



COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

Benigno R. Fitial
Governor

Timothy P. Villagomez
Lieutenant Governor

VIA CERTIFIED MAIL

APR 29 2008

President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

RE: Designation of a Marine National Monument in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

Dear President Bush:

The purpose of this letter is to apprise you and those within your Administration regarding recent inquiries made by national environmental organizations concerning the designation of a Marine National Monument in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands ("CNMI").

In December, 2007, I received a letter from the Pew Charitable Trusts ("Pew") requesting my support for the designation of a National Monument sector around the northernmost three of the Northern Mariana Islands (Uracas, Maug, and Asuncion Islands), an area already designated by our founders as a Nature Preserve under the CNMI Constitution. A copy of that letter is enclosed for your reference. In its letter, Pew noted that it had modeled its thinking concerning the proposed National Monument on the recent designation of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands ("NWHI") as a Marine National Monument.

On March 19, 2008, I responded to Pew's letter of request for my endorsement. A copy of my response is also enclosed for your reference. As outlined in my response, I do not support Pew's proposed creation of a Marine National Monument in the Northern Mariana Islands. Such a designation would, in my view, greatly reduce or eliminate the ability of the CNMI government to carefully balance cultural, environmental, and economic considerations in the region in an open and inclusive manner.

In view of your Administration's recent designation of the NWHI as a National Monument, I felt it important to convey to you my concerns about this PEW proposal, and the rationale underlying these concerns. My hope is that representatives from your Administration will coordinate with me and the CNMI Administration before taking any further action on any proposal advanced by Pew in this regard.

First, a long history exists regarding ownership and management of submerged lands around the Northern Mariana Islands. Article IX of the CNMI Constitution declares that all submerged lands in and around the Northern Mariana Islands belong to the people of the CNMI, and that management and disposition of submerged lands shall be governed by the laws of the CNMI. For over 20 years, since the establishment of a Covenant between the CNMI and the U.S., the Federal government and the CNMI have engaged in discussions regarding ownership and management of these areas, and the CNMI remains resolute that submerged lands rightfully belong to the indigenous peoples of this area.

Second, notwithstanding assurances contained in Pew's December, 2007, letter, I am concerned with the potential impact of such a designation on ocean areas of critical importance to the people of the CNMI. As an island community and traditional native culture, the CNMI's very existence is tied to the sea. Fishing and related activities are intrinsically intertwined with our culture and economy---present and future. We rely on fishing as a source of food and jobs. Those who live in the CNMI have no interest in ceding their cultural heritage to the Federal government under the auspices of environmental protectionism.

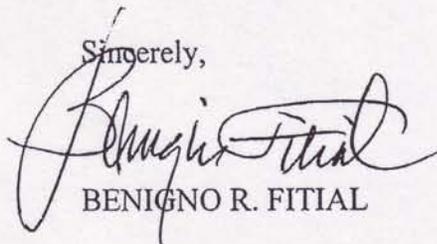
Third, as the process surrounding the designation of the NWHI National Monument makes clear, monument designation under the Antiquities Act of 1906 lacks procedural safeguards to insure public involvement and environmental review during the designation process. Given the importance of a decision such as this to the people of the CNMI, any consideration regarding the designation of a National Monument must include a full and complete analysis of its cultural, economic, and environmental impacts.

Fourth, the CNMI has actively supported the development of a commercial longline fishery in areas around the Northern Mariana Islands. The CNMI is working to expand its fishing fleet to fill the vacuum in its narrow economic base due to the recent closure of the garment industry and the contraction of tourism. Increasingly-stringent Federal immigration controls will further impact tourism from emerging markets like Russia and China. The loss of about 115,000 square miles of ocean area due to inclusion in a National Monument would significantly impact this developing fishery and the economy of the CNMI.

Finally, the views contained in this letter are shared by the majority of the representatives in the CNMI legislature, and their constituents. As the enclosed Senate Resolution makes clear, the CNMI Constitution has already designated the islands of Uracas, Maug, and Asuncion as wildlife conservation areas, with the waters surrounding these islands already constituting marine protected areas. Given this consideration, and given our desire to retain control over such areas for the benefit of indigenous peoples, the Senate and House of Representatives of the CNMI recently enacted a joint resolution opposing the establishment, creation, or designation of a Marine Monument, Marine Sanctuary, or National Park in the vicinity of the Northern Islands of the CNMI.

In view of these considerations, I respectfully request that you refrain from designating any portion of the CNMI as a Marine Monument, Marine Sanctuary, or National Park, as requested by the people of the CNMI and evidenced in the enclosed resolution and this letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Benigno R. Fitia". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "B".

BENIGNO R. FITIAL

Cc: CNMI Delegation
James L. Connaughton, Chairman, Council on Environmental Quality
Dirk Kempthorne, Secretary of Interior
Carlos M. Gutierrez, Secretary of Commerce