovingly depicted by artists like Nicholas Krasnoff, Julian Trevelyan and Russell Flint and the general ambience of the countryside has been immortalised in the very recherché paintings of Girolamo Gianni and Luigi Maria Galea, to name but two. If one examines these paintings closely, making allowances for a bit of artistic licence and editing, one can easily understand why artists are so fascinated by the Maltese countryside.

So much of Malta's countryside has been swallowed up already to accommodate an ever-growing population that it will take nothing less than Mr Pullicino's war to preserve what is left and open it up to all those who wish to enjoy it.

Too much has been allowed to happen in these areas without anyone making much of an ado about it and Mr Pullicino's declaration must have been received with great relief by all those who, quite rightly, think that matters have been allowed to go too far for too long.

There must be cooperation on both sides. Very often farmers are faced with picnickers and hikers who, oblivious of the hard backbreaking work that producing a crop entails, damage and litter indiscriminately. Their paranoia is understandable.

As for hunters, no matter what the EU or what our laws say, this so-called pastime is not going to disappear and we will have to find a modus vivendi to have a countryside that is free for all to enjoy.

Mr Pullicino's war is, by his own admission, under-financed. Thus, all financial sources available, whether locally (and those falling under other ministries too) or overseas, including EU programmes, ought to be exploited and tapped for this war has to be waged by all of us. It seems Mepa has difficulties recouping monies spent on enforcement. However, Mr Pullicino did say that Mepa can do more to ensure its resources are used to their full extent and that illegal structures are demolished at the outset instead of merely being sealed off.

Mr Pullicino means business and, in this regard at least, the majority of Malta's population stands four-square behind him. The decisive action he promises, tardy as it may be at this stage, certainly deserves everybody's full support and the Cabinet's unconditional commitment.