

On My Mind

3/01/01

With all due respect to House Speaker Heinz S. Hofschneider, I cannot help but disagree with his suggestion that the way to boost tourism in the CNMI is to double the Marianas Visitors Authority's budget. According to an article in the 2/26 issue of the <I>Variety</I>, he also believes that the MVA should not be burdened with the responsibility for maintaining tourist sites - and again, I cannot help but disagree.

It is well known that those who have a stake in a project care more about its outcome. MVA can be expected to be more conscientious about doing a good job in maintaining tourist sites, because tourism is its business. To anyone else, maintaining tourist sites is just a job - whether it's done well or not is of little or no concern. Nor does it save any money to transfer the responsibility elsewhere - the work still has to be done. Might as well leave it to those with the better motive to see that the job be done well.

The problem with simply doubling MVA's budget - which it would then use to solicit more travelers from Japan and elsewhere - is that this does not solve the CNMI's basic problem. Surveys funded by the MVA itself have revealed that tourists spend only a few days here because there is not enough to do to warrant staying longer. Once the tourist suns on the beach, spends a day shopping and another touring the island, then what?

The assumption appears to be that this cannot be changed, and that the answer lies in bringing in more tourists to do the same. But what if that extra \$6 million the Speaker wants to give to the MVA were given - a million dollars each - to the CNMI Museum, the Historic Preservation Office, the Commonwealth Council for Arts & Culture, the Council for the Humanities, the Division of Parks and Grounds, the CNMI Sports Association, to develop additional tourist activities?

What if the Museum had enough funds to change its shows every quarter, instead of only every six months or so? What if the Museum had more space to display the many artifacts now hidden away? More funds to advertise its displays and holdings to the tourists? And vehicles to bring tourists to the Museum? What if the HPO had enough funds to develop the latte sites and other traces of older settlements in the CNMI? To provide for guided tours and explanatory brochures? What if the CCAC had the funds to mount larger, more frequent shows, and the funds to advertise them to the tourists? The funds to purchase or hire vehicles to bring tourists to the Flame Tree festival, to its art shows? What if the Council for the Humanities had more funds to mount cultural events open to tourists - and the means to bring them there? What if PSS had the facilities to welcome tourists to the cultural day festivities at each of its schools? What if the Division of Parks and Grounds could afford to develop more nature trails for the tourism sector? or to build a roller- skating rink?

The broader range of activities would appeal to a whole new range of tourists - not only the sun-bather and shopper, but also the naturalist, the historian, the anthropologist, the musician, the artist. The increase in the number of activities would also encourage tourists to stay longer.

With fewer tourists staying longer, rather than more staying only briefly, the impact on the CNMI's natural environment would be less damaging. Scuba diving at the grotto would be reduced by half, easing the pressure on corals, fish population. Sheets would not have to be changed as often at the hotels, easing demands on the water supply, the sewer system, power - and staff. Air quality would improve with fewer busses spouting diesel fumes on their way to and from the airport, and more smaller vans carrying tourists to local events.

Providing more funds to send MVA members on repeated trips to other countries to try sell the CNMI to tourists, when the product they are selling is so desperately in need of improvement, just doesn't seem very cost-effective to me.

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One "selling point" that the CNMI has that Guam does not is birds. Guam's bird population has been largely wiped out by the brown tree snake. So far, the snake has not established a foothold in the CNMI, and while it does not have the variety of shore birds that many islands do, the CNMI does have any number of colorful land birds. Among my favorites are the bright-red little honey-eaters, which often sat and preened themselves in the tree branches outside my window.

A zealous neighbor, who is transforming his house across the street into a dive shop, recently cleared the strip of land bordering his lot. Tangentangen, vines, weeds, even drooping branches of pine and coconut were all cut down. It certainly opened a vista of the nearby ocean, but it also destroyed the home of countless birds, among other things. I don't mourn for the rats, mice or shrews that might have made their home there, but I do mourn for the red honey-eaters who no longer come perch by my window.

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Isn't there a saying about 'if you don't know where you're going you won't know when you get there'? The talk of bringing in 100,000 more tourists this year, the three initiatives that have been introduced to extend public land leases, the intent to revive the zoning law, the many attempts to lower the cost of development for foreign investors - all have but one purpose: to re-heat the CNMI economy.

But no one seems to have an answer as to how hot it should get, how to know when it gets there, and how to know what to do when it does. No limits have been defined to the maximum number of tourists, hotel rooms, foreign workers, golf courses, grocery stores, restaurants, these islands can sustain and still maintain a satisfactory quality of life. No limits have been defined to the number of hectares of land clearing, habitat destruction, and wildlife displacement these islands can sustain and still offer an island experience.

In other words, no limits to growth have been developed, and without them, the CNMI runs the risk of becoming as barren as Nauru. Those limits should be defined now, while it's still possible to be rational about where to set them. When and if the economy does restart, it will be too late - there will be too much self-interest to allow good judgement to govern.

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Speaking of limits, whatever happened to the austerity program announced by the governor several weeks ago? There should be austerity everywhere but in the governor's office? For everyone but the governor's staff? If there is a budget shortfall, as everyone says there is, shouldn't there be limits to expenditures - including salaries?

At the rate that excessive salary increases are being bestowed, the temptation arises to launch formal protest out of a concern that by the end of the fiscal year, shortages are bound to occur, and there may well not be enough left to maintain medical, police, even teacher payrolls. To wait until then is too late - steps to prevent such shortages need be taken now.

It seems odd indeed that while the private sector continues to insist that imposition of the U.S. minimum wage would be disastrous to the economy, the government seems bent on providing U.S. mainland-level salaries for all its executive positions. The minimum wage is too high for the private sector, but the maximum wage isn't too high for the government sector?

Doesn't anyone up there remember, understand, that the net take-home pay of any given mainland salary will already show a substantial increase in the CNMI simply because of the CNMI tax-rebate system? Moreover, the argument that high salary levels are needed to attract skilled professionals to the CNMI - or even to retain its own professionals - and must therefore be competitive with mainland salary levels fails for the same reason. The CNMI's tax-rebate system makes a sufficiently large difference in take-home pay to make U.S. salary levels irrelevant in the CNMI.

Seems like somebody on the hill needs to do a reality check.