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An Assessment on the Opportunities to develop Ecotourism in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong is famous for its dense, highrise-populated urban fabric. When tourists consider visiting Hong Kong, most would think of Hong Kong as a “city-break” destination rather than a place to explore the natural and cultural landscapes.

Nevertheless, little that people may know of, Hong Kong’s urban area only covers about 30% of its land area, the rest of the 70% is in fact covered with various types of landscapes.

Therefore, this paper aims at exploring the tremendous opportunities for Hong Kong to develop its ecotourism in its rural areas– an alternative operation of tourism that encourages more “interaction with the land” to induce a deeper understanding of Hong Kong’s local traditional culture and its strategic ecological networks.

The “interaction with the land” via the operation of ecotourism in Hong Kong can be explored in two spectrums. First, assessment will be made to a few case studies of Hong Kong’s rural landscapes, evaluating whether these areas have the varieties of landscapes and ecology types for travellers to explore. The choices of case studies are mostly the working landscapes in Hong Kong - traditionally there are a lot of agricultural and aquacultural activities in the rural areas, together with the village settlements, creating a lot of interesting cultural landscapes. Second, evaluations will be made in discussing whether the tourism and land development policies in Hong Kong are helpful in guiding and nurturing the growth of ecotourism here at all.

“Interaction with the land” incorporates more than just interacting with the physicality of the landscape. It induces a “refreshment” or an evaluation on the mindset, triggering new perspectives of seeing things, or even a new interpretation of man’s relationship with nature. Not only it benefits the tourists that come to visit the various types of landscapes, but it also benefits the local residents who host the guests. The operation process of ecotourism also helps educate the locals on environmental awareness. Therefore, it is an industry worth investigating.

Keywords: Ecotourism in Hong Kong.

1. INTRODUCTION

When travellers plan to visit Hong Kong, most would think of the experience of a vibrant city life and the excitement of being in a densely-populated metropolitan area. According to the Tourism Commission of Hong Kong, some of the mostly visited tourist-destinations/attractions in Hong Kong include Golden Bauhinia Square, a

Symphony of Lights, and Avenue of Stars.¹ Most of these attractions are in the urban areas of Hong Kong. There are other more outdoor-oriented destinations, such as the Peak, Giant Buddha, and Ocean Park.² However, they are more in the category of themed outdoor attractions that are especially designed for tourists' visit, rather than true interaction with the landscape. The Hong Kong Tourism Board also promotes about the geopark and hiking trails in Hong Kong.³ Yet, they are more in line with "nature-based tourism: any form of tourism that relies primarily on the natural environment for its attractions or settings."⁴

According to the International Ecotourism Society, the definition of ecotourism means "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people,"⁵ and should be aiming at "uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel"⁶ as one holistic travel experience.

Therefore, if refer to the above definition of ecotourism, Hong Kong has yet to explore its potentials and opportunities in its pursuit of ecotourism. Although ecotourism is mentioned in the "Hong Kong 2030: Planning Vision and Strategy"⁷ as one of the types of "alternative tourism"⁸, in which the government shows positive support that ecotourism aligns with its bigger vision and is part of its agenda for the future of Hong Kong, the government provides little advice and/or assistance in its policy to actually move this aspiration forward. Therefore, there is still tremendous work to be done to develop the realm of ecotourism and to advocate the proper practice of it in Hong Kong.

This paper aims at analyzing a few case studies in Hong Kong, in which the government is involved in exploring ecotourism opportunities due to various development needs in some particular rural areas (may it be the development needs in tourism in general, or the need to pursue land development and/or nature preserve in certain regions), to investigate the potentials of ecotourism in Hong Kong through a governmental involvement level. Critiques and comments of each case study will be discussed, so as to draw some inspirations for any future pursuit of ecotourism in Hong Kong.

¹ Tourism Commission of Hong Kong. "Welcome". 4th November, 2010. Accessed 20th November, 2010. <<http://www.tourism.gov.hk/english/welcome/welcome.html>>.

² Ibid.

³ Hong Kong Tourism Board. "Great Outdoors Hong Kong". c2010. Accessed 20th November, 2010. <<http://www.discoverhongkong.com/promotions/greatoutdoors/eng/html/front/front.html>>.

