

COUNTRY AND MARINE PARKS BOARD

Management and Protection of Hong Kong Country Parks and Geopark

1. Purpose

1.1 This paper aims to provide Members a general overview on the management and protection of the Country Parks and Geopark in Hong Kong.

2. Background

2.1 To provide proper venues for outdoor activities and for effective protection of the countryside in Hong Kong, the Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208) was enacted in 1976 to provide a legal framework for the designation, development and management of country parks and special areas. The Country and Marine Parks Authority (the Authority), i.e. the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation, is empowered by Section 3 of the Country Parks Ordinance for the control and management of country parks and special areas. Apart from the duties to make recommendation to the Chief Executive for designation of areas as country parks or special areas, the Authority shall be responsible to develop and manage country parks and special areas and to take such measures in respect of country parks and special areas as deemed necessary, including:

- (i) to encourage their use and development for the purposes of recreation and tourism;
- (ii) to protect the vegetation and wildlife inside country parks and special areas;
- (iii) to preserve and maintain buildings and sites of historic or cultural significance within country parks and special areas but without prejudice to the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance (Cap. 53); and
- (iv) to provide facilities and services for the public enjoyment of country parks and special areas.

2.2 Since the designation of the first batch of country parks in 1977, which included Shing Mun, Kam Shan and Lion Rock, there are 24 country parks and 22

special areas in Hong Kong nowadays. They cover about 40% of Hong Kong's total land area (i.e. 44,240 hectares). The number of visitors to country parks reaches some 13 million per year. Hiking trails, nature trails, geo-trails, family walks, mountain bike trails, barbecue and picnic sites, camp sites and visitor centres are provided in the country parks to meet public demand. Besides, the Authority also provides a wide variety of nature education programmes to students and general public each year.

3. Structure of the Country and Marine Parks Branch

3.1 The Country and Marine Parks Branch (C&MP Branch) of the Agriculture Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) is responsible for facilitating the fulfillment of the duties and responsibilities of the Authority as stated in the Country Parks Ordinance. The Country Parks (South-east) Division, the Country Parks (North-west) Division, the Country Park Ranger Services Division and the Geopark Division under the Branch are the four Divisions responsible for handling matters related to the country parks and the geopark. The organization chart of the C&MP Branch is attached at **Annex I**.

3.2 The day-to-day management work in country parks, such as cleansing, maintenance of facilities, tree planting and vegetation management, etc. are carried out by the Country Parks (South-east) Division and Country Parks (North-west) Division. They comprise 19 Management Centres, two regional workshops, one Fire Control Centre and one Nursery. There are about 640 field staff in the two Divisions. Besides country park management work, the two Divisions are also responsible for country parks planning, designation and handling development proposals within country parks. Regarding the duties and work related to law enforcement, visitor services and countryside education, these are taken up by the Country Park Ranger Services Division which comprises 17 Ranger Offices/sub-offices distributed in different country parks. There are about 160 field staff in the Division comprising Park Rangers and Park Wardens.

3.3 The Geopark Division was set up in April 2010 to develop strategies and take the lead on geopark related duties. The Division currently has 9 staff and is responsible for developing strategies and carrying them out in the following areas in relation to the geopark: conservation planning, research and science popularization, production of publications, and visitor services and facilities. It is also responsible for

tasks which are new to the protected areas in Hong Kong, such as partnering with local communities and networking with other geoparks

4. Designation of Country Parks

4.1 Country Parks are designated in accordance with the statutory procedures as laid down under the Country Parks Ordinance. Prior to invoking the statutory procedures, a potential site for designation as a new country park or incorporation into an existing country park shall be assessed its suitability for designation following the established principles and criteria, which include among other things, conservation value, landscape and aesthetic value, recreational potential, size, proximity to existing country parks, land status and existing land use of the site. Under the criteria, the mere existence of private land will not be automatically taken as a determining factor for exclusion from the boundary of a potential country park. Though Government land is preferred when a country park is designated, private land would be included into a country park if the use of the site is compatible with the country park setting.

