

## **COUNTRY AND MARINE PARKS BOARD**

### **Consultancy Study on Enhancement of the Recreation and Education Potential of Country Parks and Special Areas – Recommendations and Way Forward**

#### **1. Purpose**

1.1 This paper aims to brief members on the outcome of public consultation for the consultancy study on enhancement of the recreation and education potential of country parks and special areas (the Study), and the recommendations on taking forward the enhancement proposals.

#### **2. Background**

2.1 The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) commissioned Urbis Limited in association with Mott Macdonald in January 2017 to explore and identify opportunities for enhancing the recreation and education potential of country parks and special areas (CP/SA) so as to broaden and diversify visitors' experience in CP/SA and meet the growing demand for countryside recreation. The Study aims to recommend proposals in three broad aspects, namely overnight facilities, adventurous activities and leisure.

2.2 Progress and findings of the Study had been reported to the Country and Marine Parks Board (CMPB) at its previous meetings on 13 April, 20 July and 23 November 2018 and 30 April 2019, and the Country Parks Committee (CPC) on 7 March and 9 June 2017, 24 January, 16 May and 20 September 2018, and 25 February and 27 May 2019. AFCD and the consultants briefed the CPC on the public consultation plan and strategies at the meeting on 20 September 2018, and provided an update on the public consultation activities at the CPC meeting on 25 February and CMPB meeting on 30 April 2019.

2.3 The public consultation was conducted from 16 February to 15 May 2019 to collect public views on the proposed enhancements. Apart from consultation document, pamphlet, dedicated website and promotion on social media and advertisement, the consultation activities included 5 interactive exhibitions at shopping

malls, 4 roving exhibitions at government offices and 2 public forums. More than 1,100 completed questionnaires together with other responses in writing representing the quantitative and qualitative views from the public were received. All the views and comments gathered were evaluated in formulating the recommendations and way forward.

### **3. Summary of views collected from the public consultation**

3.1 During the consultation period, public views were collected by (i) conducting questionnaires at various consultation activities and (ii) receiving public comments by email and in the media. In the questionnaire survey, the respondents were asked to rate their preferences on 6 enhancement proposals, including “Country Park Visitor Hubs”, “Advance Booking System for Campsites” and “Viewing Platforms for Landscape Appreciation” under “Enhancement of Existing Facilities”, as well as “Open Museums for Historical Relics Appreciation”, “Tree Top Adventure” and “Glamping Sites / Eco-lodge”, in a five-level scale from “Like it most” to “Don’t like it most”. They were also asked to suggest locations for the enhancement proposals and offer their views on the management mode proposed for the enhancement proposals and any other comments or concerns.

3.2 Generally, all enhancement proposals received more than 80% of support (“Like it most” and “Like it”) from the public during the questionnaire survey. The counts of choice for the enhancement proposals are summarised in Annex.

#### ***Enhancement of Existing Facilities***

3.3 Several proposals were suggested under the “Enhancement of Existing Facilities” to cater for visitors of different ages, experience and abilities and improve visitors’ understanding of and appreciation for the countryside as well as user convenience and comfort. By analysing the data collected from the questionnaires, 89% of the interviewees chose “Like it most” and “Like it” for “Country Park Visitor Hubs”, 86% liked the “Advance Booking System for Campsites” and 82% liked “Viewing Platform for Landscape Appreciation”.

3.4 The majority of the public opined that the infrastructure for the visitor hub should be compatible with the surrounding environment and that excessive infrastructure should be avoided. Through the provision of transportation and visitor facilities, the visitor hub should serve the function of a gateway to facilitate visitation of the area and thus managing the flow of visitors to CP/SA. If eateries are situated in

the visitor hub, takeaway food services should be avoided as far as possible to limit food packaging waste in country parks. They also felt that the government should focus on improving the existing facilities or increasing the number of facilities provided in the country parks such as toilet, shower facilities, long benches, hiking trails, barbecue (BBQ) sites and waymarks etc. Water dispensers could also be provided in country parks if feasible. There was also suggestion on introducing green toilets in country parks where water resources were low. Besides, transportation was also one of the major comments from the public that more public transportation or parking space should be provided near popular campsites or BBQ sites in country parks.

