

On My Mind
3/16/01

I misspoke in last week's column. I wrote that <I>Tribune</I> columnist Charles P. Reyes, after being openly critical in the past, had "changed his tune" and "remained mum" when it came to the nomination of David Wiseman as trial court judge. Reyes was quick to protest, saying that "Failing to comment is not tantamount to changing one's tune." He is right, and I apologize.

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Government agencies regularly complain that few people attend public hearings, respond to requests for comments, provide input to agency programs. But trying to be a public-minded citizen isn't all that easy. The CNMI Coastal Resource Management Office (CRMO), for example, recently issued a request for public comment on its activities. Sounds simple, but it's not. In this case, only comments on "Section 309 Enhancement Grant" projects funded by the federal Office of Ocean and Coastal Resources Management are wanted.

If that's not enough to discourage the public-minded citizen (PMC), he or she must then find out just what a Section 309 Enhancement Grant is, what it covers. This information is available only from the CRMO (or those formidable federal regulations), to which one must go in person - it can't be faxed or e-mailed. Theoretically one also ought to find out what proportion of the CRMO's total activities is funded by Section 309 grants, just to put things into perspective. However, all that CRMO provides to PMCs is a 43-page report, issued in January of 1997, that describes what CRMO proposed to do with its Section 309 grant in 1997.

No help or other documentation of any kind is provided to help the potential PMC understand just how to use that document, or how to approach making suggestions about activities CRMO should undertake for the next grant cycle. Of course, that is par for the course, especially when it comes to dealing with federally-funded programs.

The Section 309 grant covers nine areas: Aquaculture, Coastal Hazards, Cumulative and Secondary Impacts, Energy and Government Facility Siting and Activities, Marine Debris, Public Access, Ocean Resources, Special Area Management Planning, and Wetlands. Already a mind-numbing too-long string of jargony words, and what's worse, made up of unequal parts. Coastal Hazards, Marine Debris, Wetlands, Ocean Resources, are tangible objects. Aquaculture is a discipline. The other four are a mixed bag, impossible to categorize.

While some of the areas are fairly self-explanatory, others are not. The report does not provide any definition or explanation of exactly what those nine areas encompass. Instead, one is provided with a varying number of "Programmatic Objectives" under each of the nine topics. Where do the "programmatic objectives" come from? It doesn't say. It takes several phone calls to learn that the programmatic objectives come from the feds, which, again, is not all that surprising, given that no one else goes around talking about "programmatic objectives."

One purpose of the exercise is to examine and re-assign, if appropriate, the priority rankings pre-

viously given to the nine areas. Which is a little difficult, given the motley nature of the list, and only a limited sense of each area's scope. The report does at least provide a small clue as to what has been done before. With a little digging, both the initial priorities and those for the second round of funding can be found. There is some discussion of why the areas were ranked as they were the first time, and what went into the decision to change the ranking for the second round, but it is buried in dense language and scattered throughout the document's 43 pages. There is no discussion of whether the rankings should be changed for this third time, and if so, why.

Plodding right along..... this PMC decided to give up trying to configure her comments to the awkward, arbitrary and asymmetric framework established by the feds (one has to feel sorry for CRMO, which is under far heavier constraints to conform). Instead, she will simply describe some of the problems that, in her opinion, need addressing, and offer some suggestions for action, leaving it up to the agency - and its contractor - to translate them into the language of the grant.

Members of the general public who might be interested in commenting on CRMO activities for the coming year are encouraged to do the same. The deadline for comments is March 30, 2001. CRMO's address is P.O. Box 10007, Saipan, MP 96950; its e-mail address is crm.dmauro@sai-pan.com.

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One of the most significant areas that I think CRMO should concern itself with is the Northern Islands. There has been growing pressure to develop those islands just as if they were a new homestead development or designated tourist area - as well as increasing interest in harvesting what few resources they have, such as basalt and ash. No attempt has been made to view those islands as part of a larger picture, as perhaps having a different role to play in the over-all economic and ecological well-being of the CNMI as a whole.

While feral animals have had a devastating effect on the natural environment of several of the islands, nonetheless, in their undeveloped state they offer an ideal setting for the promotion of genuine eco-tourism - where nature is observed and enjoyed without disruption of the ecology, without the intrusion of extensive infrastructure.

Regardless of what is developed in the Northern Islands, it will be an expensive proposition, with the need for construction of landing strips and harbor facilities just to be able to bring in materials and equipment for whatever gets built there, in addition to the added costs that distance and a small market base incur.

Nevertheless, there could be mountain walking trails, bird observation platforms, volcano watching, sports fishing, scuba diving - all done, for example, from off-shore cruise ships to minimize the need for large on-island development.

Of course, means would have to be found to control the damage feral animals have already done,

and continue to do: the population must be curtailed, the animals must be contained, some re-seeding may well be required to halt erosion and sedimentation of the surrounding waters.

One or more of the Northern Islands could serve as resource havens for endangered species such as the fruit bat, threatened bird populations and the like, through the creation, maintenance and enforcement of wildlife preserves.

Should one of the islands be used as a penal colony? Or should it house a “boot-camp” type operation, similar to what Guy Gabaldon envisioned for adolescents in need of help and discipline?

Attention to the Northern Islands merits a high priority because a comprehensive management plan for the Northern Islands is long overdue; every year that passes without one increases the natural damage to the islands and the waters around them, increases the risk of man-made abuse and misuse, increases the cost of eventual restoration.

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Another problem CRMO is in the best position to address is the absence of any educational effort toward developing indigenous expertise in marine matters. One would think that people who live on islands would want to know, understand, and be able to benefit from their surroundings. Yet no educational institution in the CNMI offers a career path towards any aspect of marine science, be it biology, geology, policy, law, or oceanography, to name just a few. Rather than tout merely “fishing” or aquaculture as occupations appropriate to an ocean island setting, it’s time to encourage and support more professional options. Wiser practices, policies, toward protecting the environment and sustaining a healthy ecological balance are bound to follow the acquisition of such expertise.

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A worsening problem is the degradation of the lagoon. The dump continues to leach contaminants; motorized water-craft - large and small - continue to leak fuel oils and sewage and to endanger coral; construction and agricultural run-off continue to smother coral; illegal fishing practices continue to deplete marine life; sewage outfall continues to pollute the water. Even spear-fishing on SCUBA inflicts harm on the marine life.

The lagoon is one of Saipan’s biggest assets, but due to neglect and ignorance it is no longer the pristine jewel it once was. Education, changes in practice and in policy, are needed to protect its marine life, to restore its appeal, its vitality and beauty, its sustainability.

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It is, of course, far easier to describe problems than to find solutions. Once again, the PMC is at a distinct disadvantage. To identify the various mechanisms agencies have at their disposal for resolving such issues presents a challenge few PMCs can meet - most (and I count myself among

them) don't have the time, the patience, the knowledge, the creativity, to do so. Maybe the lesson here is that if the request for public input is genuine - and not just pro forma - it is essential that agencies simplify the process for doing so.

But when all is said and done, I am compelled to state that despite CRMO's user-unfriendly solicitation for public comment - for which I realize the feds are at least partly to blame - I cannot fault the achievements the professional, knowledgeable, hardworking people at CRMO have been able to accomplish with the limited resources available to them.