5 Development proposals in Country Parks

5.1 There is a general presumption against development in country parks and special areas. However, development which is ascertained to have genuine need would be considered. The AFCD will assess any proposed use or development of land in a country park on the merits of the individual case and consider whether the proposed use or development would substantially reduce the enjoyment and amenities of the country park concerned. Relevant factors including land status, location, ecological impact, landscape and visual impacts, and recreational impact, etc. would be taken into account. If necessary, we will seek advice from the Country and Marine Parks Board before deciding whether the proposed use or development is acceptable or not.

6. Country Parks Management and Protection

6.1 Provision and management of recreational facilities

6.1.1 Currently, there are about 400 recreational sites within country parks. Most of these recreational sites are located in areas which are easily accessible. These sites are intended for heavy visitor use and are designed with provision of various recreational facilities such as tables and benches, barbecue pits, litter bins,

shelters, toilets, etc. Besides recreational sites, footpath well-developed hiking network was established in country parks to meet a variety of needs and expectations of country park visitors. There are existing 90 named trails which are regularly improved and waymarked. Among these trails, the four long-distance hiking trails, i.e the MacLehose Trail (100 km), the Lantau Trail (70m), the Hong Kong Trail (50 km) and the Wilson Trail (78km) are the most popular ones for hikers.

6.1.2 There are ten designated mountain bike trails/sites with a total length of 110 km available in different country parks. Person who carries a valid mountain biking permit issued by the Authority is allowed to ride on these designated mountain bike trails/site.

6.1.3 Most of the country parks facilities, hiking trails and mountain bike trails within country parks are constructed and maintained by respective Country Park Management Centres distributed in different country parks. All of these facilities are carefully designed in order to blend with the natural setting of the country parks environment.

6.2 Tree planting and seedling production

6.2.1 In recent years, some 700,000 seedlings have been planted per year for the purposes of soil erosion control, rehabilitation of disturbed landscapes and enhancement of biodiversity. Most of the seedlings for planting in the country parks are produced in the Tai Tong Nursery of the AFCD. Among all seedlings produced, about 80% comprising about 100 species are native species. Some seedlings of tree species which are not readily available in the market and of conservation concern, such as *Aquilaria sinensis* (土沉香), *Camellia spp* (茶屬), *Illicium spp* (八角屬), *Keteleeria forunei* (油杉), etc. are also produced in the Tai Tong Nursery for planting in the country parks. As the majority of country park areas is now well vegetated or have been covered by our past plantation programmes, the planting tactic is now focused more on the quality of planting instead of the quantity. More resources and manpower will be allocated to enhance the overall values of existing plantation areas in the country parks.

6.3 Hill fire prevention and suppression

6.3.1 The drastic damages brought by hill fire could negate decades of effort in

afforestation and ecosystem enhancement work, and cause habitat loss to the inhabiting wildlife. Therefore, minimizing the occurrence of hill fire and containing the damage during an outbreak is one of our major duties. In this regard, the AFCD has established a comprehensive hill fire control system which comprises hill fire-fighting crews that put on 24-hour stand-by duties during the fire season (i.e. September to April). During the peak hill fire season, such as the Chung Yeung and Ching Ming Festivals, the AFCD would, in collaboration with relevant Government departments and non-government organizations, conduct publicity programmes to promote the message of hill fire prevention, which include community carnivals, broadcasting in television and radio, sky shouts (helicopters to broadcast hill fire prevention messages over the countryside), etc.

6.3.2 In 2012-13, 18 cases of hill fire occurred over an area of 79 hectares with 6,400 trees damaged within or adjacent to the country parks. Rehabilitation planting programmes in areas damaged by hill fire and various fire prevention measures have been implemented. In general, the total numbers of hill fire in country parks in the last five years were below 50 cases each year, which were much lower than that in the past decades of over 100 cases each year. The increase in public awareness and stepping up of preventive measures might account for the relatively lower number of hill fire in recent years.

