

HOI HA WAN MARINE PARK**REPORT BY FRIENDS OF HOI HA – APRIL 2004**

Members of Friends of Hoi Ha attended the Panel on Environmental Affairs in January, when the subject of Marine Park Management was discussed. We would like to comment on some of the issues raised by the Administration's submission and the subsequent discussion in the light of recent experiences and subsequent to the latest meeting of the Marine Parks Visitors' Liaison Group.

In general, the disruption caused by visitors in the village of Hoi Ha has somewhat lessened and the AFCD is to be commended for many initiatives which have improved the situation. However, it would appear that many of the AFCD's efforts to further the concepts of conservation and the sustainable development of Hoi Ha and the Marine Parks are being hindered by the inability or unwillingness of other Government departments to become involved, and the infrastructure at Hoi Ha still needs to be significantly improved.

1. Fishing Community

- a. At the January meeting, it was heartening to hear the fishing community's representative volunteering to co-operate with the Authorities to limit the amount of illegal Mainland fishing taking place in Hong Kong waters in general and Marine Parks in particular. We believe that it is vitally important to have the fishing community's full co-operation in enforcing fishing legislation as they are in the best position to spot offenders and can act as the eyes and ears of the limited resources available to the AFCD and Marine Police. There is much scope for this type of co-operation to increase. If steps were taken to educate the fishing community and convince them that the establishment of no-fishing areas was in the long term interests of fishermen, then much of the need for legislation and enforcement would disappear – the concept would become self-policing. Great efforts should be made to convince the local fishermen that if areas such as Hoi Ha Wan were declared no-fishing zones, the waters would act as a breeding ground and nursery for fish, leading to a large improvement in the fishing immediately outside the zone, increasing the economic value of fish caught. This concept would serve the aims of improving conservation in the Marine Parks and provide long-term security for the fishing community; there are many areas worldwide where this concept has led to a healthy environment and a sustainable fishing industry. The WWF HK is fully in support of this initiative and has recently applied to the Sustainable Development Fund for a grant to put together an education package for up to 1000 local fishermen to educate them in modern fish conservation practices and to teach them about the benefits of no-fish zones in areas such as Hoi Ha – an excellent first use of the WWF Education Centre at Hoi Ha. Unfortunately, the application for a grant was refused because, in the opinion of the Sustainable Development Fund's committee, the project would not affect a sufficient number of people to make it worthy of a grant. It seems unbelievable that the WWF should be refused funding for what would seem to be a classic case of promoting sustainable development; the package might only be for a maximum of 1000 fishermen but the environmental impact of the establishment of sustainable inshore fishing practices in Hong Kong would be of

inestimable benefit to the whole Hong Kong community. If the Sustainable Development Fund is not to be used for projects such as this, then just what is it being used for?

- b. Meanwhile, the legal and illegal exploitation of Hoi Ha Wan's marine life goes on unabated. The method of fishing using tangle nets up to 3 km long is decimating the marine life and the practice is even more distressing in that much of the marine life caught and killed by these nets is unusable and what is used is mainly ground up to use as fish meal in fish farms. A proper, sustainable fishing industry would obviate the need for many of these fish farms. The tangle nets are cheap to buy and when they become entangled on rocks or coral it is often seen as more convenient to cut them free and buy a new one. However, these abandoned nets stay in the water as 'ghost' nets, which continue to catch marine life for months and years ahead. In April this year, a regular clean-up of these nets was undertaken by divers and over 2 tons of these nets were removed. Commercial exploitation of Marine Parks using these methods is not sustainable.