3.5 In order to solve the overcrowding problem in popular campsites, the public suggested revitalising some of the BBQ sites with relevant facilities. It not only helps promote some remote campsites but also divert campers from those popular campsites. For the advance booking system of campsites, the public suggested giving priority to Hong Kong permanent residents and opined that the booking system should not be abused. To facilitate planning, the advance booking system should timely reflect the current capacity of campsites and activity spots.

3.6 For the site suggestion of visitor hub, many of the public would like to have it at Pak Tam Chung, Ngong Ping, Tai Tong, Tai Mei Tuk, Dragon's Back, Tai Tam (Quarry Bay Extension) and Shing Mun Reservoir etc. For P.H.A.B sites, the public also suggested Tai Tam and Shing Mun Country Park.

### ***Open Museums for Historical Relics Appreciation***

3.7 Since there are many cultural heritage sites such as war relics within CP/SA, it gives opportunities to set up an open museum that not only enhances conservation but also maximises the educational value of CP/SA. Interpretive panels can be displayed at these open museums to provide information on the background and history of the relics. Educational activities can also be introduced to the public as well. During the consultation period, 85% of the public had chosen "Like it most" and "Like it" for Open Museums for Historical Relics Appreciation.

3.8 The public generally supported the proposal of having an open museum at the proposed historical relics sites, such as Pinewood Battery and Shing Mun Redoubt. During the consultation, some of the public were concerned about the sensitivity of the environment and whether it was suitable to turn historical sites into open museum. For some highly sensitive historical sites, they should be protected from vandalism and limited access should only be granted to genuine historians or visitors under the

supervision of a trained or certified guide. They also raised that the site for the open museum should be exhibited in a way that could relate to specific historical events with minimal infrastructure that not only preserve the relics but also be compatible with the surrounding environment.

3.9 The public suggested incorporating some smart facilities around the area such as mobile app or QR code to provide information and knowledge about the historical significance of the area as well as the flora and fauna which could easily be updated and tailored for users with different levels of interest and knowledge. The public also suggested that AFCD should conduct a holistic study on the conservation of historical relics in CP/SA. The concept of open museum could also be extended to species-rich natural areas. On the other hand, the public opined that the government should carefully select the private sector to operate the kiosk or education activities at the museums to avoid commercialisation. Collaboration with the local communities could be explored to provide backup services.

### ***Tree Top Adventure***

3.10 Tree top adventure was proposed to offer unique adventure experiences to visitors that provided along with a wide variety of associated activities, such as canopy walk, tree climbing and ziplining for various age groups to deepen their understanding of nature conservation. 87% of the public had chosen “Like it most” and “Like it” for Tree Top Adventure during the consultation.

3.11 Most of the public were concerned whether the conditions of the trees in country parks could support the set-up of the tree top adventure. It was suggested to investigate the ecological impacts including the natural habitats of the proposed sites, or what facilities and activities would be affecting the environment. As there was no precedent operation of tree top adventure in a similar scale in Hong Kong, the ecological and environmental impacts should be carefully assessed when designing and building the required facilities. A pilot site should be established first to evaluate its operation before establishing more similar facilities. The public also pointed out that there would be potential impact if it was implemented in ecologically important Fung Shui woodland. Besides, transport such as shuttle services could be provided in the weekend so as to facilitate the public to visit the tree top adventure. The public opined that the structure of the tree top adventure should take into consideration of global warming that the trees supporting the structure of the adventure activities would be affected by extreme weather. The public also suggested some education programmes that could be incorporated into the adventure including tree climbing classes, adventure

training, tree appreciation, arboriculture classes etc. and may target to schools for education uses on weekdays.

3.12 The public preferred locations with view of the sea and reservoir.

### ***Glamping Sites and Eco-lodges***

3.13 New styles of camping, such as “glamping” and staying in eco-lodges, were proposed to provide diversified types of overnight facilities in CP/SA. During the consultation period, an overall of about 84% of the public had chosen glamping and eco-lodges as their “liked” options.

