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Panel on Environmental Affairs

Meeting on 23 November 2020

**Background brief on conservation of local Green Turtles
prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat**

Purpose

This paper provides background information on the conservation of local Green Turtles in Hong Kong. It also gives a brief account of the major views and concerns expressed by Members when related issues were discussed by the relevant committees of the Legislative Council in recent years.

Background

Green Turtles in Hong Kong

2. The Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) is a species of sea turtles found in Hong Kong waters and the only species known to breed locally. It is a highly endangered species listed under Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora ("CITES").¹

3. Sham Wan, at the southern sea inlet of Lamma Island, is the only Green Turtle nesting site known in Hong Kong, and is among one of the few remaining nesting sites for Green Turtles in Southern China. Like other sea

¹ CITES is an international treaty that has been ratified by 183 Parties since it was first entered into force in 1975. The aim of CITES is to prevent species from becoming endangered or extinct because of international trade. CITES regulates more than 35 000 animal and plant species, including their parts and products, to ensure the international trade in them does not threaten their survival. CITES regulates international trade (both commercial and non-commercial) through a system of permits and certificates in which the required permits/certificates must accompany the species in question when leaving and entering a country.

turtles, Green Turtles will only nest at the beach where it was born. The nesting season of local Green Turtles lasts from June to October each year. Every few years, mature Green Turtles travel a long distance from their foraging grounds to breeding areas. The females come ashore two or more times each breeding season in every three years on average to lay eggs in nest cavities on the beach. They are extremely sensitive to disturbances during nesting. Human disturbance such as illumination or noise will shy them away from the nesting ground. The hatchlings of Green Turtles have a very low survival rate. Strong light will disorientate the hatchlings from going into the sea, resulting in deaths on the beach.

Species Action Plan for Green Turtles

4. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department ("AFCD") has been implementing a Green Turtle Species Action Plan ("SAP") since 1998 with various conservation measures to protect Green Turtles and their nesting site. These include listing Green Turtle as a protected wild animal and designating its nesting site in Sham Wan as a Restricted Area under the Wild Animals Protection Ordinance (Cap. 170)("the Ordinance"),² carrying out patrol, monitoring and habitat management of the nesting site, undertaking scientific studies, removing abandoned fishing nets, conducting publicity and education, as well as making regional and international collaboration.

Regional and international cooperation

5. Green Turtles are migratory species that inhabit different regions at different stages. In this connection, regional and international cooperation is important to the conservation of the species throughout its life history. According to the Administration, it maintains regular contacts with the regional and international authorities, experts and institutes to implement the management measures and to exchange up-to-date intelligence and experience relevant to sea turtle conservation.

² During the public consultation by AFCD on the designation of Sham Wan Restricted Area in 1999, some locals considered that the proposal would affect the operations at Sham Wan by the local fishermen and the development potential of the area, and objected the designation of the whole Sham Wan as a Restricted Area. Taking into consideration the concerns of the locals, the Government eventually agreed that only the beach area of Sham Wan was designated as a Restricted Area so as to expedite the conservation of Green Turtles. The Wild Animals Protection Ordinance (Amendment of Schedule 6) Notice 1999 Notice, which was published in the Gazette on 30 July 1999 for inserting the sandy beach at Sham Wan into the list of areas where entry is restricted during a specified period of time every year, came into effect on 30 July 1999.

Major views and concerns expressed by Members

6. At the meeting on 22 February 2016, the Panel on Environmental Affairs ("EA Panel") discussed the Administration's efforts in protecting endangered species including Green Turtles and relevant measures under the first Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for Hong Kong. Related issues were brought up when the Panel received public views on the protection of endangered species of animals and plants at the meeting on 28 May 2018, and during examination of the Estimates of Expenditure in recent years. Members' major views and concerns are summarized in the ensuing paragraphs.

Sham Wan Restricted Area

Monitoring and enforcement

7. Members noted with concern an increase in the frequency of fishing and leisure activities in Sham Wan during Green Turtles' nesting season in recent years and urged the Administration to strengthen monitoring and enforcement of the Sham Wan Restricted Area.

8. The Administration advised that as a Restricted Area under the Ordinance, access to Sham Wan beach was restricted from June to October each year ("the restricted period"). Unauthorized access to the Restricted Area was liable to a maximum fine of \$50,000. AFCD conducted regular patrol to control unauthorized activities and monitor the conditions of the nesting site. Warning signals were put in place to alert the public that unauthorized access to the area was prohibited during the restricted period. Before the onset of the nesting season each year, AFCD carried out management work at the beach including removal of weeds and refuse that might hinder the movement of nesting Green Turtles.