⁴ The International Ecotourism Society. TIES Global Ecotourism Fact Sheet. "Typology of Tourism." Sept, 2006. Page 4. <<http://www.ecotourism.org/atf/cf/%7B82a87c8d-0b56-4149-8b0a-c4aaced1cd38%7D/TIES%20GLOBAL%20ECOTOURISM%20FACT%20SHEET.PDF>>

⁵ The International Ecotourism Society. "What is Ecotourism?" c1990. Accessed 20th November, 2010. <[http://www.ecotourism.org/site/c.orLQKXPCLmF/b.4835303/k.BEB9/What is Ecotourism The International Ecotourism Society.htm](http://www.ecotourism.org/site/c.orLQKXPCLmF/b.4835303/k.BEB9/What%20is%20Ecotourism%20The%20International%20Ecotourism%20Society.htm)>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Planning Department – Strategic Planning Section, HKSAR. Hong Kong 2030: Planning Vision and Strategy Final Report. "Section II: Planning Vision and Future Challenges – Chapter 6 – The Changing Economy". 27th August, 2009. Accessed 20th November, 2010. <http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/p_study/comp_s/hk2030/eng/finalreport/pdf/E_6.pdf>. Page 68-69.

⁸ Ibid.

2. CASE STUDIES

2.1 Tai O -

The first case study of potential ecotourism in Hong Kong would be Tai O. As a relatively developed tourist destination, Tai O has a more “mature” operation model for review, and may offer some insights on the dos and don’ts of ecotourism operation in Hong Kong.

2.11 The History and Environment of Tai O

Tai O has a long history of human settlement. Due to its strategic location of being at the mouth of Pearl River Delta, it was settled by humans since the Stone Age and later with military fort built nearby during the Qing Dynasty.

Therefore, the natural landscape in Tai O has long been incorporated into the lifestyle of the local residents, sculpting the natural environment more into a working landscape through the constant “interaction with the land”, and hence the Tai O landscape now clearly reflects how the local culture morphs the land rather than pure natural landscape.

The Tai O landscape is quite aligned with what the UNESCO defines as “cultural landscape” – “a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment.”⁹

Through history, local residents make use of the advantage of Tai O being at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, to make a living out of this ecologically-rich river delta habitat where the fresh water of the Pearl River meets the sea water of the South China Sea. Tai O is technically on an islet split off from the main island of Lantau, of which the local Tai O residents leverage on the waterway that separates them from the main island of Lantau as their natural habitable shelter area. Therefore, the local residents build the traditional stilt houses along this relatively shallow stream of water and create their neighbourhood, slowly morphing the landscape of this waterway to make it fit to their living. They live along the river, travel by boat, and make a living by fishing in the nearby waters. Also, because of the brackish water in the area, salt marsh is able to form, and the Tai O residents were also involved in the salt production business.

The Tai O people has created cultural landscape that inspires the contemporary urban dwellers what it means by “interaction with the land”, and offers refreshments on new perspectives of what “sustainability” and “environmental-protection” can mean. Referring to the UNESCO further description of “cultural landscape”, “[c]ultural landscapes often reflect specific techniques of sustainable land-use, considering the characteristics and limits of the natural environment they are established in.”¹⁰

2.12 Tai O Today

Because of the above described beauty of Tai O, it has become a popular tourist destination in recent years, mostly among the local Hong Kong citizens, but now also expanding into the international travellers’ market. The government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is also quite supportive to the tourism development in Tai O, for example the Grade III listed Old Tai O Police Station (built

⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Cultural Landscape.c2010. Accessed 20th November, 2010.

<<http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape>>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

1902) is commissioned to turn into a boutique hotel by 2011¹¹, serving the tourism industry in the area.

However, the current status of Tai O seems to be catering for the typical type of tourism rather than ecotourism. The number of people visiting Tai O everyday is overwhelming. The sheer number of visitors makes it questionable whether such tourism operation mode in Tai O will eventually destroy the pristine landscape due to the overflow of visitors, contradicting with the ecotourism objective to promote environmental consciousness.

Also, because of the thriving tourism in Tai O, the livelihood of the local residents has improved. However, this is due to the fact that they have shifted their businesses to cater to the provision of services and souvenirs for tourists, rather than continuing with their original way of living. If the definition of cultural landscape means a working landscape in constant operation by the local people, gearing towards tourism may cause the working landscape to disappear. Therefore, again, Tai O's ecotourism practice is questionable. The tourism-induced economic activities do benefit the livelihood of the Tai O community, but in a way that has nothing to do with their original local way of living, defeating the ecotourism aspiration of inducing awareness and respect towards local communities and their sustainable way of living.

2.13 Lessons Learnt from the Tai O Case Study

Tai O's tourism boomed during a period that people were still trying to understand what the development of tourism means and what exactly ecotourism is. Not only the local residents of Tai O are trying to define what ecotourism means to them, the government of HKSAR is also trying to define what ecotourism is in its policies.