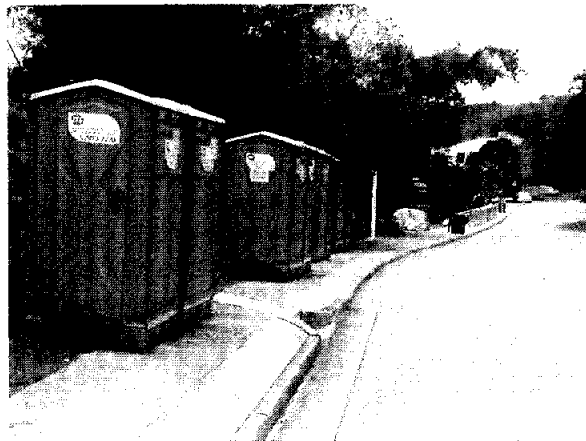
2. Congestion at Hoi Ha

- a. The number of visitors to Hoi Ha has decreased over the last few months to more manageable proportions. How much of this decrease is seasonal remains to be seen but, certainly, some of the decrease in numbers is due to the more stringent policing of vehicle passes and the limitation on the number of coaches allowed to visit Hoi Ha (a maximum of 10 per day). There is still no environmental control of the commercial vehicles being used to transport visitors through the Country Park and many coaches and mini-buses are barely able to climb up the mountains and leave a pall of black diesel smoke in their wake – a far-thinking administration would insist that all commercial passenger vehicles in the Country Park be powered by environmentally-friendly propulsion units such as LPG or electric. The demographics of the visitors has changed, with the tourist numbers being dominated by the large coach tours – many of the traditional visitors to Hoi Ha, such as individual walkers and divers, no longer come to Hoi Ha because of the crowds of tourists and the dangers of diving in waters infested by water taxis. Some of the local village restaurants are complaining that their trade has actually decreased over the last year or so because the coach tourists usually only stay a short time in Hoi Ha before going elsewhere for lunch.

- b. The WWF will be applying for up to 4 coaches per day when their Education Centre opens later this year. The WWF has expressed a wish that their allocation should be drawn from the existing quota of coach parties and, obviously, we would like to see the maximum number of coaches allowed to visit Hoi Ha to remain at 10 after the WWF Centre opens. However, this aspect needs to be co-ordinated with the authorities issuing passes and there may be some opposition from tour organisers to their allocation, effectively, being reduced to 6 per day. The alternative is for the WWF to arrange the transportation of their visitors through Wong Shek or all the way by boat from Ma Liu Shui.

3. Infrastructure/Government Oversight

- a. Despite a great deal of debate on the subject, little has actually been done to improve the infrastructure at Hoi Ha to reflect the needs of the environment and the community in the light of increased tourism. What has been done (reduction in the size of the roundabout, anti-parking bollards, portable toilets and sea buoys) have been purely reactive measures, responding to particular, individual problems. These measures have not only been piecemeal but have also not contributed to the beautification of the area. Whilst village residents are doing quite a lot to enhance the area for the benefit of both residents and visitors, the Government's efforts have resulted in visitors' first sight of the village being a line of smelly mobile toilets and ugly concrete barricades – in marked contrast to the beautiful flower borders seen in the Sai Kung area. Lines of buoys in the Wan have also not enhanced the look of what is a beautiful area. Meanwhile, larger projects such as the provision of parking and drop-off areas, proper toilet and washing facilities, a footpath bypassing the village and a comprehensive sewage treatment system have seen little progress due to funding and other difficulties.



- b. Due to an historical anachronism, the northern part of the Sai Kung Country Park comes under Tai Po District Office and appears to be too far away from Tai Po for them to take much interest. The long-term interests of Sai Kung Country Park would be best served by having a unitary authority.
- c. What is lacking from any of the Government departments is a long-term vision of what Hoi Ha should become and what infrastructure improvements are necessary to support this concept – at the moment, thinking is totally reactive rather than pro-

active. Government inertia is enormous and measures taken are designed to be the minimum possible to keep a tenuous hold on the status quo or to minimise environmental and social damage. Nobody in Government appears to actually want to improve the situation or to think long-term and any thought of actually enhancing the look of the area appears to be totally alien to Government thinking. It is extremely disappointing to see that many involved Government Departments, such as the Marine Department, the District Offices and the Tourist Board, do not send representatives to important meetings concerned with the marine environment. The Marine Department and the Tourist Board websites contain no information or links to any environmental or conservation matters and one is led to the conclusion that neither department considers that they have any environmental responsibilities or conservation remit, unlike most of their counterparts in other parts of the world. Thailand provides a good example of a developing country where the Department of Tourism works closely with the National Parks Department to co-ordinate the sustainable development of National Parks as a tourist destination, whilst ensuring that conservation and social needs are also addressed. Hong Kong receives a great deal of income from tourism; some of this money must be spent on improving infrastructure, not only to protect the environment and the lives of communities affected by tourism but also to improve the situation and to provide a better experience for the visitors.

