

# Alan C Bonnici



## Public access at is-Simblija

**H**ow can you illegally occupy public land or a historical site economically? Stick home-made and ironmongery purchased signs all over the place and paint a few PRIVATE notices on walls and fences leading to the area you want to illegally acquire. If you have property bordering the site, stick an Alsatian at a strategic point. This will normally suffice to keep most punters at bay. If there are a few stubborn ones, confront them and threaten legal action. If anyone attempts to challenge your claim of ownership, get a legal firm to send an intimidating letter.

Likewise, stay on the lookout for people who post photos or videos of the area. Either write to the company that hosts the media to demand its removal or, if that fails or proves too difficult, trace the author of the work and threaten legal action. Normally you can quote Data Protection issues.

For a few hours of PR and a few euros in legal paperwork you now have public property all to yourself. Be sure to lie low and stay put during the phase when thousands of euros of tax payers' money are being poured into the place to upgrade it. Also, say

nothing when the minister pops over with the press to make his inauguration speech right after the upgrade.

I have personally experienced parts of the above. It happened when I visited the scenic and archaeological site of Simblija situated in the limits of Dingli. In 2003, EU as well as public funds were poured into this place to upgrade and preserve it. On 9 February 2003, the restored site was officially inaugurated but less than a year later, it appeared to have been turned into private property and almost 10 years later, it still seems to be privately owned. Others have experienced similar threats and so today, this place sits in a state of under use, unable to meet its potential of serving as a recreational and educational site for both locals and tourists.

How can we expect the general public to be involved in matters related to the environment and our national heritage when such situations are allowed to exist? Why isn't there a policy of quick action zero tolerance in such matters? Why, almost 10 years after the matter was reported, is is-Simblija still littered with threatening and illegal signage that deter people from getting to

the place?

If the government has at heart the environment and the historic sites that dot the Maltese islands, it would invest in a system that would encourage private individuals to log queries such as the one at Simblija in an efficient and cost-free manner. The system would provide feedback on open cases and would, in an expedient manner, provide conclusive answers to queries.

A web-based system similar to MEPA's GIS Map Server could form the basis of this environmental database server. The general public would be able to search it for information on who owns different stretches of land. The country side could be divided into categories such as public land, privately owned land and public land that is leased to third parties. Information about access rights would be included as well.

The launch of such a system could be with an empty database. As queries are raised, these could be serviced and gradually, the database would build up. Once an area is earmarked, subsequent queries will be answered without the need to investigate the matter. If an area previously



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marked as public is no longer accessible, the person making the query would have the ability to raise an alert on the matter.

An individual reporting an abuse needs to be reassured that the abuse is, first and foremost, dealt with. Standard acknowledgments are great but these do not give the recipient any indication on whether his communication was trashed. For the system to work it must be such that queries are processed in a timely manner. For example, the situation in which nothing has been done after 10 years

from when a query about home-made signs telling people to stay away would not be tolerated. The wrong-doer would be expected to right the wrong and pay up for his wrongdoing. Penalties should be such that they discourage others from following suite.

The environment and our national heritage belong to all of us. Without the supporting tools and framework that will give each and every person the act as guardian of what we all claim to treasure safeguarding them is a lost battle.