What can be seen in Tai O today may not be a sustainable model in pursuing tourism, since the current strategy may slowly turn Tai O into a theme park rather than sustain its unique working cultural landscape, leaving alone the aspiration of operating ecotourism.

However, since Tai O has a relatively "developed" tourism model, it is not too late to re-introduce or re-emphasize the proper ecotourism ideology of promoting awareness towards both the environment and the local communities, and to re-align the aspiration of introducing how human culture intersects with the natural environment in its tourism model. Hence, the livelihood and the cultural landscape of Tai O can be sustained, while travellers can also have a rewarding visit that inspires them about sustainable way of living and the importance of conservation of the cultural landscapes.

2.2 Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay -

The second case to explore Hong Kong's ecotourism opportunities is the tourism development of the Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay area in the North-western New Territories of Hong Kong. The Lau Fau Shan area has been a popular excursion destination among the local Hong Kong citizens for decades, because of the abundant choices of seafood

¹¹ Commissioner for the Heritage's Office of the Development Bureau of HKSAR. Revitalisation Scheme – Batch I. "Result of Selection – Tai O Heritage Hotel: Old Tai O Police Station". 17th February, 2008. Accessed 20th November, 2010. <http://www.heritage.gov.hk/en/rhbtp/ProgressResult_Tai_O_Police_Station.htm>.

restaurants in the village there and the freshness of the food they offer. With the booming of Hong Kong's tourism in recent years, the government of the HKSAR has also looked into the "re-branding" of the Lau Fau Shan precinct into an "Eco-Cultural Park"¹² in the "Study on the Enhancement of the Lau Fau Shan Rural Township and Surrounding Areas"¹³, making the area a discussion hotspot for ecotourism development in Hong Kong.

Since the tourism development of the Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay area is still in its development phase, much can be learnt from the current on-going process.

2.21 History and Environment of the "Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay" area -

The Deep Bay is an ecologically-rich water body in North-western Hong Kong, fronting Shenzhen on the other side of the Bay. Being at the outlet/estuary of the Shenzhen River, the Deep Bay area is mostly shallow water with wetlands and marshes along the northern edge of it, offering unique habitats for various wildlife species.

Along the Hong Kong side of the Deep Bay coast are also some traditional villages, famous for their fish pond and oyster bed operations. These cultural landscapes remind people of how local people interact with the land and make a living out of the environment in a sustainable way. Sheung Bak Nai and Ha Bak Nai are some of the better known villages there, still keeping the traditional ways of village style living nowadays.

Lau Fau Shan sits at the North-eastern corner of the Deep Bay. It used to be famous for its aquaculture, both in fish and oysters, and even the greasyback shrimp. However, due to the pollution caused by the industrialization of Shenzhen, the metal sediments in the Deep Bay water increased dramatically in recent decades, causing the decay of the aquaculture in Lau Fau Shan.

2.22 The "Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay" area Today-

Since 2003, the government of HKSAR and the government of Shenzhen special Economic Zone had signed the "Deep Bay Water Pollution Control Joint Implementation Programme"¹⁴ to curb pollution discharged in the Deep Bay.

With the implementation the "Water Control Zone" and the possible eventual revival of water quality of the Deep Bay, the Planning Department of the government of HKSAR launched the "Study on the Enhancement of the Lau Fau Shan Rural Township and Surrounding Areas" project in 2009, with the objective to "realize the tourism and

¹² Planning Department of HKSAR. Study on the Enhancement of the Lau Fau Shan Rural Township and Surrounding Areas – Feasibility Study. "Proposed Planning Framework and Conceptual Schemes". 25th June, 2010. Accessed 20th Nov, 2010.

<http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/p_study/prog_s/LauFauShan05/framework_e.html>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Environmental Protection Department of HKSAR. Marine Water Quality in Hong Kong in 2003. "Long Term Water Quality Trends". *Deep Bay Water Control Zone (Chapter 6)*.c2003. Accessed 20th November, 2010.

<http://www.epd.gov.hk/epd/english/environmentinhk/water/marine_quality/files/m03_ch6.pdf>.Page 6.3.

recreational potential”¹⁵ of the precinct, featuring such project as an “Eco-Cultural Park.”

Although such project shows the growing awareness in both the government as well as among the local residents about ecotourism, that both parties see the urge and benefit of ecotourism development, it also reflects a general mis-understanding of what ecotourism really means.

