

FORUM NEWS

CONSERVATION NEWS 4

NGO FORUM FOR THE UK DEPENDENT TERRITORIES

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HONG KONG SPECIAL ISSUE

In the final years of Hong Kong's status as a Crown Colony many questions are being asked about the legacy of British rule. In this special issue of Forum News we focus on the conservation situation in Hong Kong, and the future beyond 1997. The Nature Conservancy Council has sought confirmation that the 1984 Sino British Joint Declaration has provi-

sion for international agreements applied in Hong Kong to remain and that existing conservation legislation will continue after 1997. Professor Brian Morton of Hong Kong University provides his personal perspective on the future for nature conservation and we also look at some of the major conservation topics of international concern.

We have drawn largely on information provided by WWF HK. Established in 1981, WWF HK has become the leading NGO in Hong Kong, working closely with other voluntary conservation groups and government agencies to secure a future for indigenous species and natural habitats.

CHINA'S SILENT SPRINGS

When I first was asked to write an article for Forum News on the future of Hong Kong's nature reserves following hand over of the territory to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, I thought about it for a while and then declined the invitation. The implication in the invitation was that any such reserves would not be protected so fully as under the British administration and as even greater exploitation of the land got under way.

The truth is however rather different. China has established many reserves and some of the more well-known ones, such as Poyang lake, receive much international interest and support. There are three mangrove reserves on the southern coast of China. In contrast Hong Kong has but one official reserve - the small and little-known Tai Po Kau forest reserve. Our best known 'reserve' is the Mai Po Marshes (See below), purchased and managed by WWF HK through public support and based around a mangrove, reed and *gei wai* (shrimp pond) wetland. Internationally recognised for its bird-life, both resident and migrant, the 'reserve' attracts thousands of visitors each month. But, actually, Mai Po is not an official reserve, it is a highly sensitive border area that the Hong Kong Government controls firmly and is only accorded SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) status which, in truth is no protection at all. Recently one of Hong Kong's more prestigious newspapers, ran an editorial asking why such an internationally recognised habitat was still not accorded full protection.

At present, I am chairman of another WWF HK committee trying to set up a coral reserve (Hoi Ha Wan) in a tiny bay in Hong

Kong's northeastern waters. Work proceeds, but it will be literally years before the government designates it a reserve - if ever. On a point of interest, there is no protection afforded to any corals or coral areas under Chinese and Hong Kong jurisdiction. So, you see, Hong Kong is not exactly a pioneer in habitat conservation and it is just possible that come 1997, the Chinese Government would act with more alacrity in affording Mai Po and Hoi Ha reserve status.

In that case, why this article? Recently I visited China, notably the delta of the Pearl River, an enormous entity, draining an area of China the size of Great Britain and forming between its tributaries vast wetlands that constitute China's ricebowl. I have been to China before, but usually by plane, or travelling by train through the night, and for the most part, staying in cities. I also know about, indeed have fought against, the illegal importation into Hong Kong from China of wildlife for food. Civet cats, otters, pangolins, owls, eagles, in fact almost any living creature is brought in, is often confiscated by the Customs Service and either destroyed, released locally or returned to China. Hong Kong is on the cutting edge of wildlife conservation in southern China and WWF International and WWF HK tries to promote conservation in that country - at many levels and in many ways. The need for conservation and environmental education is desperate.

In March I was in Guangzhou (Canton) on a short official visit to the South China Sea Institute of Oceanology and to visit the coastline of the Pearl's delta in order to instigate research on a clam, *Cyrenobatissa subsul-*

cata, little known and, to me, as a coastal ecologist, of great interest biologically. I'm not a bird-watcher, but after working for the protection of Mai Po for many years and participating each year in "Hong Kong's Big Bird Race" to spot as many species as possible within 24 hours and thereby raise funds for the protection of Mai Po, I have acquired a more than passing interest in birds and a little skill in their identification. The team the University of Hong Kong fields each year for this event is called "Bird-brains" - which, I think will illustrate the level of my own and my colleague's skills. On last year's bird race we saw 117 species out of a grand total of 271 species identified by all fourteen teams on the day.

