

On My Mind

8/13/10

Highlights (in condensed form) from "Eco-tourism - Good for the CNMI?" the talk given by daughter Stacey Tighe at American Memorial Park on 8/11/10: Eco-tourism is a rapidly growing niche in the tourism industry, and is predicted to grow by 4% annually over the next 30 years. Properly done, it is more sustainable, responds to the demand for non-traditional travel, focuses on benefits to the local community and culture, involves lower start-up costs, allows more dollars to remain in the local economy, and requires no major investment, since the attractions (nature) are already there - of which the CNMI has an ample supply.....

The narrow definition of eco-tourism incorporates a tourist learning activity, a contribution to the local community as a result of the activity, and no damage to the environment. It falls into the category of "alternative" small scale people-to-people tourism, as opposed to "massive" (all about business, conventional) tourism centered on profit-making.

To be sustainable, tourism needs more than marketing; it also needs management, diversity, community involvement and more emphasis on ecological concerns and attractions. The Marianas Visitors Authority is charged by law to market the CNMI to tourists. (In other places, this aspect of the industry is often not nearly as well funded.) Though the MVA has developed niche markets in weddings and sports, other potential areas are largely untouched: Cultural (architecture, crafts, arts), Business (workshop, annual meetings), Historical (ancient, WWI&2, archeology) Adventure (Climbing, Skydive), Nature (nature watching and helping), Other (journalism, art, and others).

Some examples of small-scale eco-tourism for the CNMI: for a fee, have tourists monitor turtle nesting sites, assist with archeological digs, participate in reef monitoring, coral transplanting, coral surveys (REEFCHECK, Bleaching Coral Watch, etc), plant seedlings in the Laulau watershed, build and operate a snorkel trail, develop bird watching trails in the boonies, help monitor or maintain or survey community fish sanctuaries, conduct pre and post storm damage and inventories.

Local islanders could host Christmas Day Bird Watch Events, provide interpretive guides for tours of historical and cultural sites, and island geology; lead boonie stomps to identify local birds, flora, or fauna, teach cooking with local produce, cook and serve local meals, take tourists reef fishing, teach weaving skills, teach coconut husking and grating.....

Getting started would involve creating some sort of CNMI Ecotourism/Sustainable Tourism Planning Team /Board/Round Table representing all major interests/sectors in the CNMI, including the community. The entity should define a system to manage traditional massive tourism (and make it more eco-friendly), in conjunction with alternative small scale/community-based and eco tourism. Other functions: conduct a campaign to create a collective vision, create an inventory of potential eco-tourism sites, develop an agreement on what the CNMI wanted to protect and preserve, define acceptable limits to

change, determine community strengths and interests, and develop guidelines and standards. It would find community members who have special skills - bird knowledge, local history, cooking; define/identify how communities want to engage (by church, family, enterprise); create a guide training program; develop necessary materials, and be responsible for deciding upon and researching the feasibility of 10-20 possible enterprises, and establishing a handful of pilot ventures. Which would then be evaluated, assessed, refined, etc., and, presumably, expanded upon.....

Could eco-tourism work for the CNMI? Definitely!

I've been told that the full power point presentation will be available on the American Memorial Park's web site at < <http://www.nps.gov/amme/> >.

Sponsored by the Division of Environmental Quality and the National Park Service, this past Friday's "Sharkwater" drew a standing room only crowd at the American Memorial Park's auditorium. The film debunks a number of myths about sharks, including the one about all of them having ferocious teeth (they don't!), and the one about sharks killing hundreds of people every year (they don't - the average is five, far less than the 100 killed by elephants and tigers every year, or the 22,000 killed by the use of illegal drugs, or the 1,200,000 killed in road accidents every year).

Sharks have survived for 450 million years, and serve an essential role as the top of the ocean food chain. But due to the illegal fishing industry - prompted chiefly by the craze for shark fins - sharks are now becoming an endangered species. Shark finning is wasteful and cruel: sharks are caught, the fins removed, and then the still-live sharks thrown back into the water.

The film follows an underwater diver, photographer, reporter as he investigates shark finning in the Caribbean at his peril - being pursued, at one point, by an armed Costa Rican border patrol crew. The film urges better control, and a sharp reduction in the consumption of shark fins. For more on the film, go to < <http://www.sharkwater.com/> >

Short takes:

People may think they have billing problems with CUC, but they can't compare to the problem friends of mine recently encountered: a bill from CUC for \$90,000 - for a small office whose bill is normally in the \$300 per month range. Not only do they now have CUC to contend with, but since they'd arranged to have their CUC bill automatically paid by credit card, they've also got to deal with the credit card company. Wonder which will turn out to be the bigger hassle?

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Fitting right in with the discussion of eco-tourism, a letter in today's *Saipan Tribune* proposes that Saipan ban the wearing of jungle boots and battle dress uniform by the

military visiting from Guam. "Leave Saipan alone as a family island," he wrote. What a great idea!

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I'd like to add my congratulations to long time resident and CNMI historian Don Farrell for the outstanding program he put together in observance of the atomic bombings that ended World War II. With more than two hundred people in attendance - many from off-island - no wonder Tinian gas stations ran out of gas!

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Better late than never: the openness, receptivity, offers of help and support to the business community that Secretary of Commerce Mike Ada expressed at this month's Chamber of Commerce meeting deserve notice. They are a welcome contrast to the usual perception of Commerce as totally lacking concern for the interests of the islands' private sector.

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The 7/30/10 issue of the *Marianas Variety* ran a story about the fact that the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate had finally actually met, and were speaking to each other. But without knowing whether that is typical of past leaders of the two houses of the legislature, it is difficult to know how to view the story - with alarm, surprise, dismay, or hope.....

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Let us hope that the college students who will be assisting in the voter education program on the three initiatives that will be on November's ballot have a better financial understanding of money flows than those who have been making rather wild and irresponsible statements about how a pension obligation bond could be paid for.

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Why is it that those legislators who insist that balancing the budget requires generating additional revenue don't understand that the CNMI's problems are caused by its bloated government, and that raising more funds to pay those unnecessary employees does not solve the problem? Their proposal to raise business license fees makes no sense whatsoever. Moreover, raising fees in such an arbitrary fashion, with different percentage increases for different sectors - instead of a fixed increase across the board - would appear equally irrational.

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The cancellation by the "administration" of the proposal to privatize the Commonwealth Health Center's radiology department just as it was finally ready to be awarded is nothing less than sabotage. The reason given, in the story in yesterday's *Trib*, was that the "administration" wanted to add more services to what was covered in the proposal. Is there any reason this couldn't have been done in a second, separate proposal? Imagine the dismay of the winning vendor, who will now be forced to throw out all the work he'd done on the winning proposal, and after an unknown period of delay while the request for proposal gets rewritten and re-issued, to start over, and to write an entirely new proposal. Business friendly? Not hardly!