

On My Mind

7/28/00

GreenPeace is on island. Its flagship, the Rainbow Warrior II, is expected to arrive on Wednesday. They are coming to help the villagers of Tanapag make sure that this time the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers does it right - removes PCB-contaminated soil from the cemetery and other high traffic spots in the village and then de-toxifies it. The contaminated soil comes from capacitors that were dumped on Saipan by the Army in the '60's, but were not found to contain hazardous PCB's until the late '80's. A half-hearted attempt to clean up the contamination took place in the early '90's, but was never completed.

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Serendipitously, the latest issue of "Rachel's Environment and Health Weekly," a newsletter given to me as Christmas present by my brother, also arrived this week. The entire issue is devoted to a discussion of U.S. efforts to weaken, if not de-rail altogether, an international treaty being drawn up to phase out and eventually eliminate what are called Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), of which PCB is one. The treaty is scheduled to be signed in May of 2001.

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According to the newsletter, the U.S. as well as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea, in order to protect polluting industries within their own countries, are insisting on loopholes and exemptions that seriously weaken the proposed treaty. European countries are urging an approach that would prevent POPs from being formed in the first place, while the U.S. and its allies are arguing that POPs can be controlled by what are called "end-of-pipe" controls - incinerating the POPs at the end of their useful life. The U.S. approach means that the polluting industries would not have to make any changes in the materials or the processes that create POPs, nor in their application.

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But incineration is a high-tech, capital-intensive approach that developing countries cannot afford. Unless the production of POPs is halted, they will persist in the environment, because only the developed countries will be able to afford to destroy them. POPs are chemicals which persist and bioaccumulate, posing serious threat to human health and the environment.

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GreenPeace is defined in my *Concise Columbia Encyclopedia*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, as an international environmental organization that seeks to promote environmental awareness and end environmental abuse through nonviolent confrontations with government and companies. The organization is further defined as "often using media exposure to draw attention to its causes." GreenPeace is, of course, following the progress of the POPs treaty very closely.

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That is why GreenPeace is on Saipan. And that is why the arrival of the newsletter was so serendipitous (the accidental coming together of, in this case, action and information).

GreenPeace is here to help the people of Tanapag. But it is also here to make its case for strengthening the POPs treaty, and to call attention to the uncooperative role of the U.S. Which, in turn, gives the people of Tanapag an opportunity to help GreenPeace make its point: that developed countries have an obligation to help developing countries protect the environment and eliminate POPs.

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Short takes:

- Most bills that are introduced in the CNMI legislature are never enacted into law - and that is probably just as well, since many of them are self-serving, or poorly thought-out, or both. One that is neither, and deserves, in my opinion, to become law is House Bill 12-178, introduced last month by Rosiky F. Camacho.

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His bill proposes that all private water wells be metered, and the water that is pumped from them - once the cost of digging and installing the well is recovered - be paid for by the well owner.

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The water being pumped from the aquifer, he rightfully argues, is not the private property of the well owner, but belongs to the entire island. If the well is over-pumped, that deprives everyone else of water. It creates permanent damage to a limited natural resource. And in the meantime, the well owner is getting water free, while everyone else pays for it.

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Well owners are naturally opposed to the proposal. But what they want is private control over public property they have not paid for, and the right to destroy, in fact, that public property.

Rosiky's bill is one of the select few that should become law..

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- It does not seem right that one of the newest villages on island is scheduled to get not only a state of the art school and campus, but also a recreation center that will benefit the entire village, when one of the oldest villages on island has little more than a basketball court in the way of recreational facilities for its youth and its residents.

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Kagman, according to media reports, is due to get a basketball court, a volleyball court, possibly a baseball field and playground equipment for small grade schoolers, and even trees and plants to create a park-type setting for picnics and outdoor gatherings while watching ball games.

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I don't begrudge Kagman the facility - the CNMI's new villages need such infrastructure to help them develop a sense of community. But as the Board of Education's vice-chair has commented, according to newspaper reports, "this venture is PSS' way of curbing crimes and delinquencies in the community especially among youths."

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Tanapag has the same needs. Will PSS provide the same facility to its residents?

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- It hasn't seemed worthwhile to carp about the long-standing and exclusive arrangement to provide continuously changing greenery for Beach Road's road dividers that then Marianas Visitor's Bureau has given to its former director. After all, a done deal is a done deal - and that one seems pretty tightly sewed up.

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But now whole new turf has been opened up as candidate for the highly remunerative practice of continuously changing greenery: those wide road dividers on the new four-lane road into Marpi. And there's no doubt that as it now stands, that, too, will be given to MVB's former director.

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But this time, maybe there's a chance to do something about it. It's already too late, I suppose, to take the road dividers out. They serve no purpose except to narrow the road, and to take away the possibility of providing a turning lane. The space they consume could have been used to provide sidewalks, if nothing else.

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But given that they are there, how about, this time, doing something different? First of all, how about open bidding for their care and maintenance? Or how about offering it to NMC's agricultural division, or the soil and water conservation district to use for demonstration purposes?

How about, for example, using them to demonstrate hardy local plants that require a minimum of care and still manage to look attractive? How about finding a pleasing variety of plants - flowering and otherwise - that don't need replacing?

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How about, in short, the visitor's bureau - which, after all, is a government agency - seeing to it that more than one nursery win government contracts?

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I don't know what I was thinking about when I wrote in my last column that surely U.S. Congressmen know the difference between propaganda and factual information. Of course they do, but what I failed to consider is the extent to which knowledge of the facts guides their vote, should another lobbyist arrive with something more tempting.

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Can the CNMI really afford to give out large enough favors to offset other favor-laden lobbyists?

Or should the CNMI, as the <I>Variety</I> suggests, let those affected - i.e., garment industry interests - do their own lobbying?