

Comment received by email
7 July 2007

Ruth Tighe

I have lived on Saipan since December 1980, and am a librarian by profession, though I have held a variety of positions over the past 27 years, from newspaper reporter and editor, to legal research associate, to public information officer for the Commonwealth Utility Corporation. I am now retired, but continue to publish a weekly column, "On My Mind" on the web at <<http://net.saipan.com/cftemplates/omm/index.cfm>> which I also distribute via e-mail to about 500 recipients.

I am writing to express my concern over the impact of increased utilization of the Mariana Islands by the military, as is under consideration in the development of the EIS/OEIS for the Mariana Islands Range Complex (MIRC).

The Commonwealth of the Mariana Islands (CNMI) is a very small entity, and thus, quite fragile. While other areas are comprised of large expanses of land, so that what happens on one small corner would not affect the rest, this is not true of the CNMI. If habitat is destroyed in one area, there is not a vast area elsewhere in the CNMI to absorb those displaced by the destruction. For example, while fruit bats were also over-hunted, they are now almost non-existent on Saipan because their habitat has been destroyed. The fruit bats can now only be found in some of the Northern Islands.

The CNMI has already sacrificed one island to the military - Farallon de Medinilla - as a bombing range. For some reason, birds continue to nest there. But there can be no doubt that if the bombing exercises intensify, the birds would no longer return - and the CNMI would lose more of its indigenous species.

The Northern Islands probably present a tempting picture for use by the military for its training and live firing practices. But these too are small, and harbor indigenous if not endemic species which would be lost if their habitat were destroyed. In addition, the Northern Islands are one of the CNMI's few assets, and those that are habitable have great potential for development as eco-tourism sites, among other things. Others, Pagan in particular, not only have valuable historic relics from pre-World War II usage, but are also considered home to a number of Carolinians forced to leave there when the volcano erupted. The CNMI cannot afford to have its assets destroyed, defaced, denuded.

The CNMI's economy is faltering at the moment, making it imperative that its viability as a tourism destination be protected and defended, given that tourism is the CNMI's main industry. Tourism depends on beauty, peace and quiet, and the proliferation of native wildlife, on land and in the sea. Thus, a proposed increase in underwater mine warfare, for example, could threaten the marine environment, destroying many things tourists are attracted to - whether it be the whales going by in season, the dolphins, the beauty of the underwater fish and corals or the availability of sport fish in the area. Underwater sonar experiments would also adversely affect the marine habitat. As does anchoring of ships, even now.

Destruction of marine habitat would also affect local residents, many of whom still depend heavily on the ability to harvest marine resources for their sustenance, while some make commercial use of them.

The islands' beaches provide nesting sites for turtles. The proposed Littoral Combat ship and use of the shore by heavy equipment (amphibious

vehicles) of any type would create havoc to those sites, not to mention the increase in erosion that would ensue. The CNMI does not have beaches to spare. Everyone is used by tourists, not to mention local residents, as it is.

Another concern is the degree to which noise is bound to increase with the MIRC -proposed live firing exercises in Tinian, increased overflights for training missions in the area, underwater detonations, etc. At present, the atmosphere is pretty bucolic - so quiet one can hear a coconut drop; hear a rooster flap its wings before it crows. The increasing noise at extreme decibel levels would destroy the peace and quiet of the islands - for residents and tourists alike - not an acceptable phenomenon.

It is not at all clear to me what increase of use of the CNMI by the military for the purposes of training, live-range firing exercises, underwater mine warfare, small arms and mortar ranges, and related operations could be tolerated without creating environmental damage of one kind or another. Use of Tinian is perhaps the exception - it has considerable area that has long been reserved for use by the military - except that an increase in noise from mortar firings and jet overflights and the like would adversely affect Saipan, since it is only three miles away.

It has been suggested that the CNMI be used primarily as for R&R for troops stationed on Guam or Pacific fleet ships in the area. This too raises concerns, but not nearly as many as does actual use of the islands for combat training. Here the concern would be maintaining respect for the property, customs, culture of others, and protection of the beaches, reef, corals, etc. - all markedly more manageable than the activities that would be part of the MIRC.