7. Country Park Ranger Services

7.1 Patrol and Law Enforcement

7.1.1 Protection of country parks and special areas from incompatible developments and activities is one of the major duties of the Country Park Ranger Services Division. Park rangers and wardens are deployed in different country parks and special areas and conduct patrols on a regular basis to provide visitor services, to monitor approved developments and to enforce the Country Parks Ordinance and related legislations. Over the last few years, about 1000 offenders were prosecuted each year for committing offences such as littering, illegal use of fire, damaging vegetation/trapping of animals and unauthorized cycling/ vehicular entry into country parks. In addition, park rangers and wardens conduct special operations from time to time, such as searching for illegal animal traps, visiting villages for promotion of fire prevention, enforcing prohibition of feeding wild animals and assisting the Police in search-and-rescue exercises. Regular joint operations with the Police are also undertaken to combat crimes, such as illegal felling of Incense Trees.

7.2 Education and publicity

7.2.1 To promote nature conservation, the Country Park Ranger Services Division provides education facilities in country parks including visitor centres, nature trails and tree walks. There are nine Country Parks Visitor Centres showing exhibitions of various themes while guided tours are provided in certain visitor centres to group visits with prior arrangement. The Country Park Ranger Services Division also conducts conservation education programmes and publishes books and leaflets for local students, teachers and country park visitors. The education programme includes a series of countryside learning activities tailored for students in different levels and nature appreciation activities for the general public.

7.2.2 Nowadays, hiking is a popular outdoor recreation activity in Hong Kong. To better utilise the well-developed hiking network within country parks and to promote nature appreciation and hiking safety, regular publicity events such as 'Great Outdoors Hong Kong' and roving exhibitions are organised for the public.

7.2.3 The Country Parks Volunteer Scheme was established in 2010 to strengthen the public awareness of protecting the natural environment and Country Parks through direct participation. The scheme also provides nature lovers with an opportunity to serve the environment. Under the scheme, trained volunteers assist in providing education services in Visitor Centres and tree walks, remove exotic species and garbage in country parks and conduct patrol in mountain trails.

8. Hong Kong Global Geopark of China

8.1 Conservation and Management

8.1.1 A geopark is a unique natural area with special geological significance which also includes facets of natural and cultural heritage, and serves the objectives of conservation, education and sustainable development. Hong Kong Geopark attained national status in 2009 and global status in 2011. To maintain the global geopark status, a revalidation is required in 2015.

8.2 Local engagement and global networking

8.2.1 Two essential requirements of the Global Geoparks Network (GGN) are

active local engagement and global networking, both of which are new to the protected areas of Hong Kong. At present, there are three local geoheritage centres located in Sam Mun Tsai, Lai Chi Wo and Kat O to serve visitors to the Hong Kong Geopark. These centres are the result of a close partnership and trust among the government, local villagers, local organizations and supporting organizations. A Volcano Discovery Centre, which is the result of our close partnership with the Sai Kung community, is now under construction. Regarding global networking, we have signed seven sister arrangements with Yangdangshan Geopark and Wudalianchi Geopark in China, Itoigawa Geopark in Japan, Kanawinka Geopark in Australia, English Riviera Geopark and Marble Arch Caves Geopark in the United Kingdom, and Bergstrasse-Odenwald Geopark in Germany. Hong Kong Geopark also signed cooperation agreements with Unzen Volcanic Geopark of Japan and Messel Pit World Heritage Site of Germany. In addition to collaboration with our sister geoparks, Hong Kong Geopark is an active participant in the China Geoparks Network, Asia Pacific Geoparks Network and GGN.

9. Advice Sought

9.1 Members are invited to comment on the management and protection work of Hong Kong country parks and geopark.

Country and Marine Parks Authority
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
September 2013

Organization structure of the Country and Marine Parks Branch

