

DeVonne Sablan

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The Lack of Marine Protected Areas

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Robert Swan once said, *“The greatest danger to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.”* Marine Protected Areas, or MPAs, are zones where human activities are more strictly managed in order to protect threatened marine species and other resources. Today, there are 7 MPAs in the CNMI with only 3 of them surrounding Saipan: Bird Island, Mañagaha, and Forbidden Island. They can be very effective as they allow damaged ecosystems to recover and give fish the opportunity to reproduce more offspring. We can’t hide the fact that we rely heavily on our marine resources for food here on the islands, so properly maintaining them is extremely important. This is why we will be focusing on the three main points; which are the community’s opinion on MPAs, how they benefit the community, and ways to increase MPAs in the CNMI. Before moving any further, we must take a look at what our people have to say about marine protected areas.

As islanders, the community relies heavily on the ocean for food, so their opinions are vital. According to a study done by Danny Morris in 2017, people of the Northern Mariana Islands overwhelmingly support marine protected areas in the CNMI and want more protected areas in their waters (2018). Also, a recent survey’s findings concluded that their support remains the same. Although, 75 percent believe that the 7 existing MPAs require stricter restrictions before increasing them because they are being easily trespassed. “When asked how much of the Mariana Islands ocean space should be protected, the average answer was 57 percent” (2018). Researchers say that there is quite a lot of evidence to show that marine protected areas can benefit species, particularly those that have been threatened historically within the protected area boundaries (Dasgupta). Now that we’ve heard the voices of our people, we can talk about how MPAs put a positive impact on the community.

Marine protected areas help our community in many ways. They “help sustain critical

habitats and marine resources for future generations to enjoy” (Moretti). The more fish and beautiful views, the better! This also applies to our fishermen, the increased catch is an economic advantage for them. Our islands are a major tourist attraction and it is our main source of income. The existing MPAs here “appeal to snorkelers and divers,” most of which are tourists “who appreciate the enhanced numbers and diversity of fish species” (Schulyer). “MPAs are therefore a great asset for the tourism industry, ultimately enhancing our entire economy” (Schulyer). MPAs do good for the community, which brings us to find ways to increase them here in the CNMI.

There are several options when it comes to increasing the number of marine protected areas and where they should be located. The survey conducted just last month concluded that many believe Obyan beach should be turned into a marine protected area. Years ago, the beach was filled with all kinds of fish. Due to unfortunate weather events over the years and most especially overfishing, the number of fish in the area decreased. Before increasing the number of MPAs here in the CNMI, it is highly recommended that the community is well informed about the purpose and benefits that they bring to the islands. That way, everyone understands and respects them in order to get the best outcome possible. According to the findings on the survey, the best way to increase the number of MPAs is to work together to attract attention all around the CNMI regarding the overwhelming support. Our authorities listen when our people speak up. When that is done, we are another step closer to saving our marine life.

Overall, findings suggest that marine protected areas are encouraged by the people of the CNMI, they put a positive impact on the community, and can be increased in many ways. Making just a small move to improve our planet can go a long way. We all see things that we know don't belong, trash on the ground for example, and still ignore them, assuming someone

else will make it right. With a better and improved mindset, our planet can still be saved.

## References

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**Assisted on: 10/21/20 from 2:00 pm to 3:00 pm**