

NGO proposes national park on golf course site

Fiona Galea Debono

Din L-Art Helwa is pushing for the creation of a national park on the site the government has earmarked as a golf course.

At its annual general meeting on Saturday, DLH approved a resolution to protect the northwest area, "which boasts some of the most outstanding, natural, untouched, open landscape in Malta", from any future development and to formally retain it as a national park to preserve the natural beauty of the area.

In the resolution, DLH strongly urged the government to reject any plans for the construction of a golf course and large-scale villa development in the area.

The NGO also resolved that Mepa should turn down the application for the development of Hotel Ta' Cenc in Gozo, strongly urging its outright rejection.

"To develop an area of such outstanding beauty would go against the terms agreed by Parliament in the Structure Plan for Malta and Gozo and would undermine the credibility and purpose of the whole planning process," the resolution said.

After indicating where the national park - an area of about five square miles - should be located, DLH was awaiting the Environment Minister's response to its proposal.

The northwest of Malta, the environment and heritage NGO's executive president, Martin Galea said, encompasses some of the most scenic parts of its countryside. The area from Cirkewwa to Xaghra l-Hamra, before extending to Bahrija, Kuncizzjoni, Ta' Baldu and Dingli, is considered to be "Maltese countryside at its best, largely unspoilt and breathtakingly beautiful".

The plan would be for Mepa to designate the area as one of high scenic value, ecological and archaeological importance, which would give it legal protection, ensuring that any planning applications would be treated with caution and presumably denied, Mr Galea said.

DLH's drive for the creation of a national park is in view of the fact that, in spite of the Malta Environment and Planning Authority and the scheduling of parts of the countryside, much was still being lost.

"We have lost over 30 per cent of our countryside and coastline over the last 40 years to urban sprawl," Mr Galea, told the annual general meeting.

"We have lost old towns like Sliema... we have lost village cores... we have lost the beautiful gardens and orange groves, the lungs of these villages, to high-density garages and apartments in the last five years," he said.

Mr Galea said the concept of national parks was the means to ensure that the countryside was properly managed and maintained for future generations. It did not require a complicated legal structure, or an expensive organisation; what was imperative was that the initiative started as soon as possible, he insisted, adding it could be refined later.

The national park should be clearly delineated, with signs set up to denote its boundaries and also point out the relevant laws.

Speaking about illicit activities that needed to be controlled, Mr Galea listed indiscriminate dumping, illegal hunting and trapping on public land, the denying of access to public pathways, off-roading and the illegal construction of hunters' hides. He questioned what measures could be taken to repair the damage, replant the trees, rebuild the rubble walls and stem the erosion caused by cars and trampling.

Mr Galea recommended setting up a system of volunteer wardens, which, he said, was already being actively considered by the Environment Ministry. By using the volunteer networks of heritage NGOs, such as DLH, volunteer wardens could be roped in to start the process of reclaiming the countryside, he suggested.

"We have an organisation and volunteers, but we would have to increase our capacity and income to make a difference," Mr Galea pointed out, without losing any of his determination and optimism.

"I am confident that, should we be entrusted with looking after a national park, we would be able to raise a significant annual income on the back of this - significant enough to employ three staff and a manager", despite the fact that there was so much rubbish to pick up, rubble walls to be rebuilt and with enforcement being problematic in such a large area.

Mr Galea said there was no need to create yet another organisation to look into enforcement. "We can and will galvanise a team of volunteers, part-timers, organise company and school outings and help days, and call on fellow NGOs to help," he said.

The national park also had an economic goal. Malta's countryside formed part of the assets that attracted visitors in off-peak periods. Country walks, rambling, mountain biking, nature and history trails in the winter and spring sun were attractive options, Mr Galea said, adding that agro-tourism had not even started in Malta.

The next step for DLH was to "look to the government to have some faith in the voluntary sector and, without fuss and the need for major funding programmes, set the wheels in motion".

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