

On My Mind
9/17/10

Talk of picturesque language: "Trees are like the lungs of the planet. They breathe in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen." Isn't that a great image? It's taken from a comment Fran Castro made on her Facebook page. The comment continues, " Additionally, they provide habitat for birds and other wildlife. But that's not all trees do for us! Trees are essential to the planet and to humans. CO2 is one of the major contributing elements to the greenhouse effect. Trees trap CO2 from the atmosphere and make carbohydrates that are used for plant growth. They give us oxygen in return. Mature trees can absorb roughly 48 pounds of CO2 a year. The tree in turn releases enough oxygen to sustain two human beings."

It was prompted - in case someone hasn't figured it out - by the recent cutting down of those stately pine trees growing along the road at Marianas High School.

The incident suggests several lessons, if you will. First, don't make visible changes to the environment without prior notice - and preferably, prior explanation. The upset might have been milder if people had been told in advance. Secondly, don't make false claims - the layers of pine needles that supposedly bred vermin are not all that much in evidence. And thirdly, maybe there should be a practice, if not a law, that for every tree cut down, another should be planted somewhere - preferably nearby - so as to continue to give birds their accustomed habitat, and to continue to provide lung power to the surrounding area.

In a similar vein, one might write, "Parrotfish are vacuum cleaners. They eat algae and keep the coral clean and healthy." The image isn't quite as appealing, which doesn't detract, however, from its importance. It's no secret that the local parrotfish population is declining - because, apparently, local fishermen are violating the law that prohibits use of SCUBA in spear-fishing.

Parrotfish sleep at night - literally - wrapping themselves in a cocoon and lying motionless in deeper water, which makes them easy prey to SCUBA divers, but more difficult to reach by breath-hold divers. As divers take the larger fish, fewer are left to mature and reproduce. With no more large ones to catch, fishermen are bringing in the smaller ones, making the situation worse.

A recent *Pacific Daily News* story reports that on Guam, bumphead parrotfish are on the verge of extinction - because Guam has not yet passed a law prohibiting SCUBA spear fishing. The last reported catch was in 2001! There are so few left, noted a professor from the University of Guam Marine Lab, that the population may not be able

to recover - which is apparently what happened to Maine's codfish - once the basis for a major industry - which have not fully recovered to this day.

Will Saipan parrotfish suffer the same fate? Unfortunately, the same mitigation measure - planting more trees - cannot be applied to parrotfish. Only self-policing - and stronger enforcement of the law - can prevent it.

Imagining tomorrow - that is, picturing what will happen if the present rate of taking parrotfish continues - does not seem an inborn skill. It is, however, necessary if fishermen want the parrotfish population to even survive, much less become more abundant.

According to Sylvia Earle, renowned for, among other things, making the deepest untethered human dive in history - a 2 ½ hour walk on the ocean floor 1,250 feet below the surface - it is not only marine life that depends on the oceans for survival, but all life. In her most recent book, *The World Is Blue: How our Fate and the Ocean's Are One*, Earle begins by noting that while we all live on earth, it takes up only one-fourth of the globe; the rest is occupied by water - by the world's oceans - and that without water, no one would survive - plant or animal, marine or terrestrial.

That makes it important that the world's water - our oceans - remain clean and healthy, which in turn requires that all that live within the oceans do the same. But, as others have also increasingly noted, humans have not understood the function, the behavior or the composition of the oceans, and still do not know what all they contain, or how their parts interact - yet have abused them to the point where the oceans themselves are at risk of degradation.

From barren ocean floors to acidification of near shore areas to dead areas where fish and coral have been wiped out, to the large swathes of floating plastic, the "illness" of the oceans has become more and more evident. Earle notes, for example, that since the 1950s, 90% of many once common fish have been "extracted" from the sea; humans have taken - eaten - more than 90 percent of the big fish in the sea; ½ the shallow coral reefs globally are gone or in a state of serious decline. Yet, she says, less than 5% of the ocean has been seen, let alone explored. Humans, in short, are wantonly destroying life forms they don't even know exist. Just imagine the unintended consequences!

Earle's book isn't quite as forceful as was Callum Robert's *Unnatural History of the Sea*, - it is far more personal - but its message - that oceans must be better protected since even terrestrial life depends on them - is just as urgent as Robert's that if species, per se, and species diversity are to survive, current levels in the killing off of ocean life must be drastically reduced.

Short takes:

Want to take a virtual tour of China? at least, as seen from the viewpoint of a virile vegan? Walt Goodridge - a regular contributor to the <i>Saipan Tribune</i> and entrepreneur extraordinaire - has been sending back some fascinating tales and pictures from Beijing and its environs, where he is at the moment. Check out his webpage at < <http://www.jamaicaninchina.com/> >.

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Kudos to Gregorio C. Sablan, the CNMI's non-voting delegate to the U.S. Congress, for arranging to testify before a House sub-committee remotely by video-technology. (The hearing was to be held today - but it's unclear whose today was meant.) Video-technology-supported meetings are not new - a local businessman recently successfully discussed a proposal with several possible vendors in the states and potential users in the CNMI without having to leave his office. But if this turns out to be workable and acceptable to the U.S. Congress, just think of all the time, travel money and wear it would save!

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First it was massage-gate, now its Buckingham-gate, or should it be called Camacho-gate? At least there's more direct information available about the latter than there was about the former, thanks to Kilili's publication of the Attorney General's response to his FOIA request on his campaign website < <http://www.kililiforcongress.com> >. (While it's not instantly clear, it is not necessary to fill out the subscription form to read entries on this site. One can click on "skip this subscribe page" - in purple at the lower right). Readers might be interested to know that there is, in addition, a second, official website for CNMI's non-voting delegate at < <http://sablan.house.gov> >.

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Let us hope that saner minds prevail in regard to the House Local Bill 17-1, Representative Stanley Torres' bill to abolish the Zoning Board. We thought the defense of the bill by McDonald's owner Joe Ayuyu, which appeared in today's *Tribune* most eloquent. Zoning Board Chairwoman Herminia Fusco's defense of the bill, which appeared in the 9/15 *Marianas Variety* was also very persuasive. The local delegation passed the bill and it has now been submitted to the governor.

With only 14 days to go until the start of the new fiscal year - and those are calendar, not working days - the big question is whether members of the legislature can do more than one thing at a time. They also need to work on the bill that defines what emergency services will be allowed to function should the budget not pass. It's called providing a safety net, thinking ahead.