3.14 Most of the public were concerned about commercialisation of glamping sites and eco-lodges and the management issues on ensuring visitors to act properly within country parks. Some also raised during the consultation that there should be sufficient provision of supporting infrastructure for the glamping sites and eco-lodges. However, construction of such supporting infrastructure including water supply, sewerage, electricity and transportation etc., may lead to ecological impacts on the environment. There were also views that there had been examples of environmentally undesirable glamping sites and eco-lodges at different conservation zones outside the county parks. The promotion of such “recreational development” within country parks would set undesirable precedent and stimulate more adverse ecological impacts on country parks.

### ***Other comments***

3.15 Country park enclave was one of the major comments from the public that fell outside the scope of the Study. There is opportunity to make use of the existing resources from the enclaves to provide supporting facilities to country parks such as “Bed and Breakfast” type of accommodation for visitors. It was suggested that the government should facilitate local communities to offer basic overnight accommodation under the relevant regulations.

3.16 Another major comment from the public was the carrying capacity and the management issue. By introducing the new facilities to country parks, it will attract more people to country parks and bring about pressure on the environment. The public suggested AFCD to study the carrying capacity of country parks in connection with these enhancement proposals. Besides, inviting private sector/non-government organisations to set up, operate, manage and maintain the new facilities may lead to commercialisation. They were concerned that granting the rights to private sectors to

operate could cause usage inequality especially to the underprivileged people.

#### **4. Recommendations**

4.1 Based on the comments received in the public consultation, possible environmental and ecological impacts are the primary concern of the public. To ensure the environmental acceptability of the proposed enhancement options, the selection of an appropriate site to avoid ecologically sensitive areas would be of great importance and a detailed feasibility study would be warranted to address environmental concerns through appropriate design and management measures. Specifically, in view of the need for more supporting facilities, glamping sites and eco-lodges should be located near the existing infrastructure to avoid large scale construction works in country parks. The concept of eco-sensitive and sustainable design may also be adopted to promote an eco-friendly overnight experience that uses renewable energy and recycled water and rainwater as far as practicable. Through environmentally friendly design and management, the eco-friendly glamping sites and eco-lodges would stimulate a positive attitude towards the environment and set an example of achieving environmental sustainability in outdoor recreation.

4.2 The other concern from the public is on commercialisation and price level in engaging the private sector in the operation of the proposals. In fact, the private sector includes a spectrum of operators from commercial companies, social enterprises, non-government organisations and charitable organisations that differ in expertise and profit target. The government could stipulate in the agreement through appropriate provisions to ensure the fee is set at a level reasonable and affordable to members of the public. Recession of fee could also be considered for educational and welfare institutes.

4.3 On tree top adventure, there are choices to set up the adventurous facilities on mature trees or on structures erected for the purpose. Considering the general size and form of trees in CP/SA, the erection of poles would seem more practicable. Nevertheless, the locations of the poles would have to be carefully identified in order not to cause damage to the trees and compromise the inspiring “tree-top” experience. The materials used and the outlook of the poles should blend in with the environment.

4.4 It is noted that the public are concerned about the priority of Hong Kong residents in booking overnight facilities in CP/SA and possible abuse. There are overseas and local examples in operating such an advance booking system. Reference could be made in developing the advance booking system for campsites to ensure the

fair use of the popular facilities. It is also recognised that there is opportunity for the villages in country park enclaves and peripheral areas to provide supporting facilities such as eateries and “bed and breakfast” to the country park users according to existing regulations. Operators of the enhancement proposals may take note of the resources and explore collaboration to create synergy where appropriate.

4.5 In connection with the enhancement proposals, there would be ample opportunities to incorporate different education elements in promoting the conservation of the rich natural and heritage resources, sustainable use of CP/SA and environmental sustainability. For example, tree top adventure would offer a unique experience for the participants to appreciate the natural environment from a different angle and stimulate affection of the natural environment through the personal experience. An orienteering programme at the war relics open museums could also facilitate the understanding of the local history in an interesting way.

