

On My Mind

2/2/01

It's not clear whom to hold responsible, but whoever it is deserves a lot more criticism than Ann Lander's proverbial "wet noodle." The CNMI is about to lose not only two of its more talented, dedicated, knowledgeable, capable, supportive and wonderfully warm and friendly residents next month, but also a major force behind the success of the NMI Museum - all because someone, somewhere, didn't know or care enough to make sure promises made to them were carried out.

The two are Robert and Gigi York, Collections Curator and "volunteer" exhibits curator, respectively, of the Northern Mariana Islands Museum of History and Culture. They will be leaving island in March, frustrated that a promised contract for Gigi's services never materialized, frustrated that the budget for the Museum is so inadequate, frustrated at the seemingly total lack of legislative interest and support.

Both qualified archaeologists, the Yorks have worked tirelessly, donating many hours of their own time, to catalog the Museum's holdings, to protect and preserve the items in its collection, to arrange its displays and prepare interpretive material, to train staff and community members as guides and docents, to arrange for the loan of related items, to work with other agencies and community members in verifying and interpreting the Museum's holdings, and to share information about the Museum with peers and colleagues around the world.

Gigi, is as well, a talented artist in her own right, having displayed her paintings and sketches at a number of art shows at the Commonwealth Council for Arts and Culture gallery.

With their departure goes the last museum professional on the staff. The present exhibit on Japanese times will remain in place until a long-scheduled visit by a Japanese tour occurs in July.

But after that? The present exhibit, already in place since last September, may well become the one and only exhibit at the Museum for the foreseeable future.

And that would, indeed, be a pity. The NMI Museum of History and Culture houses a wealth of exhibit material. It is a significant resource for students, researchers, historians, scholars, archaeologists and artists not only from within the CNMI, but from around the world. With its range of artifacts ranging from the pre-historic and Spanish times through World War II, its rare photographs, its Concepcion treasures, and its unique art works, the Museum has the potential for becoming a major tourist attraction - the only impediment being a complete and total incomprehensible lack of promotion by the Marianas Visitors Authority. Nor has the museum been able to do promotion on its own, due to an operations budget so meager it cannot even afford to repair its leaking roof.

It has taken years of effort to establish the Museum. It would be a shame to see it close its door so soon after having finally opened them. It is, it appears, too late to retain the Yorks. Will those responsible allow the Museum itself to close down as well?

<center>* * *</center>

Going from the sublime to not quite the ridiculous, but certainly to the opposite end of the scale, someone I know has suggested that instead of attempting to abolish prostitution, it be legalized, so it can be properly controlled. After all, it's known as the oldest profession in the world, and surely the CNMI isn't so presumptuous as to believe it can succeed in abolishing the practice where no one else ever has before.

This person suggested that Marpi's "Cow Town" area be designated as a "red" zone, the only area on Saipan where prostitution would be allowed. Prostitutes would be registered, and be required to undergo regular, periodic health examinations. This would not only reduce the incidence of sexually-transmitted diseases, but would also ensure that the immigration and labor status of the prostitutes was legal.

By isolating the area where prostitution would be permitted, other tourist areas on Saipan would be left free to cater to those tourists seeking only a safe place for themselves, for their families. Tourists in those areas would no longer have to deal with "ladies of the night" trying to seduce customers off the street, with girlie bars, or with any of the other disruptions and distractions of the trade.

And the businesses could be taxed, as is any other business, providing a legal source of income from a trade that is now operating tax-free.

It may not be the ideal solution to prostitution, but it is realistic - practical, do-able, legitimate. Worth thinking about, I'd say.

<center>* * *</center>

Also worth thinking about - before being dismissed out of hand as 'government theft' as some would have it - is the fee being proposed for scuba divers. Scuba divers - be they tourists or locals, be they fishermen or merely underwater sight-seers - do affect, have an impact on, their underwater surroundings. Unless the divers are highly skilled - and few are - they will damage the corals as they land on them, kick silt on them, grab hold of them for support, break them off intentionally or unintentionally. And scuba fishermen - regardless of whether they limit themselves to legal takes, or take under-sized fish, or fish out of season - deplete the stock of fish in the sea.

Those responsible for such damage should not be allowed unconditional rights to do so. A dive into the waters surrounding Saipan is not a right, it is a privilege, and it is only logical that people should pay for that privilege, particularly since their dives usually result in adverse impacts on the dive site - not only from the divers themselves, but also from the anchors dropped by the dive boats.

But rather than imposing a requirement for a license - which entails establishment of a whole new layer of bureaucracy - for rules and regulations, for schedules and late fees, for license

inspectors and issuers as well as the licenses themselves - and the burden of standing in line to process the license, a "head tax" might be far easier to administer. If every scuba diver were required to pay a fee every time he or she dived, it would serve to make them more aware of the privilege they were exercising. It would also garner a far larger income than the \$10/year being proposed for each dive shop under House Bill 12-65.

And if funds collected were to be targeted toward acquiring and maintaining an on-island decompression tank, most scuba divers would have very little objection toward supporting that goal. Additional funds collected would then be used to restore habitats, conduct research, and the like, as proposed in the bill.

The head tax could be graduated: different rates for local pleasure divers, for subsistence fishermen, for tourists and for commercial divers. Probably the easiest way to collect the tax would be on a "per tank-fill" basis rather than on shore, or through a tour agency.

In fact, snuba "divers" as well as scuba divers should be held accountable for the damage to our ocean environment.

<center>* * *</center>

The incongruity between the Rota mayor's concern for promoting his island as an environment-friendly, paradisaical, eco-tourism destination, and his support for the establishment of shooting galleries on his island is fascinating, to say the least.

The two target groups to which the two conflicting "attractions" appeal are mutually exclusive. One cannot have it both ways. And with the publication of the recent tourism survey, which clearly and unequivocally stated that safety is a priority concern for Japanese tourists - the CNMI's largest customer-base - it should be obvious that to attract tourists a place must give every indication of being safe.

As has been said before in this space, the concern is not for the formal security precautions that are being promised for shooting ranges; the concern is for the uncontrollable and inevitable illegal access to weapons that the mere presence of those weapons on island will facilitate and promote.

The coconut wireless has it that the mayor's interests in this issue are tainted by personal considerations. But a mayor should be mayor - and concerned for the welfare of - all the people.....

<center>* * *</center>

How nice that the presence of those pre-positioning ships out there has finally been made legal! Their original permit provided that they anchor off Tinian. Let's hope that the MOA permitting them to sit off Saipan instead also contains provision for protecting the coral from their anchors. than Ann Lander's proverbial "wet noodle."