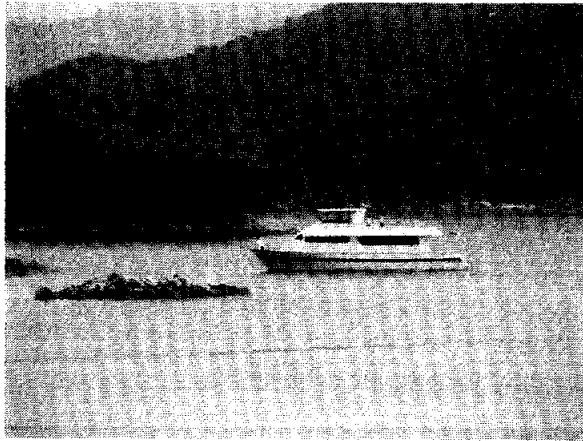
4. Water Taxis

The number of water taxis visiting Hoi Ha has decreased from the numbers seen over the summer of 2003, partly as a result of informal agreements between the water taxi drivers and the AFCD. In addition, the lines of buoys have decreased the number of power boats disturbing the intertidal zone and driving in areas with swimmers. However, it seems rather strange that this illegal activity is still being condoned by the authorities. To reiterate some of the problems – the boat owners are not allowed to operate a business in a Marine Park, the boats have motors with power in excess of the maximum of 15 HP allowed, they are not licensed as passenger-carrying vessels and they provide no life-saving devices for their passengers. If the activity is illegal, there is no excuse for it to continue and it is the responsibility of the relevant departments to stop it. There may be a case for the issuance of licences to allow a controlled number of boats, which comply with the relevant regulations, to continue to ply their trade, but the present situation, where an illegal activity is allowed to continue under the noses of the authorities provided the miscreants abide by a gentleman's agreement (usually only when there is an AFCD patrol boat in sight), is a clear abrogation of responsibility by, at least, the Marine Department.

5. Glass-Bottomed Boats

In addition to the water taxis, a new marine menace has recently emerged in the form of large, commercial, glass-bottomed boats which are now making regular appearances at Hoi Ha and are offering visitors a tour of the coral beds as part of a tour package. When the WWF opens its new Education Centre at Hoi Ha, these commercial boats will be in direct competition with the WWF and will be undercutting the WWF in price. However, the WWF will be providing visitors with an environmental education package which will include a glass-bottomed boat tour and will be run by properly trained

personnel. The guides and masters on the commercial boats have no environmental credentials or training and are operating within a legal loophole. When the WWF set about licensing their glass-bottomed boat, it was registered, properly, as a passenger-carrying vessel and, therefore, had to abide by numerous safety and environmental regulations. The commercial boats are being operated as pleasure craft, chartered by the tourists and, therefore, are able to operate without the environmental and safety requirements of an official passenger-carrying vessel. This legal loophole needs to be closed quickly and the law needs to be rigorously enforced by the Marine Department, otherwise Hoi Ha and other Marine Parks are in danger of being overrun by commercial vessels with few environmental or safety concerns.



6. Sewage

- a. There seemed to be a great deal of confusion at the January meeting about sewage effluent from the village of Hoi Ha. The sewage system at Hoi Ha is similar to the system in most New Territories villages; toilet waste (faeces & urine etc) is mostly fed into septic tanks attached to each house, which are fairly effective at treating this effluent before discharge into the environment. However, all other waste water from the village, from washing machines, baths/showers, dishwashing and other activities, is allowed to pass into open drains traversing the village and is then discharged, without any form of filtering or treatment, directly into the sea. In many respects, the environmental damage caused by this 'grey' water effluent is of more environmental concern than toilet sewage, as it contains residues from non-biodegradable detergents, phosphates and detergent enzymes, all of which are extremely damaging to marine life. We have been asking for a proper sewage treatment for the village 'grey' water because of the environmental sensitivity of Hoi Ha Wan, where there should be a policy of 'no pollution'.
- b. The EPD seems only able to classify water in terms of its public health implications and is more interested in e.coli concentrations than detergent residues. EPD's water sampling methods, times and locations are not geared to monitoring pollution types and levels which are adversely affecting the marine environment and need to be amended to provide a true picture. Members of the Panel seemed to be mainly concerned as to whether or not the restaurants were degreasing their effluent before discharge, ignoring the more environmentally damaging ingredients of the waste

water and the considerable discharge from private houses in the village. Discharge into Hoi Ha Wan should not be monitored using purely public health criteria – the beach is not even gazetted as a recreational area. New criteria should be drawn up for discharge into environmentally sensitive areas, with the intention of not only preserving the status quo in terms of water quality but also, if possible, improving the marine environment. Hoi Ha Wan is not well flushed by tides and so any pollution discharged into the waters is likely to stay there. If a no-tolerance of pollution policy were to be introduced, then the waters of Hoi Ha Wan should improve and with this improvement will come an increase in the numbers and variety of marine life, which is what we all want.

