

Dear Hon. Fred Li Wah-ming,

as a resident in England, United Kingdom I am appalled to see the apparent lack of reasoning behind the recent closure of Mai Po reserve by the Hong Kong Government in their reaction to the Avian Influenza problem, not only because of the catastrophic effect it has on my own planned birdwatching trip to the reserve in April (and equally those of all other many visiting birdwatchers from all over the world) but because of the misleading and potentially damaging message it gives out to those without the logical and learned knowledge with which H5N1 should be viewed, something that it would appear the Hong Kong Government currently lacks.

To myself and many other concerned birdwatchers (not to mention other members of the general public) in the UK, this action by the Hong Kong Government seems not only irrational but for all intents and purposes as an attack on the birdwatchers themselves, formulated from a narrow minded and ill-informed view. I feel sure this will not be the case and that the Hong Kong Government's decision, no matter how illogical it seems, had the best interests of the reserve's visitors and residents of Hong Kong at heart and was borne out of a need to appear to be pro-active but now is the time to allow logic and common sense to prevail and re-open the reserve. Allow the WWF at Mai Po to be at the forefront of educating those who visit the problems of H5N1, surely more productive than the current 'blanket closure' and the impression that produces.

I have included below comments from Hong Kong resident bird watcher Geoff Carey, which, written far more eloquently than I could ever produce, covers completely my own reasoning as to why the closure of Mai Po is entirely wrong.

I sincerely hope that Mai Po will be allowed to re-open immediately and to carry on the globally important work it does in providing a safe haven for wildlife and for those humans who visit.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Mckerchar  
Greater Manchester, United Kingdom.

"1. Birdwatching does not bring people into the close contact with wild birds that is needed to be at any risk of contracting Avian Influenza. The proximity to birds and their faeces is generally no greater than it is in the Country Parks, in public parks such as Kowloon Park and in wet markets. Indeed, I would contend strongly that contact with wild birds at sites such as Kowloon Park, where members of the public can feed and sit alongside wild birds and their faeces, and wet markets, where species such as the exotic House Crow forage and defecate, is actually much closer. It is, thus, completely illogical to close Mai Po when the locations such as the latter two remain open. It is not possible to catch Avian Influenza through binoculars!

2. Mai Po NR, while attracting large numbers of wild birds at certain times of the year, is little different from the adjacent fish pond areas of the northwest New Territories. In the latter, large numbers of egrets, herons and

other birds forage, at times forming large and dense flocks, in exactly the same manner as occurs at Mai Po NR. Thus, it is completely illogical to close Mai Po NR while allowing public access to and work in the adjoining areas of fish ponds.

3. There is no scientific justification for the closure of Mai Po NR. There is no record of humans catching Avian Influenza from wild birds, and given the very close proximity or the contact with avian faeces or blood that is required, it is highly unlikely that the casual birdwatcher at Mai Po, or, indeed, any similar site, would be at any significant risk whatsoever.

4. As can be seen on the website of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Dept, the pattern of occurrence of H5N1 positive tests this winter is one that includes widespread urban areas but keeps well away from the wetland areas of the northwest New Territories. This is despite intensive blood and faecal testing by the University of HK of hundreds, if not thousands, of birds at both Lok Ma Chau and Mai Po NR. The intensity of survey effort here is far greater than in urban areas, yet it is only in the urban areas that H5N1 has been found. The irrationality of continued closure of Mai Po NR under these circumstances is further highlighted.

5. The species that have tested positive for H5N1 are largely urban species that are commensal with man. These are the very species that are least common at Mai Po NR. Thus, the closure of Mai Po while keeping open the wet markets and public parks where these species occur, makes no sense. To blame migratory birds when it is, so far this winter, only resident species that are testing positive for H5N1 is unreasonable."