This “Eco-Cultural Park” project has four distinct “focus study areas - 1)Eco-Tourism Destination, 2)Enhancement of the Cultural Township, 3)Unique Cultural Landscape and Sunset View, 4)New Gateway – New Experience.”¹⁶

However, it is questionable why the different aspects of the Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay region have to be experienced in separate locations within the area, rather than being offered as a holistic experience of how the human culture interacts with the local ecology, i.e. interaction with the land, to the visitors? How is it possible to promote the sustainable practices of living communities if the socio-cultural component is separated from the environmental/ecological component? How can we promote environmental awareness if human culture is not part of the “ecological-equation”?

In fact, if taking a more thorough look into the project’s first focus study area, i.e. the “Eco-Tourism Destination”, it is mainly focusing on the pure nature reserve area near MaiPo rather than the areas closer to human settlement, e.g. Lau Fau Shan / Sheung Bak Nai / Ha Bak Nai – the precincts that reflect how human culture intersects with the natural environment to form sustainable communities.

Therefore, similar to the Tai O case, the ecotourism strategy here only achieves to promote a conservation mindset when travellers visit the ecologically-sensitive marshes areas near the MaiPo precinct, but unfortunately fails to promote any social interaction between the visitors and the local communities and hence unable to facilitate any exchange of experiences in terms of what it means by sustainable living. There is a fundamental separation of experiencing culture and nature in this “Eco-Cultural Park” project, which makes it hard for the visitors to relate why the marshes are vital to the livelihood of the local community, and makes it a weaker campaign to educate the locals on why such local habitats are important to the greater ecological network of the greater Deep Bay area as well as to the benefits of their traditional way of living in the region.

2.2 Lessons Learnt from the “Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay” Case Study -

Through the Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay “Eco-Cultural Park” project, it illustrates that there is still a huge fundamental mis-understanding of what nature-based tourism and what ecotourism distinctively are. This reflects a need to promote public awareness of what ecotourism is all about and how and why this practice could benefit both the

¹⁵ Planning Department of HKSAR, Study on the Enhancement of the Lau Fau Shan Rural Township and Surrounding Areas – Feasibility Study. “Study Objective”. 25th June, 2010. Accessed 20th November, 2010. <http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/p_study/prog_s/LauFauShan05/obj_e.html>.

¹⁶ Planning Department of HKSAR, Study on the Enhancement of the Lau Fau Shan Rural Township and Surrounding Areas – Feasibility Study. “Study Area”. 25th June, 2010. Accessed 20th November, 2010. <http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/p_study/prog_s/LauFauShan05/area_e.html>.

protection of the environment as well as the socio-cultural welfare of the local communities.

Identifying the Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay area as a potential ecotourism hub is a fantastic initiative. This site has the appropriate settings, i.e. the human culture interacting with how the landscape works, to offer ecotourism opportunities. However, there are some fundamental mis-understandings of the possible operation modes, which make the project lose its essence by isolating the landscape/ecological part from the cultural part, hence failing to offer a holistic experience of ecotourism.

If the proposed execution procedure was to be adjusted to align better with the proper definition of ecotourism, the Lau Fau Shan / Deep Bay “Eco-Cultural Park” project certainly has the potential to develop into a successful ecotourism operation which benefits not only the visitors but also the local villagers.

2.3 “Frontier Closed Area” (FCA) -

The third case to explore Hong Kong’s ecotourism opportunities is the re-opening of the “Frontier Closed Area” (FCA). The FCA is the restricted border area in between the Northern edge of Hong Kong and the southern edge of Shenzhen. It has been prohibited from almost any urban development for about 50 years due to its sensitive location and its strategic use of being a border buffer back in the British colonial era of Hong Kong. However, a recent plan by the government of HKSAR, prompting to “release” over 85% of the FCA for future development arouses various voices in urging the conservation of the undeveloped and undisturbed pristine landscape within the FCA and an outcry for a low impact ecotourism development as part of a preservation strategy for both the landscape and the livelihood of the area, yet allowing limited developments to proceed.

The FCA offers a new way of looking into how ecotourism should be operated with the encroaching concern of urban development. Due to the shortage of land in Hong Kong, this would be a classic example in how Hong Kong should achieve a balance between the two forces.

2.31 The History and Environment of “Frontier Closed Area” (FCA)

The “Frontier Closed Area” (FCA) consists of about 2800 hectares (ha) of land. It was formed in the post-World War II era (1950s) and formalized with its present boundary by 1962, as a border buffer controlled zone in between the then-British-ruled Hong Kong and China. Due to its sensitive border control usage, almost no development was allowed to happen in the zone. Therefore, both the landscape and the rural human settlements are “frozen in time” and dated back to the 1950s era. It works like a “time capsule”, people’s way of living stays the same as the traditional Northern New Territories village style, and the landscape within the zone is undisturbed and now becomes an ecologically-rich area, urging for preservation.

