

## Consultation

### **“Enhancing the recreation and education potential of Country Parks and Special Areas in Hong Kong”**

#### ***Comments by Save Our Country Parks Alliance (SOCP)***

On 16<sup>th</sup> February this year, the Government launched a public consultation regarding proposals aimed at “enhancing the recreation and education potential of country park and special areas in Hong Kong”.

In general, SOCP supports measures to enhance the recreational and educational value of our country parks and special areas, while at the same time protecting the biodiversity, geodiversity and sustainability of our system of protected areas.

Having said that, the following key issues need to be addressed:

1. We are concerned over commercialisation and privatisation of country park areas and facilities. The renting out of tents on camp grounds and other park areas during public holidays have demonstrated how this can result in damage, nuisance, pollution and overcrowding. While we encourage implementing measures which help attract more visitors and users of the parks and special areas, efforts must be made to ensure that mass and group tourists with little experience in the use of sensitive areas are discouraged except for limited selected areas near entrances and public transport facilities.
2. We have observed significant increases in local, Mainland and overseas tourists along popular hiking routes and on campsites throughout Hong Kong’s country parks during weekends and public holidays. We note that the consultation failed to provide visitor statistics, conditions of facilities, impacts on environment, and transportation capacity. Information is needed to determine appropriate measures to enhance the potential of country parks in Hong Kong. The information provided in the consultation is limited to summary proposals. Comprehensive information is needed to determine carrying capacity, and how to balance conservation and developments which encourage greater use and visitation.
3. The natural characteristics, landforms, geodiversity and biodiversity of country parks should be safeguarded. An in-depth analysis of impacts on the natural environment with clear and full information is required. For example, the construction and operation of Tree Top Adventure, glamping and eco-lodge suites will require ground work, slope stabilisation, sewage systems, water and electricity supply, and so forth with potentially far reaching impacts. We note that essential information such as the location and the construction and operational impacts have yet to be identified in the consultation.
4. To minimize impacts on “green fields” in country parks we should prioritise the use and development of existing developed areas, structures, infrastructure and utilities first. As such, appropriate economic activities such as food and beverage, camping, hostel, sports, and other services can be encouraged and facilitated in the enclaves of private land surrounded by or on the edge of country parks fall. While these may fall technically outside the controls of the Country Park Ordinance (Cap. 208) and Country Park and Special Areas Regulations (Cap. 208A) they should be integral to any study. Existing developments and dilapidated areas in enclaves should be prioritised for enhancing the recreational and educational value of the surrounding country parks.

5. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department has suggested that it will consider private sectors to manage and maintain the enhanced facilities and services. This is of great concern. Any agreement should be of relative short term, or otherwise include a fixed schedule of review and right to cancel by the Country and Marine Parks Authority after seeking advice from the Country and Marine Parks Board. All facilities should be designed and operated for public use. The Government must retain full control over all facilities, operations and activities in country park areas, and retain responsibility for the quality of management and maintenance.
6. Priority should be given to supporting “low impact” activities, including support for appreciative uses of country and marine park areas such bird watching, the study of insects, flowers and trees, the study of geomorphology and geology, the appreciation of culture and history, and so forth. Active land based and waterborne sports activities –from running to surfing to flying paragliders - can be encouraged for selected areas and routes.
7. New facilities to be added should maintain rustic and simple characteristics in line with traditional furniture and facilities as can be seen around Shing Mun Reservoir. Moreover, priority should be given to simple measures to enhance the enjoyment of our country parks such as with significant expansion of fresh water supply points designed for refilling water bottles.
8. “Leave No Trace” attitude should be enabled and promoted. Visitors should be guided and educated on minimizing their impact on the environment, including proper waste handling and disposal. Resources must be deployed to reach out to every visitor – whether they enter on foot, from the seas, or by coach or by public transport. Comprehensive strategies must be deployed to ensure that the growth in users and usage of our parks does NOT lead to an increase in garbage, sewage, destruction, pollution, nuisance, or otherwise damage the geodiversity, biodiversity and sustainability of our system and protected areas.

Members of Save Our Country Parks Alliance include:

Ark Eden, Association for Geoconservation, Hong Kong, Clear the Air, Designing Hong Kong, Environmental Life Science, Friends of Hoi Ha, Friends of Sai Kung, Friends of Tai Long Wan, Friends of Earth, Green Power, Green Sense, Greeners Action, Green Peace, HKWildlife.net, Hong Kong Dolphin Conservation Society, Lantau Buffalo Association, Living Islands Movement, Sai Kung Cattle's Angel, Sai Kung Tai Long Wan Concern Group, The Conservancy Association, Hong Kong Bird Watching Society, Hong Kong Snake Concern Group, Hong Kong Outdoors, Green Lantau Association