

On My Mind
7/25/08

Could one call it the elephant in the room, that everyone knows is there, but no one does anything about? No, not corruption, though that, too, might qualify. In this case, the reference is to the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, better known as WESPAC.

WESPAC members, representatives, loyalists, have been waging a pernicious, yet quite effective, campaign in opposition to the proposed Marianas Trench Marine Monument. They have made sure that they regularly come up with front-page stories in the paper. They have made sure that everywhere a presentation about the Monument is made they also make one. They have made sure that every time there is an opportunity for discussion, or testimony, they too are heard. They are striving industriously to spread their campaign at social gatherings, at parties, wherever people gather.

That would not be so bad, if it weren't for the fact that what they are saying, what they are telling people, is so often wrong. And it would not be so bad if what they were fighting for were desirable, and beneficial and positive. But it's not.

WESPAC is one of eight federal bodies, authorized under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery and Conservation Management Act. The councils manage fisheries - defined in the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, 4th ed., as "the industry or activity of catching, processing or selling fish or other aquatic animals" - in the federal waters of all coastal states as well as the U.S. entities. WESPAC is authorized to "manage" the waters surrounding Hawaii, Guam, the CNMI, American Samoa, and the smaller Pacific islands under U.S. control such as Johnston Atoll and Wake Island.

The federal waters over which the councils have authority, known as the Exclusive Economic Zone or EEZ, extend out 200 miles from land, and, it is said, the funding given each council depends on the extent of the waters under its jurisdiction. This is one reason why WESPAC has so vigorously opposed the Marianas Trench Marine Monument (MTMM): it would lose jurisdiction over the 115,000 square miles of water that declaration of an MTMM would set aside as a sanctuary, and thus suffer a cut in its budget.

The function of the councils is to manage and implement laws governing fishing activity in the areas over which they have jurisdiction, to assure that the fishing industry can remain a profit-making venture. Unfortunately, most councils, whose members are chosen from a list submitted by state governors to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, are made up of members of the fishing industry, more interested in maximizing their take than in ensuring that the number and species of marine life remain at healthy, sustainable levels. WESPAC, for example, does not have a single environmentalist or conservationist on its board.

As a result, WESPAC and other fishery councils set limits that allowed fishermen to go further and further out, to go deeper and deeper, to catch smaller and smaller fish, to increase the amount of allowable by-catch, just to sustain a profitable fishery. In the meantime, scientists predicting the collapse of fisheries were ignored.

More recently, WESPAC, has instituted so-called "Fisheries Ecosystem Plans," which purportedly manage fish on an ecosystem-wide basis, but in reality the FEPs do nothing more than allow its present destructive practices to continue.

The damage allowed to occur under WESPAC and other fishery council rulings has been widely reported: the collapse of cod fisheries in New England, the collapse of salmon fisheries on the west coast; the decline in shark populations due to the practice of finning and discarding the rest of the fish; the decline in turtle and dolphin populations, discarded as by-catch by long-liners. New technologies that allow "seeding" of signal-emitting logs in the middle of the ocean under which fish aggregate, that allow ships to go further and haul nets from ever-greater ocean depths, that allow destruction of marine life and protective coral structures at the bottom of the sea are doing ever more damage to the ocean and its inhabitants.

Setting aside the waters around the three most northern islands in the CNMI as a sanctuary/marine monument would help the fish, turtles, sharks, dolphins, coral recover. It would provide a place where marine life could grow to maturity, and reproduce, replenishing some of the threatened species. It would help off-set the pollution of other ocean areas. But declaring it a sanctuary would prevent commercial fishing in the area and WESPAC, judging from past performance, is more interested in maximizing take today than in preserving and protecting species for the future. This is another reason why WESPAC is so adamantly opposed to the idea of the MTMM.

Though well-run, it is an invidious campaign. Local members of WESPAC in positions of authority in government have made it clear to their employees that the employees are not to support the MTMM effort in any way, shape, or form. Local members have spread false information - for example, that the three northern islands will be used as bomb sites - which is patently ridiculous, or that the feds will control the MTMM once it is established, which again is not correct. Local members have held out to the people of the CNMI the promise of wealth some time in the unknown future from minerals supposedly to be found in the sea beds of the northern islands, when the CNMI has no rights to those minerals in the first place; the courts have ruled that the submerged lands surrounding the CNMI are under federal control.

It is no wonder that most of those seen supporting the declaration of the waters surrounding Maug, Uracas, Asuncion as a national marine monument appear to be non-local. Government employees, largely local, and their families have been thoroughly intimidated - not to mention brain-washed - by fellow islanders whereas non-locals, largely not government employees, are thus immune to such intimidation.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery and Conservation Management Act, which established and defines the fishery councils, was recently amended, ostensibly in support of better management, increased conservation. However, proposed regulations implementing the Act have been found to have many loopholes, thus weakening the Act's effectiveness, and President Bush is now being asked not to bow to the powerful fishery lobby and to demand that the spirit of the law be followed.

We, too, would ask the President not to bow to the powerful fishery lobby and to

proceed with declaring the waters surrounding the CNMI's three northernmost islands a national marine monument.

Short takes:

I think I've lived here too long. When people suggest we meet for dinner at the Fiesta Resort Hotel, I have to go back in my mind, thinking: Fiesta, which one is that? It's the former Dai Ichi, which used to be the Inter-Con(tinental). The same is true of the World Resort, which used to be the Diamond and before that was the Royal Taga Hotel. The Hyatt has undergone only one name change - it used to be the Continental. The Nikko has only recently undergone a name change, to Palm Resort. Thank goodness for the stalwarts, who have not changed their names: the Hafa' Dai, the Grand, the Pacific Islands Club, among others!

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The coconut wireless has it that Pete A. Tenorio would make a good candidate for governor. Maybe he should withdraw from the race for Washington Rep so he can run for governor next November?

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Continental's pull-out from the Saipan-Mania-Saipan route leaves a bad taste in the mouth. If flights are no longer full, why couldn't it have just started using smaller airplanes? The many awards it received over the years never did make sense to me. As far as the CNMI is concerned, Continental always seemed to have the most inconvenient flight times - coming and going. What a way to treat tourists! Dump them here in the middle of the night - and then, make them get up in the middle of the night when they get ready to leave. Did that play a role in the extent of tourist traffic? It certainly played a role in my use of Continental - I avoided it like the plague.

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Two mainland reporters have joined the staff of the *Saipan Tribune*. Stefan Sebastian has been here for a couple of weeks; Kristi Eaton just arrived. We welcome them both.