

Dear Hon. Fred Li,

I understand that there will be a meeting of the Legco panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene tomorrow (14th March 2006), to discuss the issue of Avian Influenza in Hong Kong. I would like to take this opportunity to campaign for the immediate reopening of the Mai Po Nature Reserve, which has been closed since early February over concerns about avian influenza. I believe the continued closure of the reserve cannot be justified for the following reasons.

1. Direct contact between visitors to the reserve and wild birds is extremely rare; visitors generally observe the wild birds from a distance, and wild birds such as these are generally scared by people approaching. This situation is very different from the wet markets and bird markets, where workers are continually in close contact with birds and their faeces, and where birds are kept confined together in small cages, increasing the risk of disease spread. There have so far been no cases anywhere in the world in which a person has become infected from a wild bird.
2. The cases of H5N1 in Hong Kong this winter involve resident species which live in close proximity to man. As shown on the AFCD website, most cases have been in the urban area. The species involved are found throughout the territory, and can often be observed foraging around urban parks and wet markets. These areas remain open to the public, despite the possibility of close contact with birds and their faeces; indeed, there may be more risk of contact with the faeces of birds here than at Mai Po. Many of the species recorded with H5N1 this winter are actually less common at Mai Po than around the urban area (for example, house crow and crested myna).
3. There have been no cases of H5N1 recorded in the North-west New Territories during winter 2005/06. This is despite regular testing by the University of Hong Kong of flocking migratory birds at Mai Po NR and the KCRC site at Lok Ma Chau, including blood and faecal samples from hundreds if not thousands of individual birds.
4. Although large concentrations of water birds congregate at Mai Po NR, this is also true of the surrounding fish pond areas, which are still open to the public. Surely the risk in the areas is no different to the risk at Mai Po?
5. The best scientific evidence for the spread of the disease throughout south-east Asia suggests that the poultry trade is responsible, and throughout the world H5N1 remains primarily a disease of poultry (despite some high-publicity cases among ducks in Europe). Indeed two of the cases in Hong Kong this winter (out of a total of just 16 cases) have been in illegally-imported chickens. The closure of Mai Po to protect the public against a disease found mostly in chickens seems completely illogical.
6. Birdwatching activities in the urban parks have also been stopped this winter, although these same parks remain open to the public. The message being sent is that birdwatching as an activity increases the risk of contracting avian influenza; this is quite obviously not the case. To repeat my earlier statement, there have been no cases of human infection resulting from wild birds.

I urge you to consider these points, and to recommend that the Mai Po reserve is reopened to permit holders immediately. Many birdwatchers in the territory are becoming frustrated that their activities are being prevented without justification and without any suggestion as to when the current situation may end. Meanwhile, WWF which manages the reserve is unable to accept visitors, which contribute to its source of income; this is likely to be detrimental to environmental conservation in Hong Kong, especially at Mai Po which is an internationally important site in terms of ecology.

Yours sincerely,
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