I live just outside the city of Victoria on Hong Kong island and am sometimes woken up by a cacophony of Black-faced Laughing Thrushes and Magpies arguing about rights. If I wake early, I can recognise the earlier calls of a Violet Whistling Thrush and the Magpie Robins. Sometimes, I even hear a Coucal, always doves, in summer Black Drongos and on my way to work (10 minutes) will always see sparrows, Chinese Bulbuls, the occasional Indian Mynah and again, always, Black-eared Kites, nesting in the hills and scavenging in the harbour. The kites, indeed, are obvious in this city as anything else - they characterise its skies.

Back, however, to Guangzhou with no thoughts of birds in my head. Stepping out of the hotel for a stroll, I could not fail to miss a man standing on the pavement holding a 2m string tethering, by one leg, an Eastern Grass Owl. It was uninjured, physically, and tried to fly, but against the tether soon re-

turned to earth. What struck me most poignantly, however, was that the flight was, as it should be, absolutely silent. I felt I was watching a silent black and grey movie, and, utterly repulsed, had a problem in not laying out the man, around whom a crowd of possible customers was accumulating. Sickened, but not wishing to cause an international incident 10 minutes after my arrival, I left the scene thoroughly dejected.

Over the next few days, discussions went well. We agreed to co-operate in marine science training. Time to leave; but via Duomen deep in the heart of the Pearl's delta to look for the clam. Duomen is about five hours drive from Guangzhou, for the most part sweeping over the vast deltaic plain of rice paddies, vegetable plots and fish ponds. Through growing towns, the road soars, on brand new bridges, over huge tributaries of the Pearl, pierces villages, by-passes hamlets, each hour the scene becoming flatter and more rural, as Guangzhou's influence lessens. Seemingly, it is relatively prosperous. Duomen is a former market town, now industrialising, and worthy of little comment save that it is but an hour or so drive from Zuhai, north of Macau, the Portuguese colony that sits proudly on the western flank of the Pearl, just as Hong Kong sits majestically on the east. Seven hours of slow driving through this rural wetland, with occasional stops, gave me an, albeit fleeting, impression of it. And, save for chickens, ducks, geese, pigeons and swallows, not one bird did I see or hear. Not a sparrow, not a thrush, not a kite, not a wader, not a egret - not one.

The reasons for this may be many: intensive agriculture and pesticides for example, but almost certainly also capture for food. Such a situation brings into sharp relief the need to establish, as rapidly as possible, fully protected reserves, but also brings into a sharper focus the importance of Mai Po in Hong Kong as a major wetland for migrating birds and other creatures. But it also tells us something else. For the vast majority of southern Chinese people, conservation and the protection of wildlife, notably that most visible and audible component of it, the birds, means absolutely nothing. To change this attitude will be a task of superhuman proportions, and to bring the birds back to southern China an even greater task, for it is clear that today no self-respecting migrating wader pauses until it reaches Mai Po. The total lack of birds suggests that their killing has been going on for the history of the delta and to reverse such a situation is perhaps impossible.

On the last short leg of the journey from Duomen to Zuhai, I thought back to the captive Eastern Grass Owl in Guangzhou and anger was replaced by sadness and pity. Not only for the birds, but also for

generations upon generations of Chinese children waking up every morning to absolute silence. Today they almost certainly do not know what they are missing.

For them each morning is the same; there is no dawn chorus to welcome the day, but more, each spring is a silent one. It always has been and always will be until such a time as a Chinese Rachel Carson is born to point out that which is most obvious to you and me - that spring is not spring without the resurgence of life that makes it so.

Professor Brian Morton

CONSERVATION EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

If there is to be a future for Hong Kong's wildlife and natural habitats, education must play a vital role. Informing local people and visitors of the biological diversity and fragility of natural resources, and changing traditional attitudes to the consumption of indigenous and imported species are major undertakings - as elsewhere in the world. WWF HK actively promotes environmental education and some of its current activities are described below.

The opening of Peter Scott Field Studies Centre at Mai Po earlier this year was an important milestone in the work of WWF HK. The new building provides a residential field studies and management housing base for groups of conservation workers and specialists from Hong Kong, China and elsewhere in Asia. A delegation from Vietnam was the first party of international visitors to use the facilities when they visited Mai Po for a wetland management training course in April. Mai Po also has an Education Centre opened in 1986. An Education Officer, Miss Clara U is employed at the site.

