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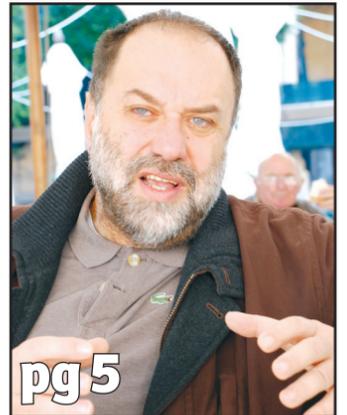
END OF AN ERA

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See back page story and feature on pgs8-9



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OPINION

Anglu Farrugia

pg10

FREE INSIDE

Business Today

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EXTINCT

MEPA minimising threat to Maltese wildlife - naturalists

RAPHAEL VASSALLO

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Sciberras is an authority on Maltese herpetology (reptile study) and other aspects of wildlife.

PAGE 4

Photo by Arnold Sciberras

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Extinct

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Raphael Vassallo

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"MEPA doesn't want to acknowledge that its conservation attempts have failed in some cases," naturalist Arnold Sciberras told MaltaToday.

Sciberras is an authority on Maltese herpetology (reptile study) and other aspects of wildlife.

Together with his brother Jeffrey he has published the most detailed reports on the habits, populations and taxonomy of Maltese reptiles.

It was the Sciberras brothers who announced the untimely extinction of the Selmunett lizard five years ago.

"As far as my brother and I are concerned, *Podarcis filfolensis* ssp. *kieselbachi* is an extinct endemic subspecies of the Maltese wall lizard, and has not been seen since 2005," Jeffrey Sciberras explained. "We visit the island yearly, and since then we never saw another lizard again. It used to be common in the 1970s till the mid-1990s, then the population crashed from there, till 2003 they were extinct from the larger half of the island. By 2003, only 30 lizards were found on the south side of the smaller half of the island."

Elsewhere, new threats have also been identified to the endemic Fungus Rock species (*Podarcus filfolensis* ssp. *generalensis*): although the lizard is not in imminent danger of extinction just yet.

"Current population figures are stable, but there is a growing rat population which could result in a decline," Arnold Sciberras said. However, the same lizard is classified as 'favourable' by MEPA.

With regard to mainland species, one lizard is understood to also be in decline, though not yet endangered. Not according to the MEPA State of the Environment Report, which supplies a markedly different picture: "The eight species of Maltese terrestrial

reptiles are all at a favourable conservation status, apart from one, this being the Selmunett Wall Lizard... which is confined to the islands of Selmunett," the report observes (failing to take into account the most recent research which defines the Selmunett lizard as extinct.)

Nor is the fate of Malta's reptilian population the only area in which this report appears to be out of synch with current research. One notable absence in the mammal category concerns the Least weasel (*Mustela nivalis*); but here, the news is slightly better.

"It is very difficult to establish precise figures for the weasel population, but I can confirm that it is not facing extinction as yet," John Borg, curator of the National History Museum told MaltaToday.

Borg, a specialist in both mammals and seabirds, explained that there are a 'few sightings' reported every year, and the small predator is believed to inhabit mainly the northwest of Malta (it is entirely absent from Gozo and Comino). Although not technically endemic, the Maltese variety is markedly bigger than its Sicilian counterpart: possibly a case of 'island gigantism' (the same evolutionary phenomenon that produced the famed giant tortoises of the Galapagos).

But while not directly endangered, the weasel also faces threats to its longterm survival in the form of pesticides, and the loss of natural habitat through urbanisation.

"It is certainly not lacking food sources - rats, mice and rabbits are all available in its environment," Borg added. "The biggest threat is development, and also changes in agricultural practices. To a lesser extent, the species is sometimes targeted by hunters. When the police pass on confiscated private collections of stuffed animals to the museum, these often include stuffed weasels along with birds..."

Borg however considers the threat to Malta's six resident species of bat to be far more serious than that facing either weasel or Sicilian shrew (a tiny nocturnal mammal limited only to Gozo, classed as 'data deficient by the MEPA report).

Here, the same report comes nearer the mark: "the hedgehog and two species of bats are at a favourable conservation status, with four other bat species being at an inadequate status."

As with the threat of urbanisation, human activity is mostly to blame for the worrying decline of these highly important components of Malta's ecosystem.

"One of the greatest threats to the Maghrebian bat (formerly known as the 'mouse-eared bat') was the loss of Ghar il-Friefet in Birzebbugia," Borg explained, referring to the building of a road on top of the cave despite a policy to protect this natural habitat. Among the factors threatening its status is urbanisation - in which MEPA plays a dominant role by issuing development permits (including several controversial ones outside the development zone