- c. There has been some reluctance to set up a sewage treatment scheme at Hoi Ha because it was felt that if Hoi Ha had one then other villages would demand the same. However, Hoi Ha should not be compared with other villages because it is a special case – no other New Territories villages discharge their sewage directly into a Marine Park. Meanwhile, a village house in Hoi Ha has been completely demolished and rebuilt with no requirement to improve the existing sewage system and AFCD and EPD have voiced no objections to the building of a new village house, despite the fact that extra building would increase the sewage outfall into Hoi Ha Wan. Again, the authorities are hiding behind regulations that should not apply to Hoi Ha, given its special environmental relationship to an important marine habitat. We should be looking at ways to improve environmental protection, not just, tenuously, maintaining the status quo.

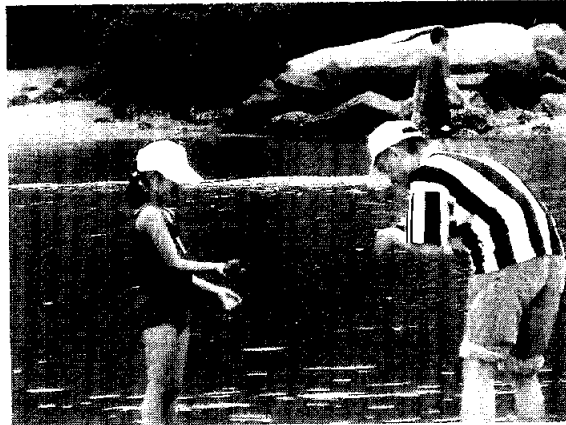
7. WWF Education Centre

Despite the assurances to the contrary, the WWF Education Centre is still attracting much adverse comment. The disguising of the sewage pipe by planting of shrubs and trees has been an almost complete failure, with most of the plants dying within weeks of their planting. The plants which are surviving are large shrubs/trees planted close beside the soakaway pit – these plants are totally inappropriate to plant in such a location as their roots will eventually penetrate the concrete pits and cause leakage of sewage onto the beach, which is only a few metres away. The sewage system from the Centre is an eyesore, offensive to many people and a potential health hazard – it should be relocated.

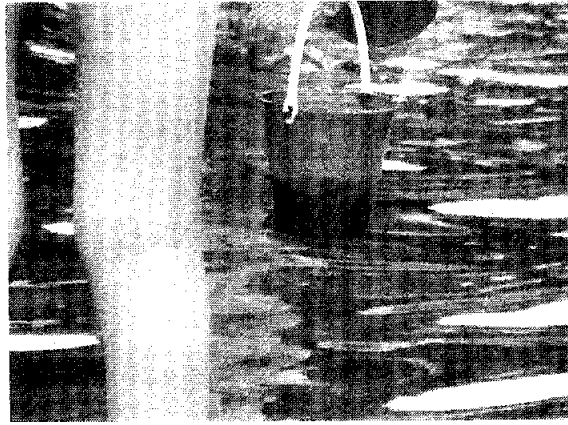


8. Disappearance of Marine Life

- a. The assertion from the AFCD that marine life has not disappeared from Hoi Ha Wan but has moved from the beach to the mangrove area is laughable in its naivety. We have not seen any crustacean removal vans on the beach in recent month but what we do continue to see are visitors taking away marine life in plastic bags and bottles; this is coupled with the insatiable demand for people to have their pictures taken whilst holding sea life, which causes considerable disturbance and often kills the creature being handled.



