



BirdLife Malta's response to latest plans concerning PA 5277/96: To develop Ta' Cenc area into Malta's first 'Heritage park' and 'Multi-ownership tourist hotel development', at Ta' Cenc, Sannat, Gozo.

Comments on EIS Addendum and Appropriate Assessment 29th February 2016

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The area of Ta' Cenc, from the outskirts of the village of Sannat eastwards to the area known as il-Kantra, is understood to be the property of entrepreneur Victor J. Borg. This vast area represents a sizeable chunk of the island of Gozo and apart from having an existing hotel (Hotel Ta' Cenc), some infrastructure and a number of recreational villas, Ta' Cenc hosts a vast range of relatively pristine and un-spoilt natural habitats which gain from several protection designations of national and international importance.
- 1.2 Ta' Cenc has been the subject of development plans for a number of years, with the owner seeking to obtain permits for the extension of the current hotel development since 1996. Such plans have been subject to Environment Impact Assessment studies, to which BirdLife Malta has submitted comments as well as its position with respect to the proposed development in three different occasions (January 2006, September 2007 & November 2007).
- 1.3 BirdLife Malta's concerns voiced over the years included its opposition to aspects of the planned development which would be detrimental to the site's integrity as a Natura 2000 site for its nesting birds and habitats. These particularly included:
 - a. A hotel overlooking the Mgarr ix-Xini valley;
 - b. The development of a golf-course over agricultural land;
 - c. Extension of the hotel (in various forms) within the designated Bird Sanctuary area obliterating important habitats for birds and important flora, as well as encroaching on a buffer area to the SPA
 - d. The above resulting in increased light and noise pollution impacting the internationally important seabird colonies of Ta' Cenc
- 1.4 This document represents the organisation's fourth submission following various amendments to the original plans, which represent a considerable downsizing of the proposed development which has been welcomed in each submission.

2. EIS Addendum 2015

- 2.1 BirdLife Malta notes that further to comments made by various entities and organisations, the developer has in December 2015 submitted an addendum to the Environmental Impact Statement produced in 2007. This addendum was prepared in contrast with fresh plans made by the developer, as well as includes an Appropriate Assessment to the site (Lanfranco, Cassar & Borg, 2015), given the development is proposed within a Natura 2000 site.

3. BirdLife Malta's comments (February 2016)

- 3.1 BirdLife Malta has reviewed the documentation presented to MEPA which relates to revised plans for the hotel expansion and the inclusion of the heritage park. **BirdLife Malta, in principle, does not support any further development within Natura 2000 sites, which invariably result in the loss of natural habitats of conservation importance for inhabiting flora and fauna**, or the loss of areas which act as a required buffer to more sensitive habitats for which the area is designated. The latest plans admittedly propose an overall less intensive development for the whole area, yet however still represent the further development of a Natura 2000 site which is not desirable.
- 3.2 Nonetheless, BirdLife Malta does not oppose any low-scale development within Natura 2000 sites which serves the purposes of site management, and which has the ultimate function of aiding the site management achieve a favourable conservation status for the Natura 2000 site and its habitats, flora and fauna. **The 'development' of the Heritage Park along with appropriately marked passageways and infrastructure is accordingly seen as a positive aspect that mitigates the past mis-management and insensitive development that has afflicted the area in past decades.** This includes the development of the hotel itself, villas and services infrastructure which have in past years transformed this pristine site into a low intensity development, along with the relative introduction of light and noise pollution and traffic which have permanently transformed the area.
- 3.3 With respect to concerns voiced by the organization in past years (2006 & 2007), BirdLife Malta again acknowledges the fact that the latest plans for the area present a less intense development commensurate with rural areas. The abandonment of plans for a golf course, the Sannat Hotel, as well as a lesser number of villas in the Tal-Kantra area are welcomed. **BirdLife Malta however remains concerned that despite being highlighted in the past, the proposed plans still show an expansion of the hotel in the direction of the seabird colonies of Ta' Cenc cliffs, particularly developing an area which is designated as a Bird Sanctuary.** Responses to our comments addressing this particular issue, as made by the EIA coordinator are inappropriate, when defining a Bird Sanctuary as simply an area where hunting and trapping may not be allowed. Whereas indeed legally the designation of a bird sanctuary is meant to control a ban to activities which are damaging to bird populations (such as hunting and trapping), the designation of a particular area as a bird sanctuary is done in reflection of the site offering a suitable refuge or nesting habitat to bird species. Such a refuge is often not the result of a ban on human activities but is a product of the natural habitats the site offers, which in this case would be obliterated by the development. **Developing the Bird Sanctuary destroys the very reason why the same area is designated as such, and is therefore unacceptable and should not be considered.**
- 3.4 Moreover, the expansion of the hotel within the Bird Sanctuary will practically bring the hotel development closer to the nesting colonies of seabirds, a measure which puts at risk the integrity of this Natura 2000 site as suitable nesting habitat for seabirds. **Any development closer to the cliffs shall result in vibrations and noise closer to colony sites during the construction phase of the development, as well as bring noise and light pollution closer to the nesting areas of seabirds**

