

On My Mind  
10/31/08

### **Don't Throw the Baby Out With the Bath Water**

There's no question that officers and staff of the Pew Charitable Trust's Ocean Legacy Program have not done a very good job in the CNMI of trying to promote the idea of a monument for the waters of the CNMI's northern islands. They have used typical east coast lobbying strategies - back-room meetings, glossy brochures, give-aways, vague promises, an indiscriminate "grass-roots"-style campaign, an emphasis on quantity rather than quality in collecting letters of support, signatures on petitions, letters to the editor, an emphasis on what plays in Washington, rather than what plays in the CNMI.

In doing so, they have ignored the structure of the local society, ignored its customs, ignored the island's power brokers. And consequently they have alienated those most vital to the success of their project: the safeguarding of a marine world unique to the entire globe.

The idea of a monument for the northern waters of the CNMI could have been introduced far more effectively, could have been promoted far more persuasively, could have been "sold," if you will, far more successfully, if the approach had been different. Unfortunately, it didn't happen.

But that is not reason enough to "throw out the baby with the bath water," as so many seem inclined to do. The "baby" is a living creature in its own right, and deserves saving.

#### **Protection**

To ensure its survival, what one does for and with the baby is to protect and nurture it. One does not ignore it just because no visible harm is in evidence. The harm is in the surroundings, and the idea is to keep the "baby" free of the contaminants that threaten to invade its territory. Nor does one ignore it because it's not clear how it will develop. It needs nurturing and protection so that it can develop to its full potential.

The claim, in other words, that the northern waters are not under stress, and therefore there is no need to rush to protect them, ignores the fact that that is precisely why it must be protected now. Those waters are as near pristine as can be found anywhere in the world, and the challenge is to keep them that way. One does not do that by waiting until the damage is done. One does so by preventing damage, by providing protection before harm is done.

#### **Timeliness**

Nor is it prudent, does it make sense, to hold off or postpone taking steps to put protective measures in place in order to study it. The longer the delay, the greater the chance that harm will be done, that "development" may not occur at all.

Moreover, the so-called monument proposal has been "on the table" for over a year - more than enough time to conduct whatever studies anyone could want. In fact, the Senate proposed formation of a committee to do just that. But nothing came of it,

nothing happened. One year has already gone by. If action on the proposal is not taken now, what assurance is there that action will take place at some future point, that a committee will eventually be formed to look into it? Or will the idea end up, as so many other good ideas have, simply gathering dust on the shelves?

### **Better Odds**

People gamble, buy lottery tickets, play the slots in hopes that maybe they will be lucky and hit a jackpot. Supporting a monument designation brings far better odds than any other available form of gambling. It would assure that the northern waters were protected. It would assure that federal monies and positions came to the CNMI. It would assure an economic spill-over effect that would help revive the CNMI's economy. It would give the CNMI co-management authority over the EEZ. These are not gambles. They are established givens. But the offer, unlike a slot machine, won't be there very long. It goes away when President Bush leaves office.

The alternative being promoted by some - waiting for the U.S. Congress to pass a bill awarding the CNMI sole management authority over either a three - or maybe 12 mile - EEZ is a far bigger gamble. A bill to do that would either have to go through a "lame duck" Congress, or start over in whatever the new Congress - remember, every member of the House is up for election - ends up looking like. What with the current world-wide economic crisis, it does not seem likely that the present Congress would be all that interested, concerned about, tiny, remote CNMI's seemingly narrow interests. And the new Congress? Again, a big gamble. Who knows what its priorities, its concerns will be.

### **Global Responsibility**

It's not as though only the immediate family of the "baby" is involved, either. This particular baby has gifts that could benefit the whole world. Some people in the CNMI feel/want/believe that only they should care for the baby, only they should have a say in how it should be protected, only they should play a role in how it develops. But because it has a potential for helping the whole world, other people also want to make sure that the baby is properly nurtured and protected, that its development not be stifled.

The people of the CNMI have a responsibility to the rest of the world to make sure that happens. It is an overwhelming responsibility, and rather than taking a negative view, the people of the CNMI should be pleased to know that someone else is willing to take on a large share of the responsibility to make sure the "baby" remains pristine and retains its uniqueness, that it is properly protected from contamination, that its potential is fully realized. The sharing brings more benefits to both the immediate family and the larger extended family than trying to do it alone.

### **In Sum**

The process started poorly, and caused a lot of hurt and anger. Some acknowledgment of the errors might have helped. But in the long run, neither should really matter. What matters is that an exciting opportunity is being offered the CNMI - it could even be

considered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Not to take advantage of that opportunity could result in a major loss to the people of the CNMI now and for generations to come.

Short takes:

Both non-voting delegates John O. Gonzales and Pete A. Tenorio sent e-mails explaining their absence from the recent CREAM-sponsored debate, on which I'd commented in my column of two weeks ago. Apparently, they had received the invitation just days before hand, whereas they'd made reservations for the Rota fiesta long in advance. Both apparently also notified the sponsors of the debate, once they received the invitation, that they would not be able to attend. I withdraw my criticism.

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It's not clear where the error lies, but it's almost funny to read some of the misconceptions being used by people on Guam as the basis of their objection to the proposed monument for the CNMI's northern waters. For example, the *Marianas Variety* reported yesterday that Governor Felix P. Camacho opposes the "sudden declaration" of a monument within the Marianas Trench. It's been in the news for over a year. Where is the "sudden"? Camacho's letter was dated, so the *Saipan Tribune* story states, October 27, a day after the official comment period ended on October 26.

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Immigration Director Melvin Gray draws a bleak picture of joblessness for local immigration employees once the federal immigration officials take over in a story in today's *Trib*. First of all, that is not yet all that certain. Many of the regs have not yet been finalized. But I would ask, nonetheless, which is better, an inept, untrained immigration official creating all sorts of problems through mishandling, or smooth, efficient operation of the process administered by professionally qualified officials? If people ever want the CNMI to function more efficiently, it's time to put the emphasis on properly trained employees, not the total warm body count. Gray's scare tactics are themselves unprofessional.

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It's not an easy choice this year, but that doesn't mean one should stay home and not vote. Just be sure to vote for whom you believe in, not whom your family tells you to vote for!