

STATEMENT OF STEPHANIE TOOTHMAN, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, CULTURAL RESOURCES, PARTNERSHIPS, AND SCIENCE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE, CONCERNING H.R. 674, A BILL TO AUTHORIZE THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO STUDY THE SUITABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF DESIGNATING PREHISTORIC, HISTORIC, AND LIMESTONE FOREST SITES ON THE ISLAND OF ROTA, COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS, AS A UNIT OF THE NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM.

JULY 31, 2013

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of the Interior's testimony regarding H.R. 674, a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to study the suitability and feasibility of designating prehistoric, historic, and limestone forest sites on Rota, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, as a unit of the National Park System.

The Department supports H.R. 674 with a technical amendment. Priority should be given, however, to the 30 previously authorized studies for potential units of the National Park System, potential new National Heritage Areas, and potential additions to the National Trails System and National Wild and Scenic River System that have not yet been transmitted to Congress.

H.R. 674 would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to complete a Special Resource Study of sites on the Island of Rota for potential inclusion in the National Park System. We estimate that this study will cost approximately \$250,000 - \$300,000.

Rota, where the indigenous Chamorro and Carolinian people have retained their cultural heritage in its natural environment, is the southernmost island of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Spared the population displacement of other colonial islands and largely bypassed during World War II, Rota preserves striking examples of the three thousand-year-old Chamorro culture surrounded by the best remaining expanse of this island chain's native limestone forest.

The Mochon Latte Village, the Chugai Pictograph Cave, the Taga Latte Stone Quarry, and the Alaguan Bay Ancient Village prehistoric sites include architectural features unique to the ancient Chamorro culture and represent outstanding examples of the territory's cultural resources. These sites possess a high degree of integrity in location, materials, workmanship and association.

The limestone forests of Rota are the most intact and most extensive examples of primary, native limestone forest remaining on any island in the Mariana Archipelago. The forest provides and sustains habitat for endangered bird species, a threatened species of fruit bat, and numerous species of invertebrates that are proposed for listing as threatened or endangered. Several of these species are endemic to Rota. The significance of this unique biotic community cannot be overstated.

Rota's residents and legislative delegation have demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to the protection of the island's environment, including establishment of marine protected areas on Rota. In 2004, Senator Diego M. Songao, Chairman of the Rota Legislative Delegation of the Fourteenth Commonwealth Legislature, formally requested planning assistance from the National Park Service (NPS).

In response to this request, the NPS completed a reconnaissance survey of Rota's natural and cultural resources in September of 2005. The reconnaissance survey found that the natural and cultural resources of the island of Rota are significant to island residents, the CNMI, and the entire nation and merit protection. It also made a preliminary finding that these resources are likely to be suitable and feasible for inclusion in the park system.

At present, the people of Rota and their political leaders find themselves at a crossroads regarding the uses to which their lands are being put. Major land use changes are continuing to take place in the form of residential and agricultural lots being subdivided out of the island's public lands and transferred into private ownership.

Congressional authorization to conduct a Special Resource Study will provide a public process to determine the suitability and feasibility of designating prehistoric, historic, and limestone forest sites on Rota, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, as a unit of the National Park System. The NPS would be pleased to actively engage organizations, residents and others in discussions of how best to preserve Rota's significant cultural and natural resources.

The NPS recommends a technical correction to clarify the intent of section 2(a)(2) of the bill. We interpret this section to apply to areas identified as suitable and feasible for designation as a unit of the National Park System. It is possible, however, to read this section more broadly to imply that the National Park Service should examine alternatives for management of the entire island of Rota. We would like to work with the committee to clarify the intent of this section.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer questions that you or other members of the committee might have.