BirdLife Malta's Recommendations on the Intent and Objectives: General Guidelines for Landscaping in Urban Areas

29 April 2024

BirdLife Malta welcomes the preparation of General Guidelines for Landscaping in Urban Areas. As part of the consultation process, BirdLife Malta would like to submit the below recommendations.

Whilst we acknowledge that the first objective of this document is to act as a general guideline on what aspects should be taken in consideration for urban landscaping, we also consider this objective as not ambitious enough. The primary objective of this document should be to provide practical and essential guidelines to relevant stakeholders on how to make our urban spaces more green, habitable and sustainable for urban dwellers. Green vegetation in urban areas of Malta is lacking but with careful planning we can maximise the use of spaces in urban areas for the increase of green vegetation. Smart and innovative ways on how to incorporate green vegetation in urban planning should be included in the guidelines, along with recommendations on the use of materials, street furniture and the boundary treatments of open spaces. Guidelines on the design should also include an element of climatic comfort and suitability[1].

These guidelines should also revolve around the concept of nature based solutions (NBS) in the design and planning of green infrastructure. NBS nurture the provision of ecosystem services and other benefits derived from the inclusion of green vegetation in urban areas[3]. Green vegetation provides a cooling effect through evapotranspiration and shading, substantially lowering air and surface temperatures, a process which Maltese urban areas would greatly benefit from[2]. Vegetation also provides important food crops, shelter, nesting and roosting opportunities for avifauna, as well as food crops and shelter for other fauna including insects, lizards and the hedgehog. NBS have also been proved to aid in improving air quality and human well being[3].

Guidelines on how to identify spatial opportunities for NBS should be included in the document. In addition, the guidelines should identify possible locations in Maltese

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[1] Scheiber, S., & Zucaro, F. (2023). Urban open and green spaces: is Malta planning and designing them to increase resilience?.

[2] Kowe, P., Mutanga, O., & Dube, T. (2021). Advancements in the remote sensing of landscape pattern of urban green spaces and vegetation fragmentation. *International Journal of Remote Sensing*, *42*(10), 3797-3832.

[3] Longato, D., Cortinovis, C., Balzan, M., & Geneletti, D. (2020). Preliminary analyses to support nature-based solutions planning in the urban area around Valletta, Malta. *URBANISTICA INFORMAZIONI*, *289*, 45-48.

urban areas where proper conditions exist for the implementation of NBS, in terms of both available space to realize them and existing rules and regulations promoting their implementation[3]. It is suggested that in order to implement NBS in practical terms, specific planning actions and implementation tools need to be defined, with the latter defining the procedures and rules through which actions are implemented. Compulsory regulations are less common than non-compulsory guidelines and principles, with a substantial need for incentive-based tools and compensation measures to attract NBS in urban landscaping[3].

The second and third objective, focusing on the recommended trees and shrubs, that can be planted in urban area, we suggest specifying that only native species are included in the list. Native species have the benefit of offering ecosystem services tailored for the climate and biodiversity of the Maltese islands. In addition, it would prevent the risk of introducing the spread of invasive non-native species which threaten native and endemic species. It would also be interesting to indicate the ecosystem services that each plant, shrub and tree species provides and promote the idea of planting a variety of species in the same space to create a varied repertoire of ecosystem services. For example, providing a list of plants and shrubs which attract the Maltese honey bee would invite stakeholders to include this in their urban landscaping plan.

Another objective which we would like to advocate for is to create or maintain ecological corridors in urban areas. Urban ecological corridors refers to linear or banded landscape elements important for the connectivity of green spaces, common examples include roads, waterways and green belt systems[4]. Vegetation fragmentation caused by rapid urbanization threatens biodiversity with negative impact on native species dispersal, leading to a decline in species resilience and ultimately localised species extinctions[2].

Lastly, on the fourth objective on the aftercare and maintenance of vegetation, we would like to add a few suggestions:

- Pruning or large interventions on established perennial vegetation should be avoided during the breeding season of locally nesting birds which are expected to occupy such vegetation between March and July.
- Halt the common but harmful practice of removing roadside ruderal plant species. This local flora should be allowed to thrive since they have an important function for local and migratory invertebrates.
- 'Grass cutting' should not done during the rainy season to allow local flora to flourish.

[4] Tang, Y., Gao, C., & Wu, X. (2020). Urban ecological corridor network construction: an integration of the least cost path model and the InVEST model. *ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information*, *9*(1), 33.

- Unnecessary installation of lighting in urban landscaping plans should be discouraged as it adds on to the issue of artificial light pollution.
- Advocate for adequate funding and resources for local councils to manage and maintain open green spaces and green infrastructure.

To conclude, we suggest that NBS are incorporated in the objectives of these important guidelines, alongside with using native species only, maintaining urban ecological corridors and avoiding harmful practices which hinder natural processes and disrupt the provision of ecosystem services. Ultimately, for positive changes in the landscaping of the Maltese urban environment we suggest that drastic measures are employed such as compulsory regulations, incentive-based tools and compensation measures for the relevant stakeholders. Finally, we encourage the engagement of various stakeholders in the design and planning of open green spaces, including residents, local councils and environmental NGOs.