

Jo Anna Ada Award Winner for Saipan –
Peachy Josifynn Quitugua

2020 Department of Public Lands Scholarship Essay Contest

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

How can we continue to learn from our ancestors and reconnect with them? How can we mentally, spiritually and physically continue our indigenous practices to better preserve our culture? One thing for certain is that there will always be a sacred, almost transcendent bond between us and our indigenous land. The Northern Marianas Islands may be small compared to the rest of the world, but our culture and our home in which we thrive is colossal. Our public land is cemented to our culture, which makes it vital to maintain and protect because of the identity it gives us as people. It is connected to our language, our traditions, and most especially our heritage as descendants of the Northern Marianas Islands.

From the day we are born, we are taught by our grandmothers and grandfathers about the importance of respecting and preserving the land. Not only does it sustain our vital necessities such as shelter, water, herbal remedies, and food but it helps us all live in balance just as our ancestors have. Our wealth does not stem from currency and trade, but from our adherence to tradition and respect. Part of that culture and tradition that we all know to revere is the latte stone, a symbol of our land that represents the strength and perseverance of a household foundation. We learned through the preservation of our land that a single latte stone cannot serve as the foundation alone. From this we teach our children that our ancestors were strong but only if we, as people, were in unison with our land. Unfortunately, much of our sacred land was dismantled and razed from World War II. But not all was lost as the pieces of history that we had found afterwards that tell the stories of our ancestors are protected today and as long as there is a son or daughter of the Marianas roaming our earth, it is our duty to preserve that history. Those pieces of our history, much like the latte stone, reminds us of the perseverance and resilience that our people and our land represent. Despite it all, our culture and our sacred home remains and it must not be given away as it is part of who we are and who we will be.

Protecting public lands is more than a privilege, it is an honor to many of the indigenous people. This honor reminds us of those before us, the Tao’Tao Mona which are the spirits of our Chamorro Ancestors who protected our lands to this today. They passed down an abundance of knowledge from one generation to the next, creating an everlasting kinship that can never be forgotten. Mona, which means forward, reminds us that we must always continue to move forward and continue to care for our land and pass it down from generation to generation, a “rites of passage.” We know that throughout history, colonization was prevalent in our world, resulting in land being stolen from many native communities. Stealing land means destroying culture. This was evident throughout the many native communities that have had their rightful land annexed, which then ultimately resulted in the degradation of their language, culture, and tradition. This is not past history, for contemporary colonization is occurring right now in our present day throughout the world. We must heed this warning and preserve our land for its essentially all we have that unites us all. We as descendants of the Marianas must learn from our ancestors and be cohesive in protecting our birthright for the sake of our people. Indigenous lands will and must always belong in indigenous hands.