

Ta' Cenc: National park or national disgrace?

Martin Galea

Ta' Cenc is a beautiful stretch of open countryside. It has panoramic views, stunning cliffs, views over the sea to die for. It contains a wide variety of fauna and flora including the most important colony of sea birds in Malta. It has ancient monuments made by man to worship ancient gods and pay respect to their dead. It is sought after as a sacred place, a place of beauty, of remoteness, rugged, part arid, part fertile, windswept in winter and scorched by the sun in summer. It is probably the most beautiful stretch of land remaining anywhere in Malta or Gozo.

It is also frequented by hunters and trappers, and by people who dump truckloads of rubbish and desecrate the old temples - one has even been converted into a hunters' hide. "Only in Malta" as they say.

Today, however, there is another, far worse, man-made threat which, if it is permitted to go through, will irrevocably change this place forever. The open, unspoilt, rugged beauty that is Ta' Cenc today will be transformed by a massive development, containing over 100 villas and bungalows, a large hotel, 66 small "tourist units", and a golf course spread over 400 tumoli. Development will not stop there. The developers of this project have reserved the right to undertake further development in specific areas.

It is clear that there are many who think it is still open season on what's left of our countryside. Certainly, it provides a fantastic opportunity for speculation - to pick up land cheaply, develop it and, in time, sell it for profit. In truth, there is nothing wrong in making money. This has created wealth, ensured continued economic growth and provided Malta with a good standard of living. Entrepreneurship is to be commended and encouraged and, where necessary, assisted.

Maltese businessmen have proved to be astute. For an island with almost no resources they have created wealth. Business, however, must be regulated. Just as there are the Companies Act, the commercial courts, consumer regulations, unions, and all the other social checks and balances which help us find the middle road and avoid excesses, we have regulation with respect to the environment - to protect our quality of life and our common wealth of Malta's natural landscapes.

In 1992 the Structure Plan was passed by Parliament. This plan set out the broad policies for the whole of Malta and Gozo. It delineated where one could build and where one could not. What areas or buildings were considered important for scheduling and conservation. It is an extremely important document which was meant to stop the excesses of bad development which had plagued Malta from the 1960s through to the 1980s. One can argue about how successful it has been, but it has undoubtedly affected us all - mostly for the better. Today, one cannot just wilfully add a storey to a house, or punch open a garage, or demolish one's house and build a hotel. One must apply to Mepa for a permit and their decision will be governed by the Structure Plan and the more detailed local plans that came after it.

The Structure Plan is very specific on the Ta' Cenc area under the tourism policy known as TOU 10. The Structure Plan recognises the importance of Ta' Cenc and seeks to protect it, while allowing some development adjacent to the existing hotel. It also states that the majority of the area must be retained as a National Park. Clearly, none of these provisions have been followed in the development application being proposed.

There is a twist here. In the local plan for Gozo and Comino which the developer is purporting to follow (which is still in draft form) the plan inexplicably refers to TOU 6. This refers to five specific areas of government-owned land, such as the Cottonera waterfront and Manoel Island/Tignè Point, and states that they should be developed to a clear development brief.

Astoundingly, however, the draft plan goes on to say that the eastern flank of the Ta' Cenc area should be developed just where the villas are proposed.

This was revealed nowhere before. It has seemingly been plucked out of the air, in direct contravention of the Structure Plan.

The same plan looks to scheduling the whole area as an area of high landscape value, as well as major parts for their archaeological, scientific and ecological interest. Clearly, these are not in keeping with the proposals in the current project.

Many arguments have been put forward by the developer in favour of the project, the main one being the protection, as well as the creation, of jobs. This argument has been used in all major projects. But the argument here should be not whether we should have hotels, but where we should put them. Clearly, Ta' Cenc is not the place for such a development.

Gozo does have economic problems. It has the problems of difficulty of access, a small local market, limited investment and job opportunities. However, it also has areas of outstanding natural beauty, and great, world

class architectural and historical monuments. The sacrifice and destruction of these will not automatically bring economic utopia to Gozo. Indeed, there are strong reasons to believe that the opposite will occur. Gozo has succeeded because of its simple charm, its distinctive countryside and people. A mega-development of the kind being proposed will be counter-productive by destroying the very things for which Gozo is known and loved.

It is time that our political leaders recognised the groundswell of public opinion against these major projects, which purport to solve all the economic problems we face but signally make matters worse. How long have we been fed these: ship building, building development areas, golf courses, cement factories, massive quarries, more golf courses, large hotels built out in the countryside and on our precious coastline? It seems that some politicians think that we never learn.

But we have indeed learnt. And we will not be misled any more by superficial arguments which have contributed to such poor development in recent years and directly to the poor tourism product we have. Today, I believe there is an unstoppable groundswell of public opinion against these developments and in favour of our natural landscapes and the creation of national parks, which politicians ignore at their peril.

A project of this size is not for Ta' Cenc. To accept it would be a national disgrace. It goes against all planning sense and against the actual provisions of the law. Mepa must stand to do its duty by law and reject the application in its entirety. Nothing less will do.

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