

On My Mind
12/12/03

A story in the other paper last week told of a survey of Korean tourists that showed that the tourists were very satisfied with their tour agents and companies, but not so happy with numerous other aspects of their visit to the CNMI. Their complaints about the cleanliness of the streets and the quality of the shopping do not come as a surprise, but their complaints about the variety and quality of night-time show do.

Not that I am a connoisseur of night-time "tours" on island, but with the great number of girlie shows available, I would not have expected anyone to complain. (Admittedly, I am equating "night-time tours" - as used in the newspaper article - with girlie shows....) It's interesting to speculate whether the problem is that the tourists were misled by false advertising before they got here, whether their tour guides didn't know where the good shows were, or whether none of CNMI's girlie shows are all that good to begin with.

It's also interesting to speculate what the outcome would have been if a similar survey - asking the same questions - were taken of Japanese tourists. If there's been one, I'm not aware that the results were ever published.

Also interesting was the finding reported in the article that the Korean tourists were "greater than 50%" satisfied with cleanliness of the beaches, safety of the CNMI, and ease of getting around the islands. I wonder what the response would have been if the survey were given to local residents. For that matter, "greater than 50%," not further defined, means only a little over half of the tourists were satisfied with those conditions.

Pretty low grades all around, seems to me.

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There's a second-hand report (no accident was reported in the papers) that a serious accident occurred along Middle Road earlier this week at a crossing where the lights were not functioning due to an announced power outage. Whether or not the report is true, non-functioning traffic lights are a major hazard. The old guideline that at a cross-roads, one is supposed to yield to the car to one's right (or is it left?) doesn't work very well when (a) no one knows the rule to begin with and (b) there are a dozen or more cars backed up in both directions. Simply waiting for a break in traffic doesn't work all that well either, especially during periods of heavy traffic - mornings, later afternoon, and during lunch time.

Particularly when the power outage is known about in advance, it doesn't seem unreasonable to expect that some level of traffic control would be provided at non-functioning traffic lights. It need not necessarily tie up a full-time police officer. There is already a need for a cadre of traffic controllers on island - at school crossings, at school bus stops, at garment factories during lunch and shift-end times. And there must be people who'd be willing to work part time, or on a split schedule, as traffic controllers.

With money apparently flowing rather freely from the Governor's office to establish various groups and grants, it should be possible to establish an auxiliary police group of some sort (in fact, at one time there was one - of students, as I recall - that helped direct traffic at large social functions such as weddings, novenas and rosaries) that would provide training, safety attire (belts, vests, or such), and pay for street-crossing traffic controllers.

Or maybe it could be worked into ROTC, or Army Reserve, or police cadet training.... As the saying goes, an ounce of prevention (of the problem) is worth a pound of cure (after the fact).

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Speaking of cures, it's nice to see that the Retirement Fund reform bill has now finally become law. The pity is that the reforms don't go into effect until 2006. That leaves another two years for the Retirement Fund to bleed before the holes are plugged. Granted that some interval of transition must be provided, was it really necessary to make it two years instead of one?

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I don't think anyone involved in the Sugar Dock protests objects to the idea of a ferry - even one large enough to accommodate cars - operating between Tinian and Saipan. After all, if the Tinian Dynasty ferries quit - and from all reports, the Dynast would just as soon cease having to run its high-cost passenger ferries - the proposed new one would be the only commercial means of getting to Tinian, other than by air.

The objection is to the site chosen for the ferry landing. While dredging would no doubt have to be done at all except Charlie Dock of the sites mentioned as alternatives in the Environmental Impact Assessment, use of none of the other sites would be nearly as disruptive of existing activity on and use of a beachfront area by local families and other island residents as would use of Charlie Dock.

Proponents claim that only use of Sugar Dock makes the ferry economically feasible. But there's been no data to support that argument. And surely, if the Tinian Dynasty ceases to operate its own ferries, the possibility is there that it might be willing to share some of the cost of bringing its customers across the channel via someone else's ferry.

The argument that traditional practices must give way to progress is, in this case, totally unacceptable.

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A new and different idea - at least for the CNMI - emerged from the hearing this past Wednesday evening on CRMO's plans for keeping cars from driving on Wing Beach - which is, according to Richard Semen, head of the Division of Fish and Wildlife, the last known beach where turtles still regularly come to lay eggs. Driving a car on the beach destroys turtle nesting sites and the eggs laid there, as well as being a major cause of erosion, which in turn destroys coral and fish habitat in the lagoon.

Archaeologist Randy Harper, an attendee at the meeting, suggested that the CNMI need not necessarily treat all beaches equally by providing paved parking lots, wheel-chair ramps, and permanent toilet facilities at every one of them. Why couldn't some, like Wing Beach, be left in a more primitive state, he asked. Not only would that, in this instance, protect the turtles, but it would also help reduce erosion in general, as well as giving beach-goers a variety of experiences since access to beaches would not all be equally unchallenging, equally populated, he said.

It is a suggestion that the Department of Lands and Natural Resources would do well to take to heart. The idea of improving access to the Grotto dive site, to smaller beaches such as Old Man by the Sea and Hidden Beach should be re-examined in light of Harper's suggestion. The Grotto, for example, seems to be an increasingly degraded site, what with its overload of daily scuba divers. Not only have all the fans disappeared from the cave walls outside the grotto, but trash has begun accumulating on the inside floor. More tourist traffic will only make it worse. Like Hanauma Bay in Hawaii, where the total number of beach-goers has now been restricted because the shoreline habitat was being destroyed, the CNMI might be better served to restrict access to the grotto by limiting the number of total daily divers allowed. Hawaii has found that the restrictions to Hanauma Bay have not hurt tourist traffic, but have enriched the tourist experience. The CNMI should seriously consider doing the same.

DLNR might also want to consider leaving the smaller east-side beaches alone, as well as the Bird Island beach approach, not only to protect the beach and the lagoon, but also to provide variety in access to the many beaches around the island for tourists and residents alike.

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Whoever decided that the Christmas images along our roads should be spread out over more of the island had the right idea. They seem to stand out more when they are not all so close together. And they are outstanding! I've not had much luck, though, in finding out who designs them. Whoever it is deserves a medal, or a bonus, or a reward - they're lovely, tasteful, and unique - a prize-winning combination if there ever was one!