

On My Mind

01/08/05

A little known - but significant - fact is that only 5 percent of all the water on earth is fresh (as opposed to salt) water - and that three-quarters of it is ice. That gem was in the introduction to a story in the latest issue of the Australian Geographic (the Australian equivalent of the U.S.' National Geographic) on the shortage of water throughout Australia - the world's driest continent. Moreover, there is no more fresh water on earth today than there was 2000 years ago, when the population of the earth was about five percent of today's six-million plus people, the introduction continues. The Australian Geographic can be found on the web at "australiangeographic.com.au."

Perhaps the biggest of Australia's water problems, according to the article, is that 67% of its annual water consumption is for agriculture, irrigating water-thirsty crops like cotton and rice, which have a very low gross value in relation to the amount of water they require - and that the method of irrigation used - flood irrigation - is the most wasteful of all irrigation practices.

Sad to say, the article does not give a sense that the country as a whole is doing anything about it.

There is mention of building more de-salination plants in the state of South Australia, or more dams or improving irrigation technology in New South Wales, or implementation of new water-supply and wastewater strategies in Western Australia. Rainwater catchment is not deemed viable because of associated storage problems, and use of stormwater run-off brings problems of water quality, capture and storage issues, according to the article.

I found it rather interesting that nowhere in the 30 pages of coverage given to the water shortage as there any mention of water loss through leakage in pipes or faucets or illegal taking. Overall, the article brings a new respect for the enormity of the problem of providing sufficient water to the earth's inhabitants.

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Another seemingly little known set of facts is that the CNMI members of the U.S. Army Reserves who are being sent overseas get paid rather well as Reservists. They get their base pay - with all the privileges that brings - but in addition they also receive hazardous duty pay, an allotment for serving in imminent danger zones, and a family separation allowance, not to mention the fact that all of it is tax-exempt.

This makes it unnecessary, to say the least, and profligate, to put it more accurately - profligate meaning recklessly wasteful, wildly extravagant - to propose that the CNMI Reservists ALSO get military leave with pay for a full year, and after that get paid half of their "civilian" salary while they are on active duty - as has been proposed by the legislature. That might all be very patriotic sounding and very supportive of our men in uniform - and of course, a great vote-getting scheme as well. But they are already getting paid a very decent salary, in the first place, and in the second place, given the dire straits of the CNMI's economy at the moment, when it can't pay its bills on time, can't pay overdue tax refunds, continues to go deeper in debt every week, the CNMI simply cannot afford such magnanimity.

Nor is it wise, prudent, or fair to the rest of the community to overpay the Reservists, especially since when they come back to civilian life, it seems likely they will have a hard time re-adjusting to just a normal pay scale. Moreover, the bills proposed so far apply only to Reservists - they leave out entirely the people from the CNMI who have joined the regular military. That, too, would appear discriminatory.

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Another little-known fact: Dr. Jesus B. Camacho, by his own admission, has never set foot in the CNMI.

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I always enjoy tracking down rumors, and two that emerged this week were rather easy to discredit. The first was the rumor that re-cycling on Saipan isn't really working, because the cans, bottles, paper and cardboard really aren't re-cycled. Well, I got it straight from the horse's mouth, as the saying goes: Steve Hiney, Solid Waste Program Manager, assured me that glass bottles are crushed on island and used for aggregate, among other things, and that the other materials - cans, garment remnants, cardboard, etc., - are bundled and shipped off-island to be re-cycled by others.

The other rumor was perhaps more of a concern: that if Chinese tourists are brought to the CNMI in "groups" of 100-200, there'd not be all that many hotels and restaurants that could accommodate such large groups. Well, according to a staffer at Century Tours, they are planning to offer a variety of packages to the tourists, varying in number of days' stay, number of meals purchased in advance, number of days on Tinian vs Saipan and in what order, etc., and that the tourists will be grouped in accordance with the package that they purchase. That, he said, would result in about 30-40 people per group, rather than 100-200.

Of course, that still leaves the smaller restaurants and hotels out of the picture in terms of being able to take advantage of the Chinese tourists expected to be coming in on Approved Destination Status tours. But with planeloads of other tourists arriving regularly, they should be able to survive as well.

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Speaking of tourists, and the onslaught of thousands more expected, it was interesting to hear, at the Chamber of Commerce meeting held earlier this week, that the Chinese love to shop, but much of what is for sale here bears a "made in China" label. An interest in local handicrafts was mentioned, but with local handicrafts being few and far between, now might be an appropriate time to re-establish a Micronesian handicraft shop similar to the one that Luis and Kathy Benavente once operated in what is now the Tribune building on Beach Road. There isn't any reason the CNMI could not enter into an agreement with the other Micronesian entities to market their handicrafts for them in the CNMI.

The CNMI would benefit, in offering something for tourist purchase that is distinctively island, and the other Micronesian entities would benefit in finding a greater market for their products. Whether it should be done between governments, as a state-run store (as some countries do) or privately is up for discussion. It would be good from a tourist perspective to have a single source providing handicrafts that were (a) guaranteed to be genuine and original, and (b) were fairly priced. It is not clear that a private sector endeavor would be able to provide both in a

manner that would be fair and equitable to all concerned. In either case, care should be taken not to put Pohnpei's wonderful craft outlet at Rota's airport out of business.

Also mentioned at that meeting was the curious anomaly of Vicki Benavente, Marianas Visitors Authority Managing Director whom I thought I heard stating that Chinese tourists were found going to Thailand rather than making return trips to the CNMI because it was cheaper there, and Lynn Knight, Hotel Association president, saying that the hotels here needed to raise their prices. You can't have it both ways.....

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Still on the subject of tourist attractions, the new Marianas Paseo looks pretty dead most of the time with nothing in particular to draw tourists. At one time it was proposed to put the Thursday night market there once the Paseo was completed, but that has not happened, and besides, that would occur only one night out of seven. Another idea might be to allow restaurants along that street to put their tables out on the sidewalk, as is done in Europe's sidewalk cafes. In late afternoons and evenings, that should be do-able even in the summer - it usually is cool enough once the sun sets. Awnings or tents could be put up in case it rains. That might also draw people even if they didn't want to eat there - they could come and gawk at those who do. Of course, you might have to hose the place down first, to cool off all that cement that absorbs the heat all day....

Or what about miniature golf? Couldn't wives and children - and it was said families were a prime target of the new ADS campaign - amuse themselves playing miniature golf while the fathers were off playing the real thing? Or what about campaigning to get more family-oriented films here - this week, for example, of the eight films showing, not a single one bears a family-approved rating. Despite the boot-legging of DVDs, Chinese tourists might like to come here to see new American films - or even other foreign films - in a theatre as well.

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Short takes:

Tanapag residents concerned about the after-effects of pcbs might want to consider the health of Ukraine's newly-elected president, Viktor Yushchenko. He was directly and massively poisoned by a dioxin similar to pcb, yet has managed to revive, recuperate, campaign successfully and now take over the reigns of an entire country.

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It's too bad that the CNMI has become so officious and impersonal that it could not find a way to accommodate the wonderful group of Fijian midwives who have served CNMI mothers for twenty years. Faced with a one-time chance to pass the NCLEX, most, if not all, have decided they'd rather leave. One could have arranged to help them study for it, to give them more than a single chance, in return for their goodwill, services, to the CNMI

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On a more cheerful note: the new phone books are out - AND they include not only a full set of tide charts but also a full set of maps showing street names AND route numbers for all of Saipan. Good job!!!!

MLKing day AND all other holidays
Fifi midwives
pcb's & yuvchenko