

SUBMISSION TO PANEL ON ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS CONCERNING
MARINE PARK MANAGEMENT

BY
FRIENDS OF HOI HA WAN

INTRODUCTION

Hoi Ha Wan was designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1989. In 1996 the Wan was gazetted as a Marine Park with the aims of promoting the conservation of an environmentally important and sensitive area, whilst allowing its use as an area for recreation. These 2 aims were always to be somewhat in conflict with each other but the matter has really come to a head with the recent increase in tourism, both organised and individual, to the area. The end result is that neither of the 2 aims is being achieved – the facilities for the number of tourists involved are woefully inadequate and the marine life is suffering as a result of increased environmental pressures. In addition, life for the resident villagers is being made a misery by the huge numbers of tourists involved and this is invoking some local hostility towards the whole Marine Park concept. Hoi Ha Wan is unlike other Hong Kong Marine Parks in that the village of Hoi Ha is adjacent to and inextricably linked to the Marine Park but it does not form part of the Marine Park or, indeed, part of Sai Kung Country Park. Many visitors to “Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park” never actually set foot in the park, but walk on village and Country Park footpaths and land. The situation is further complicated because several government agencies are involved with the interrelationship between the village and the Marine Park.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Consultation.

From the start of the process that led towards Hoi Ha Wan being declared a Marine Park, little meaningful dialogue or consultation took place with the villagers whose lives were being affected by its creation. This situation has got a little better recently but the present system cannot be called consultation; what usually happens is that a government official has some unofficial talks with somebody in the village and then decisions are made and implemented without further consultation. If villagers are told of developments, it is usually in the form of a briefing on what is to happen rather than a consultation on plans. An example of this is the recent road improvement measures - the villagers were told what was happening after work had started. Local people have a lot to contribute to decision-making processes; we know the area better than anybody, we see the situation day-to-day and feel that we have a valuable contribution to make – we should be seen as a valuable resource to help decision-making processes rather than an irrelevance or, even, a threat. Various talking-shop committees have been set up to enable us to air our views but these bodies have no power and, in general, no meaningful changes have taken place as a result of committee discussions. We have presented constructive views and written submissions on subjects such as Marine Park Management and an overhaul of the Country Park vehicle pass system, but no action appears to have been taken.

2. Pollution.

In order to fulfil its role as a conservation area, Hoi Ha Wan should be a no-pollution zone. Although village houses have septic tanks for sewage treatment, all “grey” water, that is effluent from bathrooms, sinks and washing machines, is discharged through open drains into the sea right beside the 2 beaches which are the main recreation areas, posing a significant health risk to bathers and an environmental threat to marine life. The increase in visitor numbers has seen an increase in pollution levels from village restaurants and from visitors washing and urinating in the village drain. This drain often becomes smelly and unpleasant, is a breeding ground for mosquitoes and the sea beside the outfall often has visible detergent foam. Recently, hyperplasms (akin to cancers) have been seen in the coral in Hoi Ha Wan, which may be linked to the pollution levels. Water quality monitoring is inadequate and has not concentrated on the levels of pollution reaching the sea on busy days, nor has it been concerned with relating the levels of pollution to the marine environment. It is important to consider the levels of pollution to which the marine life is exposed as well as relating water quality to that acceptable for human bathers. Hoi Ha is in urgent need of a sewage treatment facility to prevent further environmental damage and/or a public health problem. The installation of a grease trap for restaurant effluent may be in accordance with public health rules but it does not prevent detergents and other potentially damaging waste products from entering the marine ecosystem and damaging the marine life. The WWF was obliged to install a costly sewage treatment system for their Marine Life Centre but the pollution from the village has been allowed to increase without check.

The WWF was also, apparently, obliged to install diesel power in its glass-bottomed visitor boat. Diesel power is the most polluting form of marine propulsion, with exhaust gases being passed directly into the sea. In many environmentally-sensitive areas in the world, including some lakes in the UK and parts of the Great Barrier Reef, diesel-powered boats are banned and electric power is the preferred alternative.

