

## Department of Public Lands Scholarship Essay Contest 2021

**What can the CNMI do to strike a sustainable balance between land preservation and land development? (500-800 words)**

Land development has been a major topic of interest in the Northern Mariana Islands since the arrival of the Spanish. Foreign colonizers saw the immense potential of our geographic location and natural resources in the islands, and initiated land development of a settlement that greatly differed from the sustainable society indigenous Chamorros had already built centuries prior. From the Spanish era of Western societal development to the German times of copra exports to the Japanese occupation of sugarcane plantations, our ancestors have observed various forms of land development that foreigners ensued on our islands. In more recent decades, the devastation of World War II on Saipan led to even more development, which included modern forms of housing and construction in addition to military expansion. Later, the establishment of self-governance as a U.S. commonwealth brought on exponential land development through increased tourism, the garment textile industry, and casino gaming industry. As our history has shown, in order to compete in this modern world, land development appears to be a priority for economic survival. However, at the same time, our land is an incredibly precious resource, so how do we develop it without tainting it and the natural resources that come from it? I believe the answer to this balance is to promote sustainable agriculture and cultural preservation, while reducing detrimental industries such as military expansion and casino gaming.

Sustainable agriculture is a form of land development that can actually act as a preservation of our natural resources. Agriculture was indeed a successful economic industry during the Japanese occupation. Unlike sugar cane, however, growing more of our traditional foods such as *lemmai* (breadfruit), *kamuti* (sweet potato), *sunii* (taro), and *niyok* (coconut) to a scale in which we are developing land for agriculture will allow for economic exports and at the same time preserve what we already have had on our lands for centuries. Growing other varieties of fruits and vegetables through diverse agroforests or hydroponic systems are also positive sustainable ways of developing land for economic purposes while providing healthy nourishment for our population locally.

Cultural preservation can add to this balance as it naturally promotes land preservation. Our indigenous culture is greatly tied to land sustainability and vice versa. Thus, increasing education to our children about our traditional ways can help preserve our land for the future as it will educate children on who we are, our connection to the islands, and the importance of why we must conserve it for our future generations. Unfortunately, the current perspectives we have on land use have been influenced by modern westernized society and not the views of our Chamorro and Carolinian cultures. The livelihood of our indigenous ancestors was to preserve the land and develop the land in a way that would be sustainable. Our way of life included fishing and growing what we needed to eat and survive. Our culture is very much tied to sustainable agriculture.

Through sustainable agriculture and cultural preservation, we can still maintain and improve current industries such as tourism and add to the economic revenue it provides. As much as tourists are interested in the beautiful sites of our islands, they are also interested in our local culture, which include our peoples, languages, foods, and way of life. Enhancing a

sustainable agricultural industry that can also support the creation of locally made products will provide many more unique gifts for tourists to have and bring home and promote.

Land development is a crucial part of improving the livelihood of our people in our current global society, but at the same time it is of utmost importance to preserve it and not permanently destroy it. Let us not have outsiders influence what we should provide or how we should develop our land. For so long we have imported so much of our needs – from food to workers to economic industries such as military and casino gaming. We must open our eyes and realize that our lush land, right in front of us, can provide so much to us locally in terms of food, employment, and economy. Our people, our culture, and our ancestral knowledge in land preservation is our biggest strength so let us use it to develop the land and improve our livelihood, health, and well-being. Ultimately, I believe our cultural traditions and the current modern ways of living can be married to develop the land through sustainable agriculture.

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