

On My Mind
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Proponents may argue that all Senate Bill 11-126 does is authorize the Governor to request that Memorial Park be turned over to the CNMI, but it doesn't take either a genius or a fortune-teller to figure out that once the authorization is there, the request is bound to follow. Of course, there's still the possibility - or should one say hope - that the U.S. Department of Interior may refuse the request, but unfortunately, that's not a certainty.

Why, particularly at this point in time, the CNMI would want to take over responsibility for Memorial Park, is beyond understanding. The CNMI doesn't have the resources to adequately support the public school system, much less its retirement system, yet it is claiming, apparently, it has enough funds to assume responsibility for the maintenance and development of American Memorial Park? Where would those funds come from? And if there were funds to spare, why wouldn't they be going to education - the very foundation of the CNMI's future? What is there about control of the Park that could even begin to justify the diversion of what few resources the CNMI has?

There can be little doubt that the Park will deteriorate under local control, for the CNMI simply cannot afford its upkeep at the high level now provided so competently and effectively by the National Park Service. Then there's the issue of further development. At present, the Park Service spends between ¼ to ½ million dollars annually in park development. It's not likely that the CNMI will have the funds to do this either.

Whether the purpose is to get its hands on the interest from the trust, or possibly to try get its hands on the trust fund itself, or whether there is some other self-serving motivation at stake, the CNMI's move to assume control of American Memorial Park - supported, regrettably, by both the legislature and the Governor - is untimely, ill-advised, and self-defeating.

Let's hope saner heads prevail

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The book "The Enchanted Braid: Coming to Terms With Nature on the Coral Reef" is, at the same time both fascinating and the most depressing book I've read in a long time. The author, Osha G. Davidson, describes, for example, the night she spent on Heron Island, a part of Australia's Great Barrier Reef, helping a conservation official locate and tag nesting turtles - how big the turtles are, how many eggs they lay, how unerringly they return every year, how difficult it is to hold some of them still long enough for the tagging process, but how much about the life of turtles still remains a mystery, even to scientists.

No one yet knows where they spend the time "between the time the tiny hatchlings enter the water and when they reappear as large juveniles in a near-shore feeding habitat....The gap [in knowledge] is now believed to encompass up to ten years, not one." One reason for the gap, explains the book: scientists only have 24 years of data on turtles, and turtle life span is

estimated to be more than a hundred years.

Other interesting information: coral reefs, though occupying less than two-tenths of one percent of the world's total ocean area, are home to approximately one-fourth of all marine species, and approximately one-third of all marine fish species in the world. "On a single coral reef surrounding one tiny Australian island," writes the author, "there are one thousand known species of fishes. Zoom in closer: a scientist has counted 620 species of shrimp living on corals. Get even closer; go inside the coral: there, searching through a labyrinth of passageways within a single colony, an investigator found 103 separate species of a single kind of worm."

The importance of the reefs cannot be overstated. To begin with, coral reefs are interrelated. The health of one affects others. Conversely, the death of one can cause the death of others thousands of miles away. Moreover, coral reefs serve as breeding ground and nursery as well as food source to fish, shells, eels, rays, seaweed, and hundreds of other forms of marine life. Humans, in turn, depend on the products of the reef for their food, and as a source of income. Survival of the reefs, in other words, is critical to the survival of mankind.

Yet reefs around the world are suffering. Davidson paints a grim picture of reef deterioration in Jakarta's harbor in Indonesia - it "went from being a coral paradise to what can only be described as an algae-choked sewer in the span of a few decades." Here, the cause is uncontrolled urbanization and the resulting pollution of the bay not only from the heavy metal fall-out from industrial chemicals in the air, but also from raw sewerage dumped into the ocean.

In the Philippines many reefs are also dead, mostly due to the extensive use of explosives, poisons and other destructive methods of harvesting fish.

In the Florida Keys, reefs are suffering because, among other things, man-made changes to water circulation among the mangrove swamps.

Mass coral bleaching is occurring around the world - from Bahrain in the Persian Gulf to the Solomon Islands in the western Pacific - due to the greenhouse effect and global warming.

Davidson argues that there is a difference between disasters, catastrophes and tragedies. Disasters, she writes, "though they are devastating to individuals and often to whole communities...can be beneficial to an ecosystem's health over the long haul." Typhoons, for example, may cause extensive damage to reef structure, but they also prevent dominant species from pushing 'inferior' ones out, and thus help sustain diversity.

Catastrophes are "disasters so formidable that they forever change the face of life on the planet, or at least a section of it...." They are "part of a long-established process, one that has taken place without human involvement" - such as the extinction of dinosaurs.

Tragedy, on the other hand, is a catastrophe caused by humans - the elimination of a species due

to over-hunting, for example, or reef destruction due to sedimentation. A major problem, though, is that often the consequences of human actions are inadvertent and unintentional. As an example not only of such inattention, but also the interdependence of the entire ecosystem, Davidson tells of the killing off of green sea turtles in the Caribbean a hundred or more years ago. Nevertheless the algae - the turtles' main source of food, but smotherer of coral - was kept under control by an increase in algae-eating fish. With extensive over-fishing in the Caribbean in recent times, it fell to the sea urchins - who also eat algae - to keep algae growth under control.

But in the mid-1980's, a bacteria began to attack the sea urchin, and reefs throughout the Caribbean suddenly were suffocated by algae. "The transformation of a biodiverse coral reef into a clump of algae-covered rocks was clearly a catastrophe, but it was also a tragedy," says Davidson - man-made, in other words.

Such tragedies are, on their own, depressing. But even more depressing is the conclusion reached by Davidson that localized conservation attempts - establishing sanctuaries, regulating trawling, prohibiting dynamite fishing - are not enough to save the reefs. The problem, she asserts, is more basic, is, in fact, economic. Until third world countries become economically viable, attempts to prevent or prohibit any one of their inhabitants from giving up fishing for their daily food, from selling exotic fish for income, from harvesting coral so they can feed their families, will not succeed. Until people's economic condition improves, Davidson asserts, there is little hope that the tide of destruction can be stopped.

Where does that leave the CNMI? It can at least take steps to ensure that its own reefs survive. Though its reefs are no longer in pristine condition, the dumping of sewerage is not yet so extensive, the run-off from agricultural and construction work not yet so polluting, the over-fishing not yet so extensive, the destruction of coral not yet so massive, to have destroyed all of the reef. With proper conservation efforts, such as establishment of Congressman Hofschneider's proposed sanctuary, CRM's campaign to install mooring buoys, Division of Fish and Wildlife's concern for maintenance of species diversity - and most important of all, support from the people - the CNMI's reefs could regain their vitality. But without such benevolent intervention, its reefs could easily become the "algae-covered rocks" Davidson found in the Caribbean.

The book is published by John Wiley & Sons, and has a 1998 copyright.

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Grammar lesson for the day: Use of "avail" usually requires the reflexive, as in "to avail <I>one's self</I> of. Common usage dictates that a person does not "avail" of help, he or she avails <I>himself</I> or <I>herself</I> of help.

