

On My Mind
1/12/07

Some nightmares just never seem to go away. An enterprising *Marianas Variety* reporter unearthed the information that Tateishi Planning Co. Ltd., which is behind the move to install a monorail at the Grotto, is now willing to use electricity rather than a gasoline-powered engine to haul passengers up and down. What, pray tell, will be used to generate the electricity? And where will that generator be located?

The real point, though, is how far the CNMI should let outside forces degrade and destroy its natural resources, which are, after all, its primary asset. One of them, the Grotto, is world famous as an outstanding dive site, based on its unique, natural, setting and the clear marine environment below the surface. It deserves to be treasured, and preserved, as it is. Unfortunately, however, the Marianas Visitors Authority has already defaced the site with its ugly concrete viewing platform. But that doesn't mean the CNMI has to allow the site to deteriorate further.

In addition to despoiling a natural asset, it's highly unlikely that the Grotto monorail would be a money-making proposition. To be brutally frank, how many handicapped people come to the CNMI - or would come - to see the Grotto? And how does that compare to the tens of hundreds that come every year to go diving there?

Can't this nightmare be put to rest once and for all?

While some may feel that the thought of alien life forms in the lagoon also approaches nightmare, this one, at least, has been put to rest. What had been reported in the press as alien life forms are not - they are, mostly, nudibranchs - a variety of sea slugs that are macroscopic and marine, lack a shell or gills, are very colorful, and have fringelike projections that serve as their breathing apparatus. Their status as "alien life forms" came about, according to Coastal Resource Management Office's marine biologist John Starmer, as a result of a misunderstanding on the part of the press as to what CRMO Administrator John Joyner said when he attempted to explain the rationale for removing those small fishing boats from the lagoon shoreline.

Starmer said that since the nudibranchs are so small, they are not readily visible, and are noticed only when people are deliberately looking for small things under water, or have repeatedly visited the same site, and begin to see them because the rest of the view is so familiar. Several sightings have been made of nudibranchs not seen here before, though they have been seen elsewhere. Only a few, he said, would appear to be new species, though it will take genetic research to make sure.

As to the connection between the nudibranchs and the small fishing boats, Starmer said it really was a question of public land use - that just as one cannot just park one's car anywhere on public land, so the boat owners cannot just randomly leave their boats anywhere on public lands. The solution, he said, would be to provide a legal way for doing so. Presumably, this would involve either a new law or new regulations (more bureaucracy). Let's just hope that it isn't seen as a new source of revenue, and fees set so high that those who use the small boats won't be able to afford to keep them.

It must have been an interesting experience, at the Chamber of Commerce inauguration of new officers ceremony last week - on the one hand, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Interior for Insular Affairs David Cohen presenting a bleak and scary picture, and on the other, U.S. Pacific Defense Representative to the north Pacific Islands Rear Admiral Charles J. Leidig offering a picture of prosperity and hope.

Of course, Leidig's picture isn't scheduled to materialize for another five to six years, but the contrast between Cohen's dire predictions, and Leidig's hopeful ones must have seemed rather contradictory, to say the least. The challenge is to find a way for the U.S. Navy to accelerate some of its planning, so that perhaps the CNMI economy will not have to go through the "hard landing" that Cohen predicted will come about as a result of the threatened increase in minimum wage and federalization of immigration control promised by the new Democratic majority in Congress.

The U.S. Navy - if not the entire military - could play another role in the future welfare of the CNMI as well. According to a recent story in the *Pacific Daily News*, Guam companies are considering sub-contracting some of the anticipated work to the CNMI because it has easier access to guest workers, and a lower pay scale. If the CNMI's minimum wage goes up too far, and federally-imposed immigration controls become too rigid, the CNMI would no longer offer those advantages, adversely affecting both Guam businesses' ability to work with the military, and the CNMI's chances of benefitting from Guam's military build-up. It might behoove the Pentagon - and the CNMI, if not also Guam - to make those concerns known to the U.S. Congress.

Along the same lines, the Department of Interior might want to take a second look at its recent decision to withhold CIP funds from Tinian because Tinian wants to reprogram those funds, originally slated for a wastewater system, to complete installation of an instrument landing system at its airport. That is not to say that wastewater programs are unimportant, but in terms of "bang for the buck" it seems pretty obvious that not only Tinian, but the entire CNMI would benefit more, more directly and more quickly, if Tinian's airport facilities were finally upgraded sufficiently to enable the landing of larger planes.

This would bring more passengers to the Tinian Dynasty, and thus more revenue to both Tinian and the CNMI, not only directly, but indirectly. In addition, the military would also benefit from the modernized landing facility, again bringing in much needed revenue both to Tinian and to the CNMI. It would also be encouraging to those other casinos that want to open on Tinian, to have the ILS in place.

Neither action would compensate for the departure of the garment factories, of course, but one or the other might help cushion the blow.....

The Guam Contractors Association has already begun to take steps to meet the demand for the skilled laborers that the military build-up will bring. According to an article in the *PDN* this past week, the GCA has established a non-profit Trades Academy that will offer, among other things, basic safety, trade theory, and practical application courses, on-the-job apprentice training, national certification for individual skill levels, and a master's program to enable

existing journeymen to pass trade masters examinations. Classes are held in the evening and modules will run year-round, according to the article.

CNMI contractors might want to contact the Guam group to see how they could participate in the program. Contact points, as provided in the *PDN*, are Bert Johnston at the GCA Trades Academy, 671- 647-4840/41 or e-mail at <gcatrades@guam.net>.

Interns at the Department of Interior Office of Insular Affairs found that the CNMI is operating under an "out-dated paradigm" - that is, that the CNMI has not yet adapted to the realities of the 21st century. Proof of that was provided in an article in today's *Marianas Variety*, which reported that the Saipan Municipal Council passed what might better be called an ordinance, rather than a bill, calling for the establishment of a neighborhood watch task force. The ordinance provides that a task force of seven members would be appointed for two years to assess and study the situation, and to develop action plans and implementation strategies for every precinct on Saipan.

In the areas that I am familiar with, neighborhood watch program are not legislated or regulated by government in any way. Rather, they are formed through the voluntary coming together of neighbors concerned for the safety and welfare of their villages.

While the Saipan Municipal Council deserves recognition for attempting to go beyond the past pattern of only passing rather meaningless resolutions and to actually achieve something worthwhile, its following the pattern of adding to the bureaucracy is deplorable. What Saipan, the CNMI, do not need right now are another government body. The Council could, instead, have offered its encouragement, assistance and support to any village wanting to establish a voluntary neighborhood watch. As the Council has recognized, the need for neighborhood watches is increasing throughout the island. But there isn't any reason why such watches can't be established and function effectively on a volunteer basis. One need only look at Beautify CNMI! for a model and example of just how effective voluntary action can be.

Movies this week: three "new" ones, a PG-13, an R and an unrated children's movie, to which the *Variety* gives an R rating, and the *Trib* a PG. "Blood Diamond," the R, was new a couple of weeks ago; the other two don't make it to the top five in either the most popular or the new release category. In fact, none of the movies now showing make it to either list.....