

On My Mind

3/24/00

I've never been sure whether that old saying about trees and the forest is about not seeing the forest for the trees, or about not seeing the trees for the forest. As I've interpreted it, if one doesn't see the forest for the trees, one is too busy with detail to see the larger picture. And if one doesn't see the trees for the forest, one is too lost in the abstract to see reality. So, it seems to me that the saying can work either way - depending on what one is trying to say.

At the moment, there seem to be more examples of not seeing the forest for the trees, rather than the other way around. Take House Bill 12-098, which proposes that hotels be given exclusive rights to the beach front that sits between them and the lagoon through leases of public land issued by the Board of Public Lands.

The purpose statement of the bill declares that because tourism is a major revenue generating industry, cleanliness of beachfronts is mandatory, and since "local beachcombers" (a euphemism if I ever heard one) don't keep it clean, it's up to the hotels to do so. That can be ensured, according to the bill, by giving the hotels exclusive rights to the beach. (There are, come to think of it, a few non sequiturs in there too.)

It's not at all certain, however, that exclusive right to the beach automatically ensures clean beaches. To begin with, a certain amount of beach debris washes up from the lagoon, and does not come from "beachcombers" at all. In addition, just because a hotel has exclusive beach rights doesn't make it axiomatic that the hotel will keep the beach clean. What's more, there isn't anything stopping the hotels from keeping the beachfront nearest them clean now. Unless the hotels plan to put up barricades in an effort to keep "local beachcombers" off their beaches?

The goal - the forest, if you will - is a beach that is clean and attractive to tourists AND local users alike. Jumping to the conclusion that the problem of dirty, littered beaches is caused by "local beachcombers" who must therefore be barred from the beach is to look only at the trees, only at one set of details. There are other ways to achieve the goal.

Moreover, the bill would appear to be unconstitutional, since the CNMI Constitution prohibits the Division of Public Lands from transferring [to anyone] an interest in public lands that lie within one hundred and fifty feet of the high water mark.

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Another example of not seeing the forest for the trees has to do with the current direction of efforts regarding Tanapag's PCB clean-up. There is on-going dialogue and discussion among a handful of parties about where and how to take how many soil samples, what else to take samples of and how many, to what degree to test the samples, whose responsibilities the various tasks will be, how the tasks will be done, etc., etc., etc.

There is similar on-going dialogue and discussion among a handful of parties about the health

survey: what questions will be asked, of whom, by whom, what areas to include in the survey, and again, who will do the testing, what will be tested for, who will be responsible for which tasks, etc., etc., etc.

Those are all trees - details. The forest - the goal, if you will - is to make the village safe, and to see to the people's health problems. The first priority in making the village safe, it seems to me, is to clean up the cemetery - to remove the hazardous waste that is already known to be there that everyone knows is contaminated way beyond the level of safety.

There is, moreover, an imminent deadline related to the importance of cleaning up the cemetery: the upcoming All Soul's and All Saint's Day observances the first week of November. People will be working in the cemetery to clean up and decorate the grave sites. Prohibiting access by declaration - or even by the erection of plastic (!) fencing - has not worked to keep the villagers from continuing to bury deceased family members there, from continuing to care for the graves of their relatives.

What is needed is to define priorities - to step back from the details and re-examine the over-all goal, to ask: what tasks, in what order, will best accomplish the goals? Making the arrangements for determining how much of what kind of contaminant, hazardous waste, still remains in the village turns out to be a long, tedious, complicated task. And while removal of the remaining contaminated soil - once it has been located - will help to make the village safe, that soil doesn't pose nearly the threat to the health of the villagers that the known contaminated soil in and around the cemetery does.

To remove that soil - the highly hazardous waste in and around the cemetery - isn't nearly as complicated a task as finding and measuring the remaining contaminated soil in the village. It has been agreed that the responsible party is the U.S. Department of Defense. And as the "executive" arm of the U.S. DoD, that makes removal of the contaminated soil in the cemetery the direct responsibility of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Responsibility for the second priority - to see to the people's health problems - while also arguably that of the Department of Defense, does not, however, involve the U.S Army Corps of Engineers. One cannot argue, therefore, that it would spread the resources of the ACE too thin to expect it to clean the cemetery and survey and then treat the people at the same time.

There is, moreover, a compelling reason for cleaning out the cemetery as quickly as possible - certainly by the first of November - and that is the extent to which the villagers participate in the observance of All Saint's and All Soul's Day.

The Army Corps of Engineers has been notoriously slow, lethargic, uncooperative, in dealing with the PCB contamination in Tanapag. To get the Corps to move by the November deadline will not be easy. But perhaps, with the help of Green Peace, which can bring external pressures to bear, there is still hope.

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Yet another example of not seeing the forest for the trees can be found in the tangled mess of politics, litigiousness, legislative interference, commercial lobbying and executive inertia surrounding the construction of the CNMI's next power plant. The goal - the forest - is to provide sufficient power at an affordable price to the people of Saipan for the next several years. The trees are all those claims and counter-claims from contending bidders and their supporters, not to mention the micro-management of the Legislature and its hidden interests.

But more on this at a later date.

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Question: with examples of not seeing the forest for the trees so easy to find, does that mean that's the way the saying was intended to go?