

Saipan Triple Star Recycling Award Winner –
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2020 Department of Public Lands Scholarship Essay Contest

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

The Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands comprises 14 beautiful islands endowed with majestic creatures, pristine tropical beaches, and lively multicultural communities. Although isolated from the world's large nations and bustling cities, the vibrant natural landscapes prevent our islands from slipping into obscurity. For centuries, the lands supported the life and growth of our ancestors and the generations that led to ours. As the lands provided comfort and subsistence, they molded our people's captivating stories and complex cultures. Today our lands continue to play the same critical role; however, they assume greater demands as society evolves and resource consumption increases. Unfortunately, numerous threats to our public lands have emerged, including climate change, development, military expansion, pollution, and natural disasters, all of which jeopardize our livelihoods and cultural heritage. We, the people of the Marianas, rely on the lands to connect us to our cultures, sustain our economy's stability, and support the islands' environmental health; therefore, preservation of public lands should be of paramount importance.

Abundant in cultural resources and rich in history, the CNMI's public lands possess the extraordinary ability to unite the present with the past. While our history textbooks will only tell us so much, our lands provide a raw and impartial narrative of our history and culture. Artifacts and historical landmarks, such as latte stones, cliffs, caves and World War II sites, can be found on public lands, allowing current and future generations to discover and embrace our history. However, unlike other resources, historical and cultural resources are non-renewable, and once gone, they will cease to provide stories that connect us to our past. Preservation and access to these resources are critical to sustaining our islands' diverse community and our people's cultural identity. Public land preservation would protect these resources and prevent our cultural history from becoming obsolete.

While public lands function as a door to our past, they also hold the key to a viable future with healthy ecosystems and a healthy environment. Over 350 years of foreign dominance exploited our lands and led to our natural environment's current critical condition. Under the Spanish, German, and Japanese administrations, exotic animals and plants were introduced, native forests were lost, and agriculture intensified. Today, we must enact public land preservation efforts to prevent further degradation of the environment. Public lands are abundant in natural resources that maintain our quality of life and provide traditional islander needs. Preserving healthy forests prevents soil erosion and provides a sustainable yield of food, medicine, fuel, lumber, clean water and clean air. Also, wetland conservation protects our islands' natural drainage systems.

Additionally, public lands provide a habitat for indigenous animal and plant species, which hold a well-established role in maintaining a healthy and balanced ecosystem. Yet, numerous indigenous species are threatened or endangered, including the fanihi, the aga, the haggan, and the chachaguak. As super typhoons ravage our islands, sea levels rise, and waste pollutes our coastlines, these at-risk species are pushed further toward extinction. Protected public lands can provide refuge for vulnerable species and protect them from predators and the elements.

As public land preservation can keep our culture alive and maintain our landscapes' beauty, it can stimulate our economy's growth. The CNMI's tourism-based economy relies on the health and charm of our lands to attract visitors from around the world. The majority of our tourists seek to experience our scenic tropical landscapes, thrilling nature activities, and rich cultural history, all of which can be provided through public land preservation. Ecotourism, a rapidly growing world niche market, is a promising and profitable opportunity for the Marianas, but it also requires protecting our outdoor environment and cultural heritage. With the help of public land preservation, a healthy and stable tourism economy will ultimately create an enriched life for current and future generations by reducing poverty, raising incomes, improving government finances and enhancing the education system.

Public lands, the CNMI's greatest asset, are vital for understanding our complex past and building a thriving future. Preserving our public lands is merely an act of respect; respect for our ancestors' home and resting place, and every single CNMI descendant's birthright to our lands. Privatization or destruction of our public lands would amount to the theft of the people of the CNMI's history, culture and livelihood. As the fallen heirs of the islands, we must honor our duty to protect our legacy and secure unrestricted access to our lands and their benefits for the generations to come.