

On My Mind
11/26/04

I'm sorry, but I just don't find the protestations by Marianas Public Land Authority board chairwoman Ana Demapan-Castro very persuasive. In apparent response to concerns expressed by Pagan Watch members and others that MPLA would be negotiating in secret, Demapan-Castro told the media earlier this week that of course the public would be given an opportunity to be heard before MPLA acts on the controversial Azmar proposal. Nonetheless, she said, the negotiations would be conducted under strict confidentiality.

There's a difference between being heard, and being heeded. Demapan-Castro's comments give no indication that she, or the board, or anyone else at MPLA, has any intention of changing his or her position to accommodate others' concerns; indeed, none of them, up until now, appears to have changed his or her positions, despite what amounts to over-whelming opposition and repeated urgings from interested parties, despite eminently reasonable arguments for doing so.

Being heard is not enough. Responsible stewardship of public land - which is what MPLA is charged with - requires that the concerns of all those who are affected, and especially those who have legitimate claims on the land, must not only be heard, but be accommodated.

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The two very articulate spokespersons for Pagan supporters, Pete P. Perez of "chamorro.com" and Pagan Watch, and Cinta Kaipat, President of the United Northern Marianas Islanders Association, have asked Secretary of the Interior Gail Norton and Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Insular Affairs to intervene, arguing that MPLA is not fulfilling its mission to protect and make the best use of CNMI's public lands on behalf of the indigenous people, as it is charged to do in both the Covenant and the Constitution.

They have now asked the Department of Interior officials to go farther. They have asked Norton and Cohen to revive the offer, made by one of their predecessors, to use the resources at their disposal to check out the credentials of potential investors in the CNMI - in this case Azmar - so that the CNMI would not be victimized by unscrupulous entrepreneurs. The Department of Interior is able to access federal data bases to which the CNMI does not have access, and the offer at the time, as I recall, was that DoI would help in making sure that investors - foreign or otherwise - who wanted to come to the CNMI were reputable, solvent, and credible, by using its data banks to check them out.

With no hard data to date on Azmar and its capability or experience in mining, or its financial stability, such a report from the DoI would be very helpful indeed.

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Computers, I think, are going the way of the airplane. Or, perhaps a better way to phrase it would be to say that as it was once a wonderful experience to take an airplane trip - which it is

not anymore - so it was once a wonderful experience to surf the net - but it is not anymore. Airplanes used to be roomy, and the food edible, and the stewardesses not only friendly but uniformly attractive. Now airline travel involves hassles just in trying to get a ticket - with extra charges if one doesn't use the computer to do so, and unfriendly computer programs as well - and the getting on an airplane, through security guards, is at least as big a hassle, and then one is packed in like sardines, and not even fed on some flights anymore, not to mention the ever-increasing costs. Flying just isn't the fun - the joy and pleasure and adventure - it used to be.

Surfing on the web used to be a pleasure as well - with all kinds of wonderful sites and arcane bits of information coming up on the screen as one fearlessly clicked here, clicked there, on the many branches so readily available from most screens. But not anymore. Today one has to go through security screening just to get on-line, with incomprehensible messages coming up willy-nilly, either informing you that access to your computer has been successfully blocked by some program or other, or asking you, at random times in a most disruptive manner, whether you want to give some incomprehensible program/user/series of numbers access to your computer.

The ubiquitous "help" button doesn't help at all. In my case, it simply tells me that it can't determine whether the applicant for access is good or bad, and I should just use my judgment. But how am I supposed to know? It's all very worrisome, not knowing when to block what, and not knowing what I'm missing because the blocks are up, and trying to figure out why the same program keeps trying to access my computer - especially since they have such significant sounding names like web server interface, or on-line connector or system support module.

Surfing just isn't the fun - the joy and pleasure and adventure- it used to be. Instead, with talk of fire walls and virus blockers and spy catchers, it's a fearful, inhibiting and irritating experience, and its boring - with the constant need to stop operating and give the computer over to upgrading its virus definitions, and updating its spyware, and who knows what else.

What makes it all so particularly painful is that the airlines cut the comfort to stay competitive - which is sort of understandable, but the computer network is no longer enjoyable because of masochistic individuals who get pleasure from causing others pain, which is not so understandable. Why do people do such things to each other?

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It's been pointed out to me that similar things could be said of television, with its intrusive ads (on the mainland, I've been told, now there are ads that stream across the bottom of your screen in the middle of regular programs, in addition to the standard commercial ads), and telephones, with their disruptive and unsolicited marketing calls - and now it threatens even cell phones. In the case of cell phones, where the recipient gets charged for the call, such calls are even more invasive. (Word to the wise: list your cell phone numbers on the "Do Not Call list"! You can register online at WWW.DONOTCALL.GOV or call toll-free, 1-888-382-1222 (TTY 1-866-290-4236), from the number you wish to register. Registration is free.) A pity that there is not a similar way to get those ads off the bottom of the tv screen!

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It's curious that in upgrading the Grotto, first priority is going to be given to cosmetic changes in the upper portion, rather than needed safety changes to the lower portion. An article in Wednesday's <I>Marianas Variety</I> reports that first phase of the upcoming construction will include the parking area, road access, picnic tables, rest pavilion, lookout platform and restroom facilities. Not until the second phase is undertaken will work be done on upgrading the handrails and stairs leading down to the grotto itself, or the bridge connecting to the large rock which is used as dive platform into the grotto's pool. Seems to me the safety of the divers should be first priority, though perhaps it's just as well that access remains difficult for a while longer. With the heavy traffic and no limits set on access to the grotto, degradation of the site can only get worse. So the fewer souls willing to haul their gear up and down the stairs and cross over to the rock and back, the better.

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On the subject of limits, there was an interesting program on KRNM, the local National Public Radio station on Thanksgiving afternoon. Speakers were discussing bioengineering and the very real problems, risks, dangers, that bioengineering causes. Said one speaker, scientists are trying, through bio-engineering, to change animal behavior to adapt to the problems created by technology. One example: since the rivers salmon usually go up in order to spawn have now become blocked by dams and other water-management practices, scientists are trying to bio-engineer salmon so they'll spawn in open water. The focus is not on helping salmon do what they do instinctively or naturally. It is on changing the salmon themselves. However, once those altered salmon breed, their genes will "pollute" the normal strain of salmon, and there will be no possibility of ever returning the normal salmon to their pre-polluted state and instincts.

I was in my car, so could not record separate speakers or their names, but the same, or another speaker, said scientists also conduct bio-engineering experiments just to test the limits of what they can do. An example, he said, was the bio-engineering of the fluorescence in fire-flies into tobacco. Asked why such a project was undertaken - was it to make cigarettes visible in the dark, perhaps? - the answer was, "it sounded like an interesting idea." But just as monarch butterflies have already been accidentally endangered by the pesticides used on near-by crops, the damage that may occur from such "interesting ideas" is unpredictable, uncontrollable, and irrevocable.

At present there are no laws in the United States governing bio-engineering. That means there are no limits to the kind of experiments that can be done, to the kind of projects that can be undertaken. But just as people set limits in their lives, in their relationships, so should people set limits in their relationship with the earth, said one of the speakers. There should be limits on the number, nature, and extent of the changes man is allowed to make to the earth and its inhabitants, be they plant or animal - or mineral.