4.6 If these enhancement proposals could be implemented, they would meet the objectives of the present Study as to broaden and diversify visitors’ experience in CP/SA. Operated with proper management and provisions of the required services, these new facilities would be able to accommodate a prescribed level of visitation, and also divert country park visitors from the popular sites and thus alleviating the visiting pressures. Close monitoring and adaptive management approach for these new facilities would be necessary to ensure their usage at a desirable level. Last but not least, the regular maintenance and improvement of general supporting facilities, and introduction of new ones, including toilets, water dispensers, waymarks, interpretation panels and information boards, would complement with the new recreation facilities to achieve greater enjoyment of CP/SA of the public.

## **5. Implementation of the enhancement proposals**

5.1 In general, the enhancement proposals gained the support of members of the public while there were also concerns on environmental compatibility, possible commercialisation and carrying capacity raised mainly by concern groups and stakeholders. To take a prudent approach, further detailed feasibility studies would be carried out for more substantial proposals such as visitor hub, open museum, tree top adventure and glamping site/eco-lodge. Taking into account the complexity of individual proposals and the lead time required, the implementation of these proposals is recommended in short, medium and long term as listed in the table below:

<b>Implementation Timeframe</b>	<b>Actions</b>
On-going / short term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up more campsites</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve hiking trails with natural materials</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide more viewing platforms for landscape appreciation and resting / sitting areas</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop new orienteering programme in country park and review existing ones</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide more guided tours with various themes on biodiversity and cultural heritage in CP/SA</li> </ul>
Short to medium term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce an advance booking system for popular campsites</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhance the recreation (e.g. BBQ pits) and ancillary facilities of the Aberdeen P.H.A.B site.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review, develop and implement countryside education programmes in CP/SA for kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools</li> </ul>
Medium to long term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct detailed feasibility study for the setting up and design of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• visitor hub (tentatively at Pak Tam Chung);</li> <li>• open museum (e.g. Pinewood Battery, Shing Mun Redoubt);</li> <li>• tree top adventure (e.g. at Shing Mun Country Park, Ngong Ping); and</li> <li>• glamping site/eco-lodge (e.g. at Lau Shui Heung, Tai Tong),</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>followed by their implementation in accordance with the outcome of the detailed feasibility study.</p>

## 6. Advice sought

6.1 Members are invited to note the views gathered from the public consultation, and comment on the recommendations and way forward for enhancing the recreation and education potential of the country parks and special areas in Hong Kong.



**Summary of Responses on the Enhancement Proposals Collected from the Questionnaire Survey**

<b>Enhancement proposals</b>	<b>Choice</b>	<b>Count*</b>	<b>Overall percentage of “Liked” #</b>
1. Country Park Visitor Hubs	Like it most	656 (59.5%)	88.6%
	Like it	321 (29.1%)	
	Neutral	83 (7.5%)	
	Don't like it	20 (1.8%)	
	Don't like it most	22 (2%)	
2. Advanced Booking System for Campsites	Like it most	657 (59.6%)	86.3%
	Like it	294 (26.7%)	
	Neutral	94 (8.5%)	
	Don't like it	30 (2.7%)	
	Don't like it most	27 (2.5%)	
3. Viewing Platforms for Landscape Appreciation	Like it most	609 (55.3%)	82.0 %
	Like it	294 (26.7%)	
	Neutral	114 (10.3%)	
	Don't like it	47 (4.3%)	
	Don't like it most	38 (3.4%)	
4. Open Museums for Historical Relics	Like it most	600 (54.4%)	85.0%
	Like it	337 (30.6%)	
	Neutral	109 (9.9%)	
	Don't like it	26 (2.4%)	
	Don't like it most	30 (2.7%)	
5. Tree Top Adventure	Like it most	750 (68.1%)	86.8%
	Like it	206 (18.7%)	
	Neutral	76 (6.9%)	
	Don't like it	30 (2.7%)	
	Don't like it most	40 (3.6%)	
6. Glamping Site/Eco-lodge	Like it most	713 (64.7%)	84.5%
	Like it	218 (19.8%)	
	Neutral	88 (8.0%)	
	Don't like it	41 (3.7%)	
	Don't like it most	42 (3.8%)	

Remarks:

\* The total number of completed questionnaires is 1,102.

# The overall percentage is the sum of the count for “Like it most” and “Like it”.