

On My Mind

2/11/04

There's good news and bad news in response to my comment last week about access to the **Commonwealth Register**. The good news is that each month's entire issue is now available on-line at "www.cnmiago.gov.mp" - in fact the last three months' issues are available on line - along with a lot of other good information on the CNMI Attorney General's newly revised web page. (Check out its consumer information, for example.)

The bad news is that one has to download the entire issue. There doesn't seem to be a way to simply look at the table of contents to see what's there, and then to download only certain items.

But there's hope that perhaps that will get fixed.....

Just as the initial Anatahan eruptions brought Dr. Quick from the United States Geologic Survey out from Washington last year to explain the dynamics of volcanoes, and describe the agency's intentions to set up what might be called an early warning system to detect quakes in advance, increased Anatahan activity and December's Sumatra earthquake and resulting disastrous tsunami have brought Quick out again, this time accompanied by Dr. Chris Waythomas to describe the dynamics of tsunamis and explain what modelling should be able to tell us about the likelihood of their occurring in the CNMI.

The presentation by the two, offered earlier this week, dispelled a lot of misinformation about tsunamis - for example, Waythomas, a specialist in tsunamis, said the deep trenches surrounding the CNMI are not necessarily protection, but rather would enable a tsunami heading this way to travel even faster. Quick made it clear that the Anatahan eruptions did not cause the recent series of earthquakes the CNMI has been experiencing - that it is earthquakes, rather, that can cause volcanic eruptions. He also noted that while Anatahan's eruptions seem to be increasing in intensity, he did not expect a major eruption, because the volcano has been releasing pressure with the smaller on-going explosions.

Though tsunamis are more often caused by earthquakes than volcanic eruptions, Quick explained that earthquakes cannot be predicted, though volcanic eruptions - provided monitoring equipment is in place - can. Earthquakes happen because there is no prior release of pressure - and therefore no detectable evidence, unlike the tremors and minor ventings that occur prior to a volcano's erupting - which are detectable.

Worrisome as the information was about tsunamis and how they are formed, both men acknowledged that given the fact that there is little historic evidence of a tsunami reaching the CNMI, it is possible that there are geologic features that make the chances of one coming here less likely. A bathymetric study of the surrounding ocean floor would help identify such features; Quick was not optimistic, though, that funding for such a study would be available in the near future. Waythomas said that nonetheless much could be discerned through modeling based on available knowledge.

In their final report, the two expect to provide the CNMI with information that can be used to

assist the CNMI in developing adequate precautions in case of such hazards. It is possible, they suggested, that precautionary measures would only be required for parts of the CNMI, and not for all areas of all three inhabited islands.

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The alert system presently in place - that the Emergency Management Office will call MCV and the radio stations - whether the threat be tsunami, earthquake, volcanic explosion - is ok, so long as the stations - and the listeners - have power, have access to the tv or radio. It's my understanding that often police cars go out as well, and advise neighborhoods using car loudspeakers. But I'd like to suggest that it might be a good idea to have another type of back-up system as well - just in case.

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It might not reach everyone, either, but using the church bells as a signal could also be used. There'd have to be an agreed-upon combination of chimes, so that bells giving an alarm could be distinguished from bells announcing church services. For example, two rings, and then a pause, and then two rings and a pause, repeated for several minutes, would mean a tsunami is coming. Three bells and a pause, repeated for several minutes, would mean it was an earthquake - one can't predict their coming, but it would be reassuring to know that is what it was, rather than sonic boom, or an explosion somewhere - and that yes, other people felt it too, that it wasn't your imagination. I know I would have felt reassured if I had had confirmation!

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There is an alternative, I've just discovered. There is a radio of sorts, that is tuned only to the NOAA weather station, which broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and gives warnings as well as nearly instantaneous confirmation of any natural hazard around the world. Safety 1st usually carries them, but has only one in stock just now.

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At the moment, there is what I would consider a disaster in the making underway here on Saipan - one, however, that could be avoided - provided appropriate action is taken in time. Work is on-going to survey the Talofofa area in preparation for putting in a paved road from the Bird Island lookout to the Kingfisher Golf Course. The area consists of prime agricultural land and much of it is densely forested, making it prime habitat for numerous birds as well as a much-needed green space.

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It is being surveyed in preparation for rebuilding the bridges across the two ravines in the area and widening the road to 12 feet, with another 8 feet in shoulders. Not only will the work involved in doing so create sedimentation problems in the lagoon, and destroy native bird habitat, but once the road is complete, there will be intensive incursions towards, presumably, constructing a homestead - complete with power, water and sewer lines, and the accommodating development of strip malls and gas stations.

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The area may not be pristine in the literal sense - there is little old forest remaining - but it is, nonetheless, relatively untouched. It would be far better to declare it a preserve, or a park - and allow trails for eco-tourism, than to reduce it, too, to a treeless concrete plain.

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Another disaster of sorts that could be avoided if appropriate action were taken in a timely manner is the possibility, with four candidates running for governor this November, that the next