2.32 “Frontier Closed Area” (FCA) Today

With the unification of Hong Kong to become part of China in 1997, the strategic function of the “Frontier Closed Area” (FCA) was being re-considered. It is no longer the buffer zone between two separate regimes. Instead, it is considered as an area that can blend the two cities (i.e. Hong Kong and Shenzhen) within the same country (i.e.

China). Therefore, there were talks about the re-opening of the FCA for future development.

In 2006, the Planning Department of the government of HKSAR started the “Land Use Planning for the Closed Area”¹⁷ project, with the aim to finish the study by 2011/2012 and to release up to 2400 ha for development, while maintaining only about 400 ha as future border control area.¹⁸

In dealing with such a sensitive area with most of its environment “naturally preserved” due to lack of development for the past 50 years, the Planning Department of the government of HKSAR identifies and recognizes the ecological importance of the undisturbed and pristine landscape in the area, as well as the cultural significance of the unique village lifestyle and on-going agricultural activities there. Therefore, the current proposal will aim at treating the future use of FCA as a “ ‘Green Area’ between the two cities [i.e. Hong Kong and Shenzhen].”¹⁹, with the main themes to “1)Strengthen Nature Conservation, 2)Conserve Cultural Heritage Resources, 3)Promote Sustainable Uses.”²⁰

In executing the above themes and aspirations, the proposed plan will have over about 55% of as conservation areas. This will include existing ecologically-rich areas and any other natural landscape areas. Meanwhile, about another 35% of the land will be reserved for farming activities, recreation uses, as well as any other low-impact development.²¹ This is to help “maintaining the rural character, protecting the setting of heritage villages.”²²

2.33 Lessons Learnt from the “Frontier Closed Area” (FCA) Case Study

Although the fundamental objective of the “Land Use Planning for the Closed Area” project is not primarily for ecotourism, the future development of this practice may after all flourish in this area due to the ecological and cultural conservation work to be done via this newly proposed development plan. Conserving nature and cultural heritage, and to promote sustainable way of living, are the basic “infrastructure” for ecotourism to happen. This current proposal for the FCA thus lays tremendous “foundation”/framework for the future of any ecotourism development in the area. The local communities are also to stay, and continue to interact with the land with the local traditional way, maintaining a sustainable way of rural living that would inspire visitors on what a harmonious relationship between man and nature can be. Therefore, although ecotourism may not be the key agenda in this development plan, it will certainly thrive and benefit from this “Land Use Planning for the Closed Area” project in the long run.

¹⁷ Planning Department of HKSAR. “The Study - Study Background”. Land Use Planning for the Closed Area. 28th July, 2010. Accessed 20th November, 2010.

<http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/misc/FCA/frontier_eng/frontier_e2.htm>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Planning Department of HKSAR. “3.1. Strategic Context”. Land Use Planning for the Closed Area – Feasibility Study: Working Paper No.6: Executive Summary. July 2010. Accessed 20th November, 2010.

<http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland_en/misc/FCA/files_072010/Working%20Paper%20No%206_ES_Eng.pdf>. Page1.

²⁰ Ibid. Page2-3.

²¹ Ibid. Page7.

²² Ibid.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Hong Kong, instead of projecting an image of a dense urban fabric with concrete-highrises everywhere, actually offers a lot of intriguing cultural landscapes in the rural areas. Both the government of HKSAR and the Hong Kong citizens are having a good intention to protect such precious landscapes and hope to offer them as the local treasures to travellers through ecotourism.

In summary, certain land development project in Hong Kong has already laid down a very good “infrastructural” framework for ecotourism to develop in the future, due to the land development project’s fundamental aim to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of the area. This type of land development project should be encouraged as it allows more ecotourism opportunities to happen. On another note, there are also some Hong Kong tourist destinations marketed as offering ecotourism yet fails to fulfil certain ecotourism aspirations. The re-alignment and/or re-injection of the proper ecotourism operation mode to these already developed/mature tourist destinations can help promote this discipline. Of course, last but not least, there are still some fundamental misunderstandings of the term “ecotourism”, and much public education has to be implemented to re-align the proper understanding and the public awareness of such practice.

Hong Kong does have the “hardware” (i.e. interesting cultural landscapes that shows how the ecology works with local culture) for ecotourism to happen, now it is the time to develop the “software” (i.e. public education about ecotourism, re-consideration of tourism operation models, and land development policies) to allow ecotourism to nurture and operate properly in the future.

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