Hermit crabs, mudskippers and starfish used to inhabit the whole of the coastline, the beaches and the mangrove forests. Due to uncontrolled collection and, possibly, other influences, such as pollution and physical disturbance, the sea life along the beaches has now almost entirely disappeared. We have walked along the beach every day for 8 years and would assert that, whatever the AFCD would say about the health of the marine life in Hoi Ha, a couple of years ago the sea shore was teeming with hermit crabs and other marine life; now it is hard to find any live crabs or starfish anywhere along the beaches. This observation is not quantitative but still provides strong evidence that, whatever AFCD would like to think, environmental damage is occurring at Hoi Ha and should be recognised. Although the state of health of the coral beds and artificial reefs is fairly well monitored, the rest of Hoi Ha Wan's marine life is not well documented and there is little baseline data to assess the state of health of the Wan as a whole. Dr Cornish of the Swire Institute has published data showing that the marine life of Hoi Ha Wan is much less than that seen in similar protected areas in other parts of the world – a sad reflection of the inability of Hong Kong's authorities to set up and maintain protected marine areas. Whilst local fishermen are permitted to use tangle nets of unlimited length within the Wan there can be little expectation that the numbers and variety of fish will increase from the present situation.



- b. In addition to the direct threat to marine life caused by visitors, the seashore at Hoi Ha is dynamic and the last few years has seen a marked decrease in the extent of the sand flats and beaches – at high tide the main beach at Hoi Ha is now only about 10m wide, half of what it was 2 years ago. It is believed that the relatively new road to Hoi Ha has increased erosion of the sand from rain run-off, whilst the relatively few typhoons we have experienced in the past few years has meant that sand has not been driven back to the beaches by strong winds and currents. There have also been changes noted in the extent and health of the coral beds for which the Wan is famous. Overall, there is the inescapable conclusion that much more research needs to be done to find out about the dynamic situation at Hoi Ha and, in the meantime, environmental pressures which are controllable (pollution, fishing, physical damage caused by tourism etc) should be minimised.



9. Policing of Visitors

Although the AFCD have recorded a number of prosecutions, the number is still tiny in relation to the number of visitors to Hoi Ha and the amount of illegal activity that take place. What was not mentioned to the Panel was the lack of success that the prosecutions have achieved when they have come to court. There are still members of the judiciary who do not take environmental crime seriously. Although littering offences seem always to have attracted the maximum fines, other offences, which are much more environmentally damaging, have been treated extremely leniently or have been dismissed. Laws covering environmental vandalism need to be strengthened and

the judiciary needs to be educated to treat such crimes seriously. If people are to be prosecuted for crimes such as collecting marine life from within a Marine Park, the sentences need to be punitive and well documented to deter future visitors. Putting up signs is obviously not sufficient – there needs to be a real deterrent. Litter is highly visible and the organisation of beach cleanups, although welcome, does not address the less visible environmental consequences of tourism – the removal of sea life and the disturbance to their habitat.

10. Warden Patrols

As was brought out at the Panel meeting, wardens need to be more proactive in patrolling the Marine Parks and need to be visible and active in seeking out potential problems and advise people verbally of their responsibilities for the environment as well as, where necessary, issuing summonses. There are more shore patrols being undertaken at busy times this year but the wardens need a better uniform which is more practical in a shoreline situation and which is instantly recognisable – they need shoes which can be immersed in sea water and, perhaps, short trousers, so that they can actually wade out into the water to talk to people. There must be examples around of the world of a practical uniform for shore-patrol wardens. There is still a need for resident wardens at each of the Marine Parks – a concept that seems to be totally alien to AFCD.

11. Conclusion

We are grateful for the interest shown in marine conservation by members of LegCo and the Panel on Environmental Affairs. Over the last year, we have seen improvements to the environmental situation at Hoi Ha but there is still a long way to go to produce Marine Parks that have a long-term future as conservation areas for marine life and which support a sustainable level of tourism. What is still most lacking from the equation is Government policy concerning tourism in environmentally sensitive areas and a responsible attitude by the Tourist Board towards environmentally sustainable tourism in the Marine and Country Parks. In addition, co-operation between Government Departments is still sadly lacking – the AFCD is now beginning to advocate some excellent concepts to ensure the conservation of the Marine Parks and the development of sustainable tourism but, without the backup of other branches of Government, such as the Marine Department, the Marine Police, the Tourist Board, District Offices and the Environmental Protection Department and the facilitation of education initiatives through Government funding, the future of our Marine Parks is still far from certain.

David NEWBERY

Friends of Hoi Ha