



BirdLife Malta Comments and Recommendations in relation to the Review of an Environmental Impact Assessment Report for Cornithia Oasis (PA/05420/21)

3rd December 2024

BirdLife Malta submits the following comments and recommendations in response to the public consultation for the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) concerning Corinthia Oasis (formerly Hal Ferh Complex).

The Hal Ferh complex has been abandoned and undisturbed for a considerable period, leading to its habitation by vertebrate fauna, including several breeding bird species. Both the Appropriate Assessment (AA) of Vertebrate Fauna and the EIA list the breeding birds present on-site, but discrepancies exist between the two. For instance, the AA mentions the Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*), Eurasian Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) and Cetti's Warbler (*Cettia cetti*) as present, while the EIA omits these species. These lists require revision to ensure consistency with the AA findings.

While the AA provides a thorough assessment of the vertebrate fauna on-site, the EIA fails to propose adequate mitigation and compensatory measures for potential habitat and species loss. For instance, the financial support of restoration and/or management of nearby protected areas including the Majjistral Park, may be incorporated within the EIA as a compensatory measure. Although the EIA identifies that dismantling and demolition will result in the destruction of flora, it neglects to address how fauna might also be impacted during this phase. The only proposed measure involves erecting impermeable hoarding to restrict species movement, with no plans to mitigate habitat destruction or bird displacement.

To address this oversight, we recommend that dismantling and demolition, scheduled to last two months as per the Construction Management Plan, be carried out outside the birds' breeding season (March to June). This will prevent the destruction of active nests within the site itself. Furthermore, incorporating nesting spaces within the new construction design could compensate for displaced breeding birds, alongside setting up bird boxes suitable for species observed on-site. We would like to take this opportunity to inform the developers of our availability to provide guidance and recommendations on integrating these features into the new premises of the Corinthia Oasis project.

The EIA includes mitigation measures for the operational phase, such as using specific fertilisers and pesticides, landscaping with approved plant species, and installing downward-facing, low-intensity lighting. However, it lacks provisions for monitoring the operational phase. Given the site's sensitive location, adjacent to protected areas of national significance, a robust monitoring plan is essential to ensure the implementation of mitigation measures through the project's lifespan and adapt as needed. This will safeguard the integrity of the surrounding environment.



The Hal Ferh development brief specifies that the facility should not “frequently attract large numbers of visitors” and should integrate mitigation measures against noise disturbance. However, this restriction does not explicitly prohibit occasional outdoor events. The EIA does not address whether such events will occur or propose limits for them. Given the site's proximity to Natura 2000 areas, the EIA should assess the impacts of outdoor events, establish limits, and might even necessitate nature permits for activities that could affect habitats or species.

As identified within the AA for Terrestrial Invertebrate Fauna, the Yelkouan shearwater (*Puffinus yelkouan*) and the Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) have been recorded breeding within the cliffs and boulder screes present in the Area of Influence (Aol) of the site. Moreover, both the Scopoli's Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*) and Yelkouan Shearwater (*P. yelkouan*) were recorded calling in the area. Shearwaters are nocturnally active seabirds and known to be sensitive to noise and light pollution. It has been reported that chick provisioning visits by Scopoli's shearwaters decreased during disturbing human activities with high noise outputs¹. Moreover, seabird fledglings are attracted by artificial lights when they leave their nest at night, causing high mortality and groundings in areas polluted by artificial light². On the other hand, adult shearwaters tend to reduce colony attendance when the cliff face is illuminated, a predatory avoidance strategy. In a study conducted locally, it has been reported that brighter conditions significantly reduced colony attendance by Yelkouan shearwaters. Disruption of natural attendance patterns is likely to have short- and long-term effects on breeding success, physiological condition, and colony viability³. In addition, artificial light at night is also known to cause misorientation of hatchling loggerhead sea turtles (*Caretta caretta*)⁴, where in the recent years, the area has been attracting an increasing number of breeding loggerhead turtles in ir-Ramla tal-Mixquqa. This concern is heightened by the cumulative impacts of ongoing touristic activities present within the Aol. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that the premises do not become an additional source of disruptive outdoor activities during the breeding season of species within the Aol.

In addition to the above, whilst we acknowledge that a comprehensive lighting scheme is being presented together with the EIA, we would like to add that any outdoor lighting should not only be downwards facing but also of a full cut-off type, to ensure that there is no light spillage in the surrounding environment. Only full cut-off fixture guarantees that light is directed only to where it is needed. They are the only fixture type to have a ULOR of 0%⁵. With regards to increased

¹ Syposz, M., Padget, O., Willis, J., Van Doren, B. M., Gillies, N., Fayet, A. L., ... & Guilford, T. (2021). Avoidance of different durations, colours and intensities of artificial light by adult seabirds. *Scientific Reports*, 11(1), 18941.

² Rodríguez, A., Rodríguez, B., & Negro, J. J. (2015). GPS tracking for mapping seabird mortality

induced by light pollution. *Scientific reports*, 5(1), 10670.

³ Austad, M., Opper, S., Crymble, J., Greetham, H. R., Sahin, D., Lago, P., ... & Quillfeldt, P. (2023). The effects of temporally distinct light pollution from ships on nocturnal colony attendance in a threatened seabird. *Journal of Ornithology*, 164(3), 527-536.

⁴ Stanley, T. R., White, J. M., Teel, S., & Nicholas, M. (2020). Brightness of the night sky affects loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) sea turtle hatchling misorientation but not nest site selection. *Frontiers in Marine Science*, 7, 221.

⁵ <https://birdlifemalta.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Guidelines-for-Ecologically-Responsible-Lighting.pdf>



illumination by cars within the premises, even though this is recognised as an impact by the EIA, it does not account how this will be mitigated for.

Lastly, we are concerned about monitoring and controlling impacts from the private villas. The Hal Ferh development brief states the land is government-owned, yet it remains unclear how this status will change upon the villas' privatisation. The EIA does not account for potential impacts arising from these properties, making it challenging to mitigate them. Impacts from the 'villa neighborhood' must fall within the EIA's scope, as the site could be exposed to unknown future developments and impacts once privatised. If the development shall result in privatised land parcels which will be open to future speculation, changes in land use or changes in the actual use of the individual villas, then the impact from such developments cannot be truly determined. The development permit should seal the possibilities of diversified use of these sites, should this project go ahead.