Archaeologist discusses prospects for NMI heritage tourism

FROM where she originally came from, heritage tourism is a thriving $4.2 billion industry and given the rich historical and cultural heritage of the Northern Mariana Islands, visiting archaeologist Dr. Jennifer McKinnon believes in the prospects for this industry in the islands.

In a public lecture at the Visitor Center of the American Memorial Park last Friday, Dr. McKinnon talked about how she engaged with Historical Preservation Office and Coastal Resources Management to work on managing underwater resources that led to exploring the option for heritage tourism.

For McKinnon, with the state of the CNMI economy “Saipan [the CNMI] recently is struggling to make ends meet, we talked about the option of heritage tourism and developing a trail.”

McKinnon shared findings of a report published by the University of Florida that pointed out that heritage tourism brings $4.2 billion in revenue to the state.

She said they thought it could generate funds as well for the CNMI.

In her public lecture, McKinnon shared highlights of the report that showed heritage tourism impacts that can be seen in job creation, income generation, increased gross state product, increased state and local tax collections, and increased in-state wealth.

According to the Univ. of Florida report, heritage preservation activities created 123,242 jobs, generated $2.78 billion in income, $5.27 billion in gross state product, $1.25 billion in total taxes, $657 million in state and local taxes, and produced $4.67 billion in in-state wealth.

The report further showed that among the sectors impacted by historic preservation activities, 33,621 jobs created in the services sector generated $751 million in annual income with 55,002 jobs in retail trade with income reaching $796 million.

McKinnon said, “Heritage tourism is a major operation [in the state of Florida where she came from].”

She added, “Florida is huge. It has lots of parks, and trails, and historic sites that people visit. This is the way to generate funds.”

Believing that what had been done and what is happening in Florida could be replicated in the CNMI, McKinnon said, “The next step was to really get serious about documenting the WWII sites and developing the underwater heritage trail.”

McKinnon, who’s affiliated with the Ships of Discovery — a Corpus Christi, Texas-based organization promoting artifact conservation among other missions — applied for a grant from the American Battle Protection Program of the National Park Service that awarded their project $50,000 which made possible the creation of the underwater heritage trail.
McKinnon said, “The major objectives of the grant are really to understand the extent of the battlefield that was in the water, things that happened in the underwater setting, why sites ended up in these kind of places, what happened to the crews, gather data to fill out National Register nominations on the individual sites that are out in the water, and develop underwater heritage trail in conjunction with the HPO.”

The grant made it possible for McKinnon and her colleagues to conduct work underwater, gather underwater archaeological data and worked on the trail.

McKinnon also acknowledged working with six masters thesis students who helped generate “a lot of archaeological data.”

She also extended her gratitude to HPO, CRM, DEQ, local divers and tour operators for supporting the project.

“What we ended up with is an underwater WWII Battle of Saipan trail,” said McKinnon.

The trail includes 12 sites, including American and Japanese vehicles — planes, tanks, shipwrecks, armored vehicles.

“It is a self-guided tour. You choose your own adventure,” she said.

“It is something that you can do individually or you can do as an organized group,” said McKinnon.

She said the deepest site in the trail is 35 feet. She said they look forward to having deep-water sites on the trail for people “who like more challenge.”

Through the grant from the American Battlefield Protection Program, McKinnon said they are producing the underwater laminated guides (8.5” x 11”), four posters (18” x 24”) and brochures which they hope to produce in Chamorro, Carolinian, English, Japanese, Chinese, and Russian.

The Flinders University professor said the materials would be available sometime in May or in June this year.

The first print-run she said was funded by the grant from the National Park Service; however, the art work will be left with the Marianas Visitors Authority, Historic Preservation Office, Coastal Resources Management and the NMI Council for the Humanities should the need arises to reprint these materials.

**The underwater heritage trail**

During the lecture, McKinnon provided a preview of what could be found in the underwater heritage trail.

The Grumman TBM Avenger — which the poster stated as a U.S. Navy torpedo bomber, and one of the more widely produced naval strike aircraft in history — could be found 10 feet underwater, said McKinnon.

“It’s upside down. Its landing gear is sticking up….It’s a fantastic little wreck. It is great for snorkeling,” said McKinnon.

She said a buoy marks the spot. Eventually, she said they are working with CRM on moorings.

She said avengers were used in early air attacks in February, April, and prior to invasion in June 1944. They were important in knocking out installations and preparing the islands for American invasion. Avengers were also used, she said, in the Marianas Turkey Shoot which McKinnon said probably set up the success of the United States in the Marianas.

In identifying the avenger wreck, McKinnon said they discovered it was the avenger by looking at the wheel wells — “where landing gear folds into the plane — unique to this particular plane.”
The archaeologist, who originally wanted to work on the Spanish colonial archaeology in the islands, said there’s also the wreckage of Kawanishi H8K or “Emily” that can be found in Tanapag Lagoon, 29 feet underwater.

“This is a popular dive site,” she said.

McKinnon described “Emily” as a great site owing to its “fantastic features” that include gun turret (with machine gun still sticking up), cockpit with chair and controls, painted fuselage (in gray and red paint), and propellers.

With Korean and Japanese monuments on the site, McKinnon said this is one of the things they recognized in posters and brochures.

Next, she showed Aichi E13A or “Jake” — the Japanese long-range float plane that can be found in 23 feet of water.

She said it was also upside-down.

“This site is interesting from an archaeological perspective.”

McKinnon said they are still working on a theory about dumping and how this aircraft was dragged out to the site.

She said, “There’s a large section of landing gear that is not associated with this plane.”

This led them to suspect that it could have been dumped but they have yet to look into historical documentation to support this claim.

Other wrecks in the area include the Japanese freighter Shoan Maru with intact superstructure and bow section.

There is also a possible submarine chaser lying on its starboard side with an intact bow structure and collapsed and disarticulated hull section.

McKinnon’s group also documented a Daihatsu Landing Craft or a large motorized boat used by the Japanese landing forces in WWII. McKinnon said there are two of this and are 350 feet apart.

She also mentioned about three Sherman tanks that are semi-submerged and an LVT or landing vehicle tracked, an amphibious tractor.

McKinnon said the trail will be launched at the end of May or early June when brochures and posters arrive.

She said brochures and posters are currently under review by the National Park Service prior to printing.

The brochures and posters will be sent to the Humanities Council for distribution to libraries and schools.

**Other ongoing projects**

Meanwhile, McKinnon said their latest visit to the island was made possible through the NOAA Marine Education Training Mini Grant program that helped them run the two trainings in heritage awareness.

The seminars held at the Manamko Center conference room from April 12-16, was conducted by McKinnon with Dr. Della Scott-Ireton of the Florida Public Archaeology Network.

The trainings included lectures on underwater archaeology, shipwrecks and ship construction; seafaring culture; conservation issues; federal and state laws on submerged cultural resources; and artificial reefs.
McKinnon said, “You can't put something into place without knowledge about how to use these resources and heritage.”

The trainings were free to the diving industry.

Moreover, McKinnon's other project on island involved mapping, recording sites related to indigenous use.

There is also an ongoing wooden shipwreck project.

She also mentioned about applying for another grant for $80,000 to fund the filming of the heritage trail that will be shown in the National Park Service parks and to be shown on TV as well.