also during the operational phase of the development. Scopoli's Shearwaters in particular are known to fly over and above the cliffs especially during the breeding season, and this development will restrict further the pristine, unlit, quiet areas which the birds may utilize. In its past submissions, BirdLife Malta has identified the need to allow for further expansion of the colonies which may have been impacted in past years, and therefore any further development towards the cliffs further limits this possibility. The Appropriate Assessment acknowledges this risk, despite the mitigation measures proposed.

3.5 BirdLife Malta notes that despite all the years this development has been proposed, the application made by the developer still relates to an Outline Development Permit. The EIS addendum lacks acute details of the actual development, such as where excavations would be made, or further still how lighting schemes would be implemented in the proposed development. **We accordingly find the interpretation of any impacts relating to these matters as lacking certainty, in contrast with the certainty we have that seabirds are sensitive to development close to or at their colonies.** Up until the developer submits detailed schemes relating to the exterior lighting, noise abatement measures and other mitigation measures, the EIS or AA cannot conclude with certainty that such impacts may be contained. To this regard, as long as the developer does not submit more detailed plans on how these issues would be addressed, the precautionary principle should be applied, and development that accentuates these impacts to seabird colonies is to be avoided.

3.6 While the development of other areas away from the cliffs are of less concern to seabird colonies, such development would avail of further mitigation measures rather than simply the designation of the area as a Heritage Park. Parks are normally valued for their natural intrinsic value and should the developer/owner consider focusing on maximizing this value, **further measures need to be proposed to ban those activities that are in direct conflict of conservation objectives.** Optimising the bird sanctuary potential of the area, as well as expanding this would be considered as an adequate mitigation which may ultimately result in a significant area of Gozo being protected and optimized to act as a haven for nesting and migratory birds. Conservation measures may include an all year ban on hunting and trapping activities, as well as a full ban on off-roading activities, and control of other sources of disturbance during sensitive periods when ground-nesting birds utilize the area. Such activities would include limiting dog-walking to leashes, as well as strict allocation to footpaths for passers-by during the spring and summer seasons. With respect to trapping, although as noted in the responses to comments, that this is not tolerated by the developer in the area, BirdLife Malta has continued witnessing this phenomenon within Ta' Cenc in recent years.

4. Conclusion

4.1 BirdLife Malta welcomes the decrease in the overall development being proposed at Ta' Cenc however cannot not note that such a development is being proposed within a Natura 2000 site, designated for its flora and fauna, in particular seabirds. With respect to seabird colonies, the development threatens to obliterate an area designated as a Bird Sanctuary which acts as a buffer to internationally important colonies of seabirds (Scopoli's Shearwater, Yelkouan Shearwater and Mediterranean Storm Petrel), which the EIS and AA fail to ascertain no residual impacts will result should the development be made as planned. The development of the Heritage Park offers ample opportunity for further mitigation and for the Ta' Cenc area to be transformed into the largest and most protected and well managed Natura 2000 site in Gozo. While this might be a suitable mitigation to the development of less sensitive areas, the EIS addendum does not clarify what conservation measures would be considered by the developer.

ENDS

References

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