

On My Mind

5/08/09

Front page stories in both papers today have again raised the controversy over the CNMI's (recently declared) national marine monument, apparently prompted by a letter to the CNMI's Washington Rep from Friends of the Marine Monument urging modification to the declaration. The Friends' letter raised several issues, including the over-all size of the monument, the extent of permissible fishing in the area, and control over submerged lands around the three northern islands. The governor is opposed to any change in the original declaration. (It should be noted, nonetheless, that the Washington Rep does not answer to the governor. He answers to the people who elected him.)

It is not clear what President Bush and his Council on Environmental Quality thought they were accomplishing by establishing the limited, constrained, restrictive marine monument that finally was declared - it certainly is a far cry from the original concept envisioned by the Friends: a significant area of the world's ocean set aside to protect beleaguered marine life in all its forms for the benefit not only of the CNMI but also of the world at large.

Unfortunately, because enactment of an Antiquities Act is the prerogative of the U.S. President, Congress cannot easily amend specific monument declarations by passing a law, though it can amend the Antiquities Act itself. However, it should be borne in mind that the U.S. now has a new president, and that nothing stands in the way of President Obama righting the wrongs that have been inflicted by the previous administration (as he has done in other areas), by enlarging and expanding the monument that has already been declared through his own Antiquities Act declaration.

Given the stifling control of free expression imposed by the governor through his authority to hire and fire at will, and given the invidious presence of the controversial Wespac mafia in the administration, rather than attempting to initiate any changes to the designation at either the congressional or the presidential level, the Friends might want to focus on urging a moratorium on all Monument planning at whatever level until the present CNMI administration leaves office.

Last night, at the Mariana Islands Nature Alliance membership meeting, former Coastal Resource Management staffer Kathy Yuknavage reported on a recent climate change workshop she'd attended. In addition to the established list of predicted woes - changes in typhoon patterns, threats to coral reefs, changes in rain frequency and intensity, and the impact of ocean rises, she'd added a new one to the list: environmental refugees.

"Environmental refugees" is a new term, used to describe people driven from their homes due to drought, flooding, salt damaged crops and sea level rise. It applies primarily to people in the Pacific, whose islands and atolls are already suffering from climate change, from the rise in sea level. As the sea continues to rise, she said, the Pacific will

have a great many such refugees and sooner than previously thought, since the rate of rise is occurring more quickly than originally forecast.

Predictions are that the eastern and western Caroline Islands will be flooded a mere forty years from now and the central Caroline Islands in fifty years. Many will no doubt leave their islands long before. Where will those people go? Who will take them in? What preparations will be required?

MINA plans to explore this "poorly understood Micronesian Challenge" through public forums and discussions with scientists, planners and policy makers - to take a lead role in the issue rather than be caught unprepared. Individuals interested in working on this topic are asked to leave their name at the MINA web site < www.minapacific.org > (click on "contact us.").

Last week's *Saipan Tribune* poll asking readers to rank the CNMI government's compliance with the open government act showed that 73 of 128 people ranked the government as a five, the highest. Of course, that's not very many people, and I'm not sure how well the *Trib* controls how many times a person votes. So it's not clear how much stock to put into the response.

I would argue, however, that the government fails abysmally when it comes to carrying out the spirit of the open government law. For example, the *Commonwealth Register*, in which government's proposed new or amended agency rules and regulations first appear for public comment, is nearly inaccessible to the public. Allegedly, copies are available at the Public Library and the Law Library, but even at that, only if the libraries are open, and the copies can be found. Is there any reason the proposed rules can't be made available on-line, for all to read, download, study?

Despite a supposed moratorium on new government employees, it continues to be reported that government hiring is on-going. However, there has yet to be a listing of how many, what jobs, in what agencies. Is that open government?

Then there are the agendas listed for various agency meetings open to the public. Yes, the meetings are announced in the paper. But who can tell what will be discussed?

A random item: "CDA request." CDA request for what? Another: "Operational Matters" WHAT operational matters? Is there any reason these can't be spelled out, so that interested members of the public could better decide whether to attend?

However, even if notices in the paper were more forthcoming, it would not be enough. Not everyone reads the papers, or reads them in hard copy. Some read them on-line. Unfortunately, the on-line editions do not include paid notices - which hearing and meeting notices all are. To be truly open, government must find additional ways to inform the public of what it is doing, or expects to be doing, or wants public input on.

The government may rate a 50+% compliance with the open government act in people's minds, but so far as the spirit of open government is concerned, particularly in the executive branch, generally speaking much more is concealed than revealed. As far as the legislature is concerned, thanks to Representative Tina Sablan's efforts, there is,

relatively speaking, much more openness.

Short takes:

The Friends of the Arts' performance of "My Fair Lady" this past week-end was impressive, as has come to be expected from the group. The casting, the performance, the orchestra, all deserve commendation. But particular notice should go, in this instance, to the costume designers as well. The range of outfits required was vast, as was the nature of them - from ragamuffin to fancy ball, house maid to queen, tuxedos to Ascot - and all were well-executed, perfectly fitted, stylishly satisfying. Congratulations to all involved!

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Tribune reporter Kristi Eaton has left for broader horizons and bigger challenges. Her careful attention to detail, especially as regards the Public Utilities Corporation activities, will be sorely missed.

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This has been Teacher Appreciation Week. Amid the furor as to "highly qualified teachers" - defined by test scores - comes an article in the *New Yorker* discussing the selection of good teachers vs. good football quarterbacks. According to the article, research shows that the ability to keep students aware and interested - a key factor in student success rates - does not rely on cognitive (book-learned) skills. In investigating whether it helps to have a teacher who has earned a teaching certificate or a masters degree, the author notes that "Both are expensive, time-consuming credentials that almost every district expects teachers to acquire; neither makes a difference in the classroom. Test scores, graduate degrees and certifications - as much as they appear related to teaching prowess - turn out to be about as useful in predicting success as having a quarterback throw footballs into a bunch of garbage cans." Board of Education members considering lowering the Praxis scores should take note. The article, "Annals of Education: Most Likely to Succeed," by Malcolm Gladwell, appeared in the December 15, 2008 issue.

Despite the empty horizon - an uncommon occurrence in recent years - it would appear that the absence of the pre-positioning ships is only temporary. An Ambyth official explained that the ships' schedules called for them to be in the Japan-Korea area, and that one or more will be back in about a week. In the meantime, that empty horizon - though welcome - seems almost spooky!