NMI should tap heritage tourism potential

BY ALEXIE VILLEGAS ZOTOMAYOR
Saipan Reporter

GUAM RAI, Saipan — A visiting archaeologist has suggested that the Northern Mariana Islands follow the example of the state of Florida and capitalize on heritage tourism.

According to Jennifer McInnon, an underwater archaeologist who used to work for the historic preservation office in Florida prior to relocating to Australia to teach at Flinders University, "there are several studies on heritage tourism and how much money it brings in to the local economy. One particular study was done in Florida where they identified different types of tourism."

McInnon was referring to "Economic Impacts of Historic Preservation in Florida," a study initiated by the Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources. Funding assistance from the National Parks Service of the U.S. Department of Interior. The study revealed striking evidence that Florida's investment in the preservation and protection of historic places and the legacy of the cultures that created it are paying huge dividends — $4 billion annually.

The study further revealed that historic preservation activities created jobs, made substantial contributions to tax collections in the amount of $657 million to state and local governments as tourists spent $3.7 billion.

"People spend a lot of money going to historic sites if you are to develop an underwater trail and market it internationally, market it through dive magazines and dive shows, you could have a world-class World War II underwater heritage trail," McInnon said.

McInnon told the JNS that her application for a grant to develop an underwater archeological trail was approved by the National Park Service under the Battlefield Preservation Project Grants for 2009. She said that the $40,967 grant would allow them to conduct an archeological survey and GIS mapping of the sandy beach at Tanapag Lagoon to identify and document submerged remains of the Battle of Saipan for use in the future development of an underwater maritime heritage trail.

"For us, it is really a good opportunity to jumpstart heritage tourism, get people out diving and more tourists coming to dive in World War II sites and generate money," McInnon said.

McInnon said the main goals of the project were to create three to four underwater sites, map those archeologically, research their history, and create brochures and underwater site guides so people can dive them and know what they are looking at.

"After those three to four sites have been developed from this grant, we would be looking for more money to develop more sites," said McInnon who along with her colleague Ronnie Rogers of Saipan's Historic Preservation Office have been envisioning an underwater heritage trail.

Initially, McInnon and her team have started mapping and background research. They also conducted training under the auspices of Flinders University in Australia.

Believing that the $50,000 grant won't be sufficient, McInnon said they offered training to raise awareness and develop a volunteer base. "$50,000 won't be enough so we will rely on the diving public to help us out," she said.

For an emergent heritage tourism industry to flourish, McInnon put a high premium on the diving industry's readiness. She said dive shops will have to do training and be involved in the process.

She also highlighted the role of the tour operators and the Marinas Visitors Authority to be actively engaged in the project to market it.

Once an underwater trail has been opened to the public, regulatory agencies including the Department of Public Safety and the United States Coast Guard will need to monitor and protect the wrecks.

In the meantime, McInnon is encouraging interested individuals to sign up for the maritime archeology training.

Asiana has new Saipan GM

BY ALEXIE VILLEGAS ZOTOMAYOR
Saipan Reporter

GUAM RAI, Saipan — Heung Sik Choi is filling the shoes of Kwang Joong Kim as general manager of Asiana Airlines on Saipan.

Effective July 2009, Choi, who has been with the airline since 1989, will be handling sales and marketing of Asiana Airlines at the Saipan International Airport. Kim returned to the airline's Korea office on June 30.

Prior to this assignment, Choi was general manager of the airport office and station manager at the airport office in Bangkok, Thailand, from 2000 to 2004. Choi, commenting on his predecessor, said he admired Kim for his many contributions to the Asiana Airlines Korea-Saipan route and also credited him with increasing the flight frequency.

Marinas Visitors Authority also hailed the achievements of Kim who was instrumental in bringing in Kumho Asiana Group that acquired Lao Lao Bay Golf Resort and for helping to increase Korean tourist arrivals on Saipan.

Asked about his impressions of Saipan, Choi said, "Saipan offers Korean tourists a good environment, clear sky and fantastic sea."

He also said he is looking at introducing Saipan to Korean tourists via Korean Broadcasting System.

Choi added that he is optimistic that flights will continue to increase despite the economic slowdown.