

Saipan Stevedore Company, Inc. Award Winner –
Nathaniel T. Snodgrass

2020 Department of Public Lands Scholarship Essay Contest

Essay Prompt- “Why is it important to preserve public lands in the CNMI?”

Public Lands: The Core of the People

As a little boy, I used to pepper my grandfather with questions about the CNMI and its struggling economy. “Papa, why do the states have so much, and we have so little?” This was essentially a question about economics, and I have not stopped asking these questions since. Part of my mission while studying at Gonzaga is to uncover solutions to wicked problems facing the CNMI and so many other struggling economies. But for many years, before my formal economics education, I thought that one answer would be to put public lands up for development to boost the economy. At first, it seemed like my genius plan to open up public lands to anyone would be a good idea. However, as time passed and my education progressed, I quickly realized that taking the fast route to money was not a good idea and that our public lands need to be protected.

If you ask the person next to you what is the possession that they cherish the most, what are the chances that they will say their land? Many civilizations from across the globe have been terrorized by colonialism and continue to feel its lasting impact today. While the CNMI is no exception, the people of the CNMI are one of the few in the world today that can preserve and protect their public lands. Since the first Spanish ship landed centuries ago, our ancestors fought to regain control of their once governed islands. They did so not for themselves but for the generations to follow. In the Chamorro culture, we continue to see this tradition of sacrificing for family live on to this day, and not protecting public lands would mean letting our ancestors die in vain.

Additionally, despite our freedom, our lands remain vulnerable to hostile intervention. As we have seen in many states and even on our islands, handing our public lands to large corporations to enhance the economy does not always result in an ideal sustainable investment. While the promises of jobs and money for the economy sound good, these corporations do not always fulfill their promises. Furthermore, the damage that these companies can do to these lands could be irreversible. The CNMI is home to unique wildlife not found in any other parts of the world, and destroying their habitats may push them closer to extinction. Developing idle land can also decrease its value. When the time comes to find a new lessee, the government may miss out on critical revenue to finance its operations and sustain the economy. Tasking people with protecting public lands ensures sustainable developments and the continued focus on keeping these lands in the public’s hands.

While our land may seem like an ocean of money to others, to those of Northern Marianas descent, they are one of the few remaining gifts left behind by our ancestors who fought so hard for them. Like many precious resources, they are scarce, and there needs to be an organization like the Department of Public Lands to protect and preserve them. At one point in my life, I believed that the CNMI had so little, and then I reflected about the one gift many of my people and I have the honor to share.