3. Fishing.

When the Marine Park was set up, we were told that fishing was to be banned except for a small amount of “artisanal” fishing. We assumed that the only fishing allowed was to be small-scale rod and small-net fishing for the local villagers; the continuance fishing on this scale would be sustainable by the Wan and would encourage local acceptance of the Park. In reality, although there has been a stopping of large-scale fishing by trawlers, several hundred licences have been issued (at no cost to the licence holders) to many commercial fishermen in the area. Thus, we still see medium-scale fishing activities by junks and small boats, which use long nets up to a kilometre in length. There can be up to 6 of these nets strung across the Wan at any one time and they often become snagged on the coral and artificial reefs and are left in situ to ensnare marine life on a large scale or drift into the swimming areas, where they pose a hazard to bathers. In addition to the legal activities, we see considerable

illegal fishing activities by boats from the Mainland as well as from Hong Kong. However, with so many licences being issued, it is impossible to police the fishing activities effectively, particularly as much of the fishing takes place at night. A partial solution to many of the problems would be to ban net fishing except small hand-held nets. However, the whole issue of fishing in Hoi Ha needs to be re-visited; if fishing in the Wan was to be restricted to village residents only, the fish within the area would thrive, the area would act as a fish nursery and the fishing areas in the Tolo Channel would be considerably enriched – this concept needs to be embraced by the local commercial fishing community.

4. Marine Park Wardens.

At present, the main policing of the Marine Park is carried out by an AFCD launch, which also has to cover other Marine Parks and Reserves, limiting its time at Hoi Ha. An AFCD Warden's Post was set up in the village some time ago, but the wardens here are almost exclusively employed in educational functions and manning the displays within the post. This method of administering the Park is highly inefficient. Wardens within the post are often underemployed, whilst illegal activities are constantly taking place within the Wan – only stopping when the AFCD boat is spotted rounding the headland and continuing once again as soon as the launch is out of sight. Several years ago, we suggested that AFCD install a Resident Warden for the Park, as is standard practice for reserves of this kind in many other parts of the world. The Warden should live in the village and have a boat and mobile telephone/radio at his/her disposal. The role of the Warden should be multi-disciplinary, dealing with policing, education and fulfilling the important role of liaison with the local community. The advantages of having a Warden living on-site, available 24 hours a day, are numerous – policing would be markedly improved and, living within the village, the warden could represent village problems and aspirations much more effectively. This may be a new concept for Hong Kong but it has proved highly cost-effective in other countries.

5. Infrastructure.

It is essential that some matching of tourist numbers and available infrastructure takes place. The numbers of tourists we now see at Hoi Ha on weekends and Public Holidays exceeds the carrying capacity of the environment and infrastructure. The transport situation is chaotic, with the road to Hoi Ha often being clogged with up to 30 coaches at a time and taxis, minibuses and private cars adding to the general mayhem. At times, it can take residents an hour to get to and from the village in their cars, village parking places are filled with visitors' vehicles and it can get extremely difficult just to walk through the village because of the mass of visitors. Access to the village for emergency vehicles would often be extremely difficult. In addition, we have recently seen an influx of passenger boats carrying visitors from Wong Shek and the Wan Chai peninsula – exceeding the speed limit and coming dangerously close to bathers. Toilet facilities for this level of tourism are completely inadequate, so visitors use the village drain, bushes behind the beaches and residents' plant pots to

urinate and defecate; washing facilities are also inadequate and many villagers, who use village water, have no running water at weekends, as visitors use water from every tap they can find for washing and drinking (the water is unfit to drink without boiling). There is no effective policing of the activities of this number of people and the Easter weekend saw thousands of visitors looking for sea-life on the beaches, many of them taking away their finds in plastic bags. The actual tourist areas of Hoi Ha are limited in size; the village is small and the beaches are not large – only 250m wide and narrow at high tide; on busy days, the footpaths through the village, the beaches and the jetty become hopelessly overcrowded.

