A CALL TO ACTION ON THE PROTECTION OF HONG KONG RIVERS AND STREAMS

Joint Panel Meeting on Impact of Construction Work on Rivers in Hong Kong

Green Lantau Association

February 2004

FACT

The HKSAR has over 140 species of freshwater fishes, and 80% are restricted to lowland habitats. New records/species are still being found - some may still remain unknown.

Tai Ho and Tung Chung streams in North Lantau, harbour very important species including the endemic Ayu *Plecoglossus altivilis* (Tai Ho) and the rare Barb *Acrossocheilus beijiangensis* (Tung Chung)

TIME IS RUNNING OUT….

- Six native species, including *Aphyocypris Lini,* a fish endemic to HK are already extinct.
- Almost a quarter of our native fish SPECIES ARE FACING IMMEDIATE EXTINCTION.
- Hong Kong has about 120 lowland river fish species, and almost no lowland freshwater habitats are protected.
- 70% of Hong Kong native fish could be extinct within the next decade unless rivers and streams are given greater legislative protection.

The Problem - Ecological Degradation

- 60% of HK’s rivers have suffered from large scale channelization in the last 10 years. Channelization entails creating a U-shaped or trapezoidal channel, flattening the river bed and covering it in concrete.
- 80% of lowland rivers have been ‘trained’ or ‘improved’ in some ways, devastating the ecology.

CHANNELIZATION is not the proper solution

- Channelization considers flooding problems only from an engineering perspective and fails to take account of the wildlife value of a stream or river and its scenic setting. Channelization not only destroys the stream itself but impacts the land around it and the water into which it drains.
- Channelization fails to address the fundamental causes of flooding - urbanization of flood plains and soil erosion from deforestation, often the result of hill-fires.
- Pollution is no justification for channelization.

The Solution

- Government needs to implement proper planning controls to prevent development within a set distance from streams and rivers. This entails a revision of The Small House Policy and studies relating to sustainable practices of other countries.
- Fire protection, enforcement and prosecution measures need to be stepped up to prevent soil erosion and silting.
- Environmentally-sensitive river and stream management practices need to be reviewed and implemented for all watercourses.
- Improved enforcement is needed to curb illegal discharges into streams and rivers. Sewage systems should rapidly be put in place and Government-aided services provided to maintain and service existing septic tanks.
- Improved regulations are needed to protect streams and rivers from illegal fishing practices.

ACTION

- China is a signatory on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention for wetland protection, and Hong Kong is committed to the spirit of these conventions.
- Realization of this commitment calls for a genuine change in attitude and strategy for our natural streams and rivers.
- In 2000 “A Call for Action on the Protection of Rivers and Streams” was addressed to Tung Chee-hwa and signed by the majority of green groups. These recommendations need to be accomplished without delay.

Recommendations

- 1. **Cease river training pending a review of current practices.** The use of concrete and gabion walls in river training and drainage improvement must be restricted to situations where it is totally unavoidable. Stream beds must be left intact. No watercourse, large or small, should be exempt from environmental impact assessments under the Environmental Impact Ordinance.
- 2. **Restore streams and rivers devastated by river training.** Habitat restoration for degraded watercourses has a become a global trend for developed countries in pursuit of a quality environment. Hong Kong should follow suit.
- 3. **Clean up polluted streams and rivers.** Pollution control for streams and rivers should be stepped up. Government should take whatever steps are necessary to control discharges at source.
- 4. **Conserve and enhance ALL existing natural streams in lowlands.** Those watercourses that remain relatively natural in character must be preserved, and their conservation value enhanced