9. The Administration further advised that the sandy beach of Sham Wan and the nearby shallow water were designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest in order to recognize the scientific and conservation importance of the area for Green Turtles. Furthermore, the entire bay area in Sham Wan was a Speed Restricted Zone for vessels designated by the Marine Department with a speed limit of 5 knots. This helped protect Green Turtles from being hit by vessels navigating in high speed. Every year prior to the commencement of the Restricted Area, AFCD issued letters to local marinas and boat renting companies to remind them of the control measures related to the Restricted Area and the Speed Restricted Zone in order to reduce disturbance to sea turtles by boats. If there was any case of exceedance of the speed limit, AFCD would report to the Marine Department or the Hong Kong Police Force for taking appropriate enforcement actions.

10. Members noted that to enhance the monitoring of Sham Wan Restricted Area, AFCD had been deploying a surveillance camera system during the restricted period since 2018. The surveillance camera system enabled remote monitoring of the conditions of the beach and nesting activities of Green Turtles through an online platform so that additional manpower could be deployed promptly. According to the Administration, over the past three years (i.e. 2017-2018 to 2019-2020), AFCD did not receive any complaints, issue any warnings or initiate any prosecutions regarding unauthorized access to the Sham Wan Restricted Area.³

11. As regards the cleaning of the Sham Wan beach, the Administration advised that the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department ("FEHD") conducted regular cleaning 1 to 2 times per week under normal conditions during the restricted period. Apart from commissioning outsourced cleansing contractors, the routine cleaning work carried out by FEHD included collecting and clearing the marine refuse. Under special circumstances, AFCD would arrange its staff and contractors to support FEHD's cleaning operations. To avoid entanglement of Green Turtles at Sham Wan, AFCD also carried out underwater survey for abandoned fishing nets at the bay and arranged removal of the abandoned fishing nets and other marine debris if necessary.

Scope of restricted area

12. At the meeting on 28 May 2018, EA Panel passed a motion urging the Administration to expand the Sham Wan Restricted Area to the waters off the beach, so as to prevent the noise and light pollution caused by the vessels and people congregate there from hindering the nesting of Green Turtles on the shore. The Administration advised that AFCD was reviewing the Green Turtle SAP, including the extent and period of the Restricted Area, taking into account the nesting records and the fishing and leisure activities at Sham Wan.

Tracking of sea turtles and related research studies

13. Members enquired about the tracking of sea turtles (including Green Turtles) and the scientific/academic research projects conducted on sea turtles. The Administration advised that since 2000 and up to April 2020, AFCD had attached metal tags engraved with a unique serial number to 74 sea turtles. The metal tags helped identify individual sea turtles when they were encountered in the future. Over the past five financial years (from 2015-2016 to 2019-2020), AFCD had conducted satellite tracking of sea turtles to study their migratory routes and to better conserve sea turtles and their habitats. AFCD also conducted population genetic analysis on sea turtles to better understand their

³ According to the Administration, there had been cases of unauthorized access but they were mostly unintended and the persons concerned left the area upon the instructions of the nature wardens/patrol staff.

genetic diversity. The Administration pointed out that findings from these studies were important for formulating appropriate management measures with other conservation authorities in the region for the better protection of sea turtles.

Latest development

14. At the meeting on 23 November 2020, the Administration will brief EA Panel on the proposed expansion of the Sham Wan Restricted Area to cover the sea inlet at Sham Wan and the extension of the restricted period to further enhance the protection of Green Turtles.

Relevant papers

15. A list of relevant papers is set out in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 1
Legislative Council Secretariat
16 November 2020

Conservation of local Green Turtles

List of relevant papers

Date of meeting	Event	Paper
22 February 2016	Meeting of the Panel on Environmental Affairs ("EA Panel")	Administration's paper on "Update on the Protection of Endangered Species and Biodiversity in Hong Kong" (LC Paper No. CB(1)557/15-16(04))
28 May 2018	Meeting of EA Panel	Administration's paper on "Latest Progress of the Protection of Endangered Species of Animals and Plants in Hong Kong" (LC Paper No. CB(1)977/17-18(03)) Minutes of meeting (LC Paper No. CB(1)1301/17-18) Administration's written response to a motion on protection of Green Turtles raised at the meeting (LC Paper No. CB(1)1276/17-18(01))
9 April 2019	Special meeting of the Finance Committee ("FC") for examination of Estimates of Expenditure 2019-2020	Written questions raised by Members and the Administration's replies (Reply serial number: ENB011)
6 April 2020	Special meeting of FC for examination of Estimates of Expenditure 2020-2021	Written questions raised by Members and the Administration's replies (Reply serial numbers: ENB012 and 191)