The facility to limit visitor numbers already exists through the vehicle pass system, controlling access into Sai Kung Country Park. However, the current pass system is in urgent need of replacement as it is administered by too many departments and is subject to open abuse, not least by government officials using their official passes for recreational purposes. An effective pass system relies upon effective policing and at the moment there is no clear policy on who is responsible for ensuring that passes are not abused. We presented a paper to the Country Parks Visitors' Liaison Group meeting last year, which suggested a system of coloured passes to differentiate between the various kinds of users (residents/visitors/tradesmen/Government officials etc) and which would meet the needs of Country Park residents as well as limiting access to the Country Park to people with a genuine requirement to visit the area; however, there appears to be no major change to the present system in prospect. A pass system should also provide a means whereby organised coach parties can be controlled and the numbers of visitors allowed access to an area limited to the carrying capacity of the infrastructure. Alternatively, all tourist buses could be left at Pak Sha O, where there is a large coach park, and visitors could be conveyed within the Country Park by environmentally-friendly buses. This system could be combined with a "Park and Ride" system for private motorists so as to further reduce the traffic within the Country Park - there are no official parking places within the Country Park. The idea of a "quota system" appears to be an anathema to some government departments but, as far as organised coach parties are concerned, this is the only real solution to the problems of overcrowding.

The present increase in numbers of visitors is not entirely as a result of the SARS epidemic; the numbers of visitors to Hoi Ha has been steadily increasing since 1996. What has precipitated the recent inundations has been the uncoordinated advertising of Hoi Ha by the Tourist Board, TV and the WWF.

6. Government Oversight.

The almost-completed WWF Marine Life Centre in Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park represents a significant negative visual and landscape impact on both the Marine Park and Sai Kung Country Park – it is a monstrosity. This development should not have been allowed on a natural, supposedly-protected coastline. There has been a total loss of visual amenity – no attempt whatsoever was made to blend the edifice into the surrounding landscape and seascape. Now that the Centre is almost completed, the

landscape and environmental impacts should be minimised. The one-kilometre long aboveground sewage pipe along the full length of the coastal path between the Centre and the village of Hoi Ha either needs burying or taking back and connected to the recently constructed campsites on the Chai Wan extension, which have sewage facilities. The one-kilometre long stretch of exposed earth alongside the coastal footpath needs replanting with native species – not exotic plants, some of which have recently been planted. The electricity poles and cables, which destroy the skyline to the east of Hoi Ha, also need putting underground. Given that the WWF was allowed to develop on a Site of Special Scientific Interest, there should have been environmental monitoring schedules and procedures to ensure that environmental impacts were minimised. Procedures should have been established for checking that mitigation measures were applied, and that the appropriate corrective action was undertaken. Friends of Hoi Ha organised a dive team to photograph the rubbish the WWF's contractors left underneath their Marine Centre on the seabed of the Marine Park. Friends of Hoi Ha have also documented the construction rubbish dumped on the Country Park's hillside by WWF's contractors.

Despite numerous government departments being involved in the design and siting of the centre and imposing many design alterations, nobody within Government or the WWF seems to have paid any attention to the visual and environmental impact of such a hideous structure in an area of outstanding natural beauty or to consider the social consequences of inviting more visitors to an area with limited infrastructure. The construction of the Centre in an area deserving of the highest levels of environmental protection was a major failure in Government oversight and steps should be taken to ensure that something similar does not reoccur. In addition to the failure of government to effectively monitor the design and building of the WWF Centre to ensure minimum environmental impact, no attempt was made to integrate the efforts of the WWF with other conservation and educational activities being undertaken by various Government departments.

7. Government Responsibilities.

The future of Hoi Ha Wan and other Marine Parks is crucially dependent upon proper liaison between several government departments, and leadership – factors that appear to have been lacking in the past. The Tourist Department is actively promoting Hong Kong's Country and Marine Parks as areas for internal and external tourism and rightly so, as these areas of outstanding natural beauty should be utilised by a wider audience – there is more to Hong Kong than shopping arcades. However, it is incredible that the Tourism Board does not have an environmental section and irresponsible in the extreme for it to be promoting tourism in hitherto undeveloped parts of the SAR with no concern for the environmental and social impact of an influx of tourists to these areas. The primary concern of all government departments should be the conservation of our Country and Marine Parks so that they are preserved for generations to come. We must also bear in mind the requirements of tourists – particularly external visitors. Areas promoted by the Tourist Board should have all the necessary facilities for tourism – clean beaches and water; adequate toilet and

