The flame trees are spectacular this year. From Susupe to Garapan, they form an almost continuous arbor of brilliant orange-red along Beach Road - despite the fallen trees, despite the disease afflicting them, despite the cuttings by the Commonwealth Utilities Commission, and despite the power poles in the way - especially noticeable in Susupe and as one reaches Garapan. Off in the distance, on the hills, are more broad splotches of reddish orange. (Often, the trees on the hills bloom later than do the ones along the shore.)

It only happens once a year, and admittedly, some years are better than others. But it is a unique phenomenon, and it is always particularly beautiful, even though a number of other trees also have lovely blossoms, even though the bougainvillea add their own color to the surroundings. An event similar to the CNMI's flame tree blossoming occurs every year in parts of Japan and in Washington, D.C., among other places - the blooming of the cherry trees. Cherry blossom time there attracts tourists by the thousands. There are special tours not only to those cities but around them once one gets there to view the cherry blossoms. There are cherry blossom-themed performances, t-shirts, pillow covers, coffee mugs, photographs, paintings, earrings, and dozens of other cherry-blossom-themed items for sale.

There's bound to be some cost in making it happen - year-round care of the trees, making sure they are trimmed properly, making sure they get enough nutrients, making sure they are protected from vandalism. But comparatively speaking, the costs are minimal as opposed to costs for developing a water park, for example - or a casino.

Couldn't the CNMI do the same thing? Couldn't it package and sell flame tree blossoming time as a major tourist attraction? If the Marianas Visitors Authority cannot, or will not do it, couldn't it at least put out a request for proposal, or invitation to bid, for an entrepreneur/developer to put such packages together? One would have to work with the airlines to make more seats available, but that should not be unsurmountable. What a boon it would be to the local economy!

Then there's the Flame Tree Arts Festival. As was the original intention, it could serve as the focus of flame tree festivities were a full-blown flame tree celebration/program put together: an opportunity for all those who came to admire the flame trees to view local art in all its forms, and to purchase works of art directly from the artists.

Reports varied as to the success of this year's effort. Yes, there were fewer booths, but that was because only made in Micronesia artifacts were allowed - which is as it should be - and because no federal funds were available this year to bring in delegations from the rest of Micronesia, which was most unfortunate. Some complained at the venue, at the timing. The suggestion to combine the Thursday street market and the Flame Tree might work, but why not leave that as it is - and begin the Flame Tree on Friday? Holding the flame tree festival during the time the flame trees bloom seems only logical, and most appropriate. The venue? Seems like the American Memorial Park site has more parking, and creates less of a traffic problem than the Susupe location, but perhaps that's a personal preference.

One has to ask: where were the tourists? Why were they not in attendance? Here was an opportunity for tourists to buy genuine local products instead of the cheap crushed coral made-in-China souvenirs that Saipan stores are so full of, to partake of local foods, to watch local performers free of charge - but tourists were few and far between. Why wasn't MVA promoting

the Arts Festival? It is really necessary for the Arts Council to grease the palms of the tour guides to bring tourists to the Arts Festival? Or could more direct effort by the Arts Council have brought in more tourists?

Admittedly, the lack of tourist attendance at the Flame Tree Festival is a long-standing problem - it's not new this year. Next year's committee might want to take a closer look at the issue and develop specific plans to bring tourists to the Festival, with or without MVA's help.

Short takes:

- Taking a longer-range view of the viability of casinos on Saipan, one has to wonder where anyone thinks the thousands of players are going to come from that make the casinos at Macau, Singapore, Reno, Las Vegas, those Indian reservations, profitable. That kind of people traffic just doesn't exist in the CNMI. Nor does the NMI have the infrastructure in place to support them if they did come.
- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is to be excoriated ("to censure strongly, to denounce," according to the 4th edition of the *American Heritage College Dictionary*) for its inexcusable and inexplicable delay in issuing its regulations for dealing with the CNMI's foreign labor workforce. The lack of regulations affects local businesses, government operations, the workers themselves, the workers' families, and foreign investors in other words, the entire CNMI economy. We wish Wendy Doromal former Rota school teacher and ardent supporter of fair and equitable treatment for CNMI's foreign workers well in her latest efforts to bring this dilemma to the attention of Washington officials as Kilili, being a member of Congress, is not as free to do.
- Though there have been group tree-plantings every now and then, it would be nice if every time a flame tree were cut down, another would be planted in its place. It would be particularly nice in places such as the Garapan fishing basin, where two flame trees were just cut down, supposedly because they were already dead, leaving no source of shade in the area for Tuesday night market vendors or for the Liberation Day festivities.
- While perhaps not deserving excoriation, the large CNMI delegation to the meeting of the Association of Pacific Island Legislatures in Palau certainly deserves some criticism as well. The attendance of the leader of each house of the CNMI Legislature, of one "at large" member from each house (or its minority leader), of Rep. Diego T. Benavente, because he's been asked to speak, and a member of the Legislative Bureau as support personnel can perhaps be justified. But more than that? Would seem sort of extravagant in today's economy proof, seemingly, that legislators aren't suffering the cuts in pay imposed on everyone else in one way or another.
- Interesting words: "It is a great experience to fly many hundreds of miles over the Atlantic Ocean to come to an island and be greeted in Spanish ... an island which has an entirely different tradition and history, which is made up of people of an entirely different cultural origin than on the mainland of the United States, and still be able to feel that I am in my country, here in this city and island as I was in my country in Washington this morning." They were said by President John F. Kennedy, upon his arrival at the international airport of San Juan, Puerto Rico, on a visit on December 15, 1961.
- To those readers who have asked to be "linked in" or "friended" on Facebook: please don't take my lack of response personally. I'm just not into that kind of social networking. I did put up a

page on Facebook - because a friend had posted some pictures I was interested in, but I've hardly been back since - not even to take it down, as I guess I should.....