

# Report on the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

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The 14 tropical islands comprising the Northern Marianas chain stretch across 400 miles in the western Pacific Ocean, just adjacent to the famed Marianas Trench, with the world's greatest known ocean depth of 35,810 feet.

Volcanic in origin, the Marianas lie approximately 1,300 miles south of Tokyo, 1,400 miles east of Manila, 3,200 miles west of Honolulu, and 2,900 miles north of Sydney.

Saipan, the largest and most populated island in the group, measures 13 miles long and 6 miles across at its widest point (area 47 square miles). Saipan's western shore is almost completely encircled by a huge barrier reef creating a beautiful, calm lagoon with sparkling white sand beaches.

The Northern Marianas enjoy one of the most stable climates in the world with abundant year-round sunshine and refreshingly clean air and water. Average year-round temperature is 84 degrees Fahrenheit with an average humidity of 79%. The ocean temperature averages 82 degrees Fahrenheit.

Occasional passing rain showers and gentle prevailing northeast trade winds provide an environment that has been described by travel writers as, "as perfect as it gets."

That is what the Marianas Visitor's Authority web site says about the Northern Marianas geography and climate. And though my home is beautiful, we face many challenges to keep it so.

Poaching and exploitation of our fishery resources. The hundreds of miles of ocean surrounding our islands are virtually unpatrolled by either the U.S. or Commonwealth enforcement agencies. We have little concept of who

may be fishing or utilizing the 10 uninhabited islands to the north or the three inhabited islands, Saipan, Rota and Tinian, to the south.

Pollution. Whether it is run-off from farms, failing sanitation systems, leaching dump sites, or indiscriminate ocean dumping by passing vessels, pollution is the main threat to our shores, coral reefs and associated marine habitats.

Erosion of our beaches and coast lines. Whether caused by sunken or stranded vessels or development, erosion of our beaches and coast lines is an ongoing concern for coastal ecosystems and infrastructure. Managaha, a small island on Saipan's barrier reef, has endured massive erosion between 1999 and 2001. Erosion on Saipan itself threatens roads, houses, and businesses near the coastline.

Education for better stewardship. Education is necessary for both the residents and visitors that enjoy our ocean resources but also the local staff that manages them. Enhancing education of our people, our visiting tourists, and our guest workers will increase the sense of ownership, caring and commitment to our marine resources and environment. Local agencies must develop the capacity to manage their own resources without the continual reliance on outside "technical expertise". Wise stewardship of resources requires data that support management decisions.

Cooperation between federal and local agencies. Neither the federal government nor the Commonwealth government can alone address these problems and concerns. Closer cooperation is the only way these problems will be addressed. If we are to maintain truth behind the idyllic description used to attract visitors to our islands, we must get serious about working together and protecting our marine and coastal resources.

We must work together to repair marine areas that have been damaged, restoring ecosystems and protecting marine life. We must explore ways to encourage and control marine commerce. We must find balance between "development and nature", and "utilization and protection".