washing facilities; clean, licensed restaurants; safe, efficient, clean and legal transport and good educational material. All this must be done whilst keeping the local population happy, as it is vitally important that villagers are properly consulted before tourist exploitation of an area takes place. Some villagers make their living out of the tourist industry and, understandably, welcome increased tourism; it is perfectly acceptable that local businesses should prosper as tourist numbers increase. However, it must be recognised that the majority of villagers have no pecuniary interest in tourism and yet the co-operation of these people is also necessary. Many of the tourist groups which flood into Hoi Ha bring little trade to the local businesses, which are often at saturation point anyway; most coach parties spend a limited time at Hoi Ha before they go on to other tourist destinations, such as Tap Mun, for lunch.

In terms of legislation, the primary instrument for conservation worldwide – the 1992 Convention on Biodiversity – does not formally apply to Hong Kong. The existing Environmental Impact Ordinance is riddled with loopholes and anomalies, such as the “one hectare rule”, which limits EIAs to areas over one hectare, and needs amending to encompass developments measured by their environmental impact rather than their physical size. The Country Parks Ordinance concentrates on recreational rather than conservation objectives and needs amending to reflect a greater priority on protecting the environment. The Town Planning Ordinance is cloaked in secrecy; its meetings are closed to the public and the agenda and minutes are confidential – this process needs to be made more transparent. Hong Kong has no mechanism allowing private citizens to initiate legal action in response to environmental degradation and so developers have the upper hand in environmental affairs. The demands for development must be balanced against the needs of conservation and the Government should create the necessary legislation to ensure that the environment, particularly within the Country Parks, is safeguarded against unsuitable development.

8. Eco-Tourism.

Eco-tourism is a recent buzzword and is usually mis-used. Eco-tourism is not inviting uninformed people to visit an environmentally sensitive site with the vague hope that they might gain something from the experience. Eco-tourism should be carefully managed with the aim that visitors should have minimal impact on the environment and, if possible, put something back into the area – at the very least, Eco-tourism should have a formal education function. At the moment, very few visitors to Hoi Ha could be classified as “Eco-Tourists”. An example of eco-tourism at Hoi Ha might well be some of the more responsible dive groups, who visit the coral sites under carefully monitored situations, carry out scientific research and help in clearing fishing nets from the coral beds. In addition, these dive groups bring income to the local noodle shops and, hopefully, encourage local residents to see the preservation of the corals to be in everyone’s best interests. It is amazing that the Tourist Board should be using the phrase “Eco-Tourism” when it does not have an environmental remit. If we are to go towards Eco-Tourism in Marine Parks then the first step should be to ensure that every tour group is led by an accredited tour guide who is properly trained in environmental matters – this should be a mandatory

requirement, not a Code of Practice, which will be ignored. In addition, tour companies and group leaders should be left in no doubt as to their environmental and social responsibilities when visiting an area such as Hoi Ha and should assume responsibility for the actions of their groups.

9. Long-Term Strategy.

The future planning for Hoi Ha Wan and other Marine Parks should be linked to an overall strategy for conservation and tourism for the whole SAR. The Planning Department's SENT Report is an excellent starting point and it identifies areas which should be exploited for tourist development, such as the High Island Reservoir area, where a lot of the required infrastructure is already in place in an area which is less environmentally sensitive than the eastern part of Sai Kung Country Park. Hoi Ha might not be the right place for mass tourism – the infrastructure is poor and the area is environmentally sensitive. Whilst Hoi Ha might well be capable of supporting individual tourists – hikers, divers, snorkellers and swimmers, it is not the best place to bring coach loads of visitors not equipped for water activities or hiking. The role of Hoi Ha within the overall strategy must be identified and the advertising and infrastructure improvements linked to the overall strategy rather than implemented piece-meal with no inter-departmental discussion. The administration of the Sai Kung Country Park is complicated anyway because the southern section is administered by Sai Kung and the northern section by Tai Po District Councils. The only effective way to manage Hoi Ha (by which I mean the Marine Park, the village and the attendant infrastructure, all of which are interlinked) is to have a proper management committee, which can take inputs from, co-ordinate and direct action to be taken by government departments, NGOs, the villagers and other interested parties.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

