

On My Mind

2/24/06

How unsettling that stories about PCB contamination are still making headlines - this time not in the CNMI, thank goodness, but in Guam. The Pacific Daily News has been featuring articles about PCB threats not only in a former military housing area, but just this week, also in southern Guam's Cocos Lagoon. Fish caught in the lagoon are not safe to eat, say some officials.</P>

But the stories aren't quite clear yet. The 2/21 issue contained a statement that soil contamination at Cocos Island was at a level 4900 times higher than federally recommended levels, and the level in fish from the lagoon as much as 256 times the acceptable level. Elsewhere, Guam's epidemiologist said that the PCB's are not at a dangerous level unless one "ate a lot of fish every week from that area." As though a village of fishermen would do anything else!</P>

In the next day's issue, the Guam EPA spokesman said that it isn't as though one would get sick tomorrow, from eating contaminated fish today. Excuse me? That doesn't make it any safer!</P>

Though it has never been statistically proven that PCB's do cause problems years later, certainly the experience of Tanapag villagers, who lived with PCB-contaminated soils for years, would seem to indicate otherwise. A seemingly inordinate number developed cancer, and some still suffer long-standing skin problems.</P>

It is true that PCB's were not recognized as carcinogenic when they were first brought to market. Nevertheless the persistent problems its prior use continues to present should serve as warning that humankind needs to work a lot harder at checking out the long-range impact of such chemicals.</P>

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The same is true for the radon and asbestos threats that it is now being said to endanger the lives of Guamanians who have moved to the Tiyan area. Again, there seem to be conflicting stories. Some say that original tests for the presence of radon and asbestos, and the clean-up were not thorough - that only samples were tested and cleaned up. Others say that the buildings were used to house offices before, so why are they not considered safe now?</P>

Here too the threats weren't known initially, but the price that is being paid now, years later, make this writer skeptical of all new and wonderful applications of chemicals to the houses we live in, the land that's farmed, the waters from which our fish come. It's not easy to live organically, but insofar as it's possible, we should try, because doing so will benefit not only us but also our children.</P>

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While on the subject of water, has anyone noticed the series being run by the Variety on water? It certainly has been informative. It also has pushed hard - with seemingly well justified reasoning - for the continuation of the Water Task Force, as well as

reinstatement of its program manager.</P>

I'm not sure how long the water series will go on, but it sure would be nice if the writer, Samuel Gary Gugliotta, would do the same for the solid waste program, and its manager. The coconut wireless has it that thought is being given to cancelling the contract for managing the Marpi land fill - the solid waste program manager has already been let go. What a shame!</P>

The land fill has been labelled as exemplary by both friend and foe; the solid waste program itself was pushing hard for new services including waste bins at the schools to encourage re-cycling, and garbage pick-up in the villages. (On that subject, wouldn't it make sense to have a waste bin just for paper at the post offices? So much junk mail is thrown away there, it makes a natural location for a re-cycling bin...)</P>

Effective control of solid waste benefits the island's health, its environment and its economy. Conversely, lack of effective control of solid waste endangers the island's health, pollutes its environment, and harms its economy. The CNMI cannot afford to let the on-going solid waste program falter.</P>

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Another plus for the Variety - in addition to its series on water - is its photographer, Jacqueline Hernandez. She pretty consistently - and most deservedly - gets front page coverage for her pictures, which are sometimes winsome, sometimes lovely, sometimes awesome, and sometimes downright funny - as was this past Wednesday's one of the upside-down stop sign on Tinian.</P>

But a big failing mark goes to whoever made the choice to run "Jane Austen v. The Vagina Monologues" on its editorial page this past Monday. Of course, the V Monologues are controversial - use of the "v" word in such a prominent position as the title of a stage production is controversial all by itself. That the show is being put on in Saipan, with such high-visibility advertising on the cnmi.com web site, is also bound to be controversial.</P>

The "opinion" piece, printed in the area usually reserved for the editorial, and written by a college student from Oregon, is as condescending and vituperative a review as any I've ever read. The guy (of course) had not even seen the production, only read a script. Yet he goes on and on about the shallowness of author of the V Monologues, her misguided feminism, her allegedly poor writing skills, etc., etc.</P>

Yes, I believe in freedom of the press - up to a point - and yes, everyone is entitled to his or her opinion. But if the Variety wants to print a review of the V Monologues, why choose the ranting and ravings of some idiotic, immature college student? Why not give the readers a more thoughtful, intelligent, balanced point of view? Even printing an informed negative review would have been ok - provided it was countered with an equally informed positive one.</P>

But to print such an ignorant, sexist, blatantly one-sided "critique" and just leave it hanging out there is itself, I would argue, ignorant, sexist, blatantly one-sided. Variety, I'm

ashamed of you!

On the other hand, the [Tribune](#) deserves praise for its long-running dedication of a full page in its Thursday issue to environmental issues. It managed a particularly noteworthy and significant coup in this past week's issue with its publication of a detailed report about a just-completed study on the economic value of the Saipan's reefs, written by Qamar Schuyler, Coral Outreach Specialist for Saipan's three marine-related agencies. The study was federally funded under the primary aegis of the Coastal Resource Management Office, and lead author Pieter van Beudering was on island all last week presenting the study findings to interested groups, including the governor, members of the House, Chamber members, and the embryonic Northern Marianas College-based Academy of the Sciences and Environment Management.

By surveying fishermen, hotels, tour operators, local households, and tourists about their use of the reefs, and the role reefs play in their daily lives, the researchers determined that the total economic value of Saipan's reef system comes to some \$61 million a year. With such a valuable commodity, Beudering told his audiences, this "golden egg" needs far more protection than it is now being given. Moreover, he reported that local people interviewed for the study were willing to pay as much as \$60 per year to protect and improve the condition of the reefs and surrounding waters, and that tourists would also be willing to pay fees to visit Saipan's Marine Protected Areas - provided the fees went to their maintenance and improvement.

The question then becomes how to determine priorities in providing this protection, and how to raise funds to do so. The most valuable areas, in terms of tourist and other uses, are Managaha and the Grotto. Those, and Laulau and Obyan dive sites, are the most threatened, the report found. Yet, Beudering said, Saipan's fees for using its resources are among the lowest in the world - even Palau and Hawaii charge more for access to their reefs and underwater habitats.

The study recommends, first of all, that Saipan "tackle the problem of pollution" by strengthening watershed management and control of stormwater runoff, by ensuring that the island's sewage outfalls meet water quality standards, and by making sure everyone knows about the value of coral reefs. Secondly, it recommended that local residents be given an opportunity to become more involved in coral reef protection through, among other things, the levying of taxes dedicated to better management of the marine environment and through public information campaigns. Lastly, it recommends that tourists - particularly those making use of Saipan's "golden egg" - become involved in the protection of reef systems by assessing user fees, but letting tourists know that they are contributing to the preservation of the reefs through the payment of such fees, and further, that such fees be totally dedicated to the protection and improvement of the reef systems.

More information on the study may be found at CRM's website at www.crm.gov.mp.

It's taken a long time to come up with actual hard data on just how valuable Saipan's coral reefs are - up until now it's largely been sold as an article of faith that not everyone believed or accepted. Now that a value has been established, perhaps legislators, administrative budget officials, government agencies such as the Marianas Visitors Authority, and the Chamber will be willing to

take a more serious and focused look at how to protect Saipan's "golden egg" - and follow it up with meaningful action.</P>

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Many thanks to all who offered sympathy, support, condolences regarding my loss. It's been helpful, comforting.</P>

Movies this week: 4 R's, one PG-13, and 2 PG's. Not much for the kiddies.</P>