1. Village residents and other stakeholders must be involved in Government and NGO decision-making.
2. A sewage treatment plant should be installed at Hoi Ha to process waste water from restaurants and houses.
3. Boats taking tourists on tours of the coral beds should have non-polluting motors.
4. An immediate ban on large fishing nets should be imposed within Hoi Ha Wan and a study initiated to determine the level of fishing that can be sustained by the Wan.
5. A Resident Warden should be appointed by AFCD to live in the village of Hoi Ha.

6. An immediate review of the vehicle access system to Sai Kung Country Park should take place with a view to facilitating access for essential services, Country Park residents and their genuine visitors, whilst limiting personal vehicular and coach access by tourists and casual visitors.
7. Studies should take place with a view to conveying visitors within the Country Park by environmentally-friendly buses and setting up “Park and Ride” systems for private motorists.
8. The WWF should be required to repair the environmental damage caused by the erection of their Marine Life Centre and should ensure that the development of the Centre only proceeds when its role within the overall strategy for the area is defined.
9. Government departments should carry out an investigation to see what lessons can be learnt from the unfortunate building of the WWF Centre at Hoi Ha, with a view to ensuring that similar environmental damage does not occur at other sensitive sites. Planning proposals in environmentally sensitive areas should be subject to the most stringent environmental and social standards and open to public scrutiny.
10. The Tourist Board should have an environmental section and understand that it has a social and environmental responsibility as well as a remit to generate revenue for the tourist industry.
11. The Environmental Impact Ordinance should be amended to ensure that EIAs are written for all projects that might have an environmental impact, irrespective of the physical size of the project.
12. The Country Park Ordinance should be amended to ensure that conservation is placed above recreation in the list of priorities.
13. All tour guides accompanying organised tours to the Country Park should be officially accredited and have received training in their social and environmental responsibilities.
14. A strategic plan for the tourist development of the SAR should be drawn up and the type and numbers of organised tours admitted to each potential tourist area should be linked to the environmental and infrastructure carrying capacity of the area as well to its outward appeal to tourist groups.
15. The Tourist Board and the media should limit tourist advertising to those sites designated as “honey-pot” areas, which possess the facilities and infrastructure to cope with mass tourism.

16. An Executive Management Committee should be set up for Hoi Ha Wan, which should consist of representatives from the relevant government departments, NGOs and stakeholders (including village representatives). The function of the Committee should be to co-ordinate decisions affecting the Marine Park, the village of Hoi Ha and its environs and infrastructure and to ensure the smooth integration of a suitable level of tourist exploitation without adversely affecting the environment or social conditions.

CONCLUSION

The Marine Park Ordinance was a major milestone in the development of Hong Kong's conservation strategy; however, under the present management system and the increase in tourist numbers we are now seeing, neither of the 2 aims of conservation and recreation is being met at Hoi Ha. The environmental pressure on Hoi Ha Wan is probably greater now than it was before the area was gazetted, due to the increased visitor numbers, which have not been accompanied by an improvement in infrastructure. Either visitor numbers have to be decreased by diverting tourists away from Hoi Ha into less sensitive areas identified as tourist "honey-pots", or there needs to be a major investment in infrastructure to meet the present and projected visitor numbers. The management of Hoi Ha Wan needs to be streamlined and co-ordinated, with proper consultation taking place between stakeholders, Government and NGOs, and the full co-ordination of government departments within the framework of an overall strategy for the area. Before major decisions are taken by government agencies or NGOs, the plans must be co-ordinated with other interested parties and it is essential that the environmental and social impacts are assessed and that proper public consultation with stakeholders is part of the process. Only by taking these actions now will we be able to prevent irreparable damage to the marine life of Hoi Ha Wan, the unacceptable degradation of the quality of life for village residents and the destruction of the environment to such an extent that visitors will no longer wish to visit the Park.

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