The historic Island House at Tai Po in the New Territories is another Conservation Studies Centre managed by WWF HK for environmental education. The Education officer, Angus Tse, is responsible for the development and use of the Centre. Facilities at the site provide resources for teachers, and cater for schools, public visitors, natural history and scientific groups. In the grounds of Island House there is an Arboretum for

indigenous plants of Hong Kong and southern China, a nature trail and planned wildlife refuge for animals illegally held and confiscated in Hong Kong.

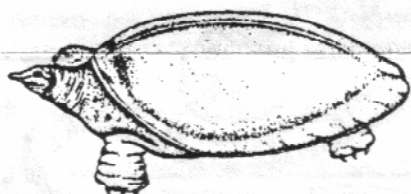
Another education centre is planned for the proposed Hoi Ha Wan marine reserve, to concentrate on Hong Kong's marine environment and the threats which it faces. WWF HK has also set up an Education Mobile Unit which visited 186 primary and secondary schools in 1989. Seminars, exhibitions and competitions are arranged to promote conservation and the WWF HK Education Committee has produced many bilingual education materials. This includes over 30 pamphlets on Mai Po and general pamphlets on Hong Kong's other natural habitats and general conservation topics.

WILDLIFE TRADE - IVORY, ORCHIDS AND BIRDS' NEST SOUP

International attention on Hong Kong's continuing problems with wildlife trade have been focused for the past year on ivory. At the CITES* Conference in Lausanne in October 1989, it was agreed to transfer the African elephant *Loxodonta africana* to Appendix 1 of the Convention. This means a ban on international trade in the listed species and products derived from it.

Since the Lausanne decision there have been problems and international controversy concerning the disposal of ivory stocks held in Hong Kong. The UK Government initially took a firm stand at the CITES conference, proposing an immediate total ban on ivory trade. On 17 January 1990, however, the day before the world ban came into force, the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd announced that Hong Kong would be able to continue exporting ivory for a further six months. The UK Government entered a 'Reservation' under the terms of the Convention to delay the implementation of the Appendix 1 listing on behalf of Hong Kong. This move angered conservation groups around the world concerned about the continuing decline in African elephant populations and the need to take urgent concerted international action.

On 17 July the UK Government announced the withdrawal of the Reservation so now at last there is greater chance for the ivory trade ban to be effective. There is, however, no room for complacency as Hong Kong still holds over 460 tonnes of ivory. WWF UK has written to Douglas Hurd urging him to persuade the Hong Kong authorities to destroy the 2.5 tonnes of ivory held as confiscated stock and to require that commercial traders holding more than five kilos of ivory keep their ivory in a bonded warehouse. There are about 800 registered ivory holders of commercial stock in Hong Kong. Four full-time inspectors would be needed to carry out annual checking of the existing stock. With only 7 staff currently employed in the conservation section of the Agriculture and Fisheries Department, which is responsible for all matters relating to wildlife conservation, there is a risk that smuggling will continue especially to Japan which has no internal registration system.



Chinese Soft-shelled Turtle *Trionyx sinensis*

Hong Kong's wildlife trade problems are far from over. Enforcement of CITES controls must be improved for other plant and animal species and products in trade. Orchid smuggling is one problem which had received relatively little attention. According to WWF HK, Hong Kong is fast gaining a reputation as a centre for international orchid smuggling. Some of the rarest and most highly sought after orchids of mainland China have been exported through Hong Kong.

There have been recent convictions under Hong Kong law for the illegal possession of endangered orchids, with one orchid trader fined twice in 1989 and 1990. Unfortunately, as with the well-publicised Azadehdel case in the UK, the penalties imposed were seen as derisory by botanists and conservation groups and as no deterrent to the trade in species close to extinction.

The range of wildlife products imported into Hong Kong for culinary and medicinal purposes includes many derived from rare and threatened species. Unfortunately the demand is increasing. A recent study by Amy Lau of WWF HK shows, for example, that Hong Kong imports over 100 tonnes of edible birds' nest each year with a value of over HK\$ 20 million. The demand increases continuously. The nests, formed from glutinous salivary secretions, are produced by the Black-nest swiftlet, *Aerodramus maximus* and the White-nest swiftlet *A. fuciphagus*. The survival of the swiftlets in parts of Southeast Asia is now severely threatened by over-harvesting of their nests. At present the swiftlets are not protected by CITES.

Wildlife trade is clearly big business in Hong Kong. Products imported in 1989 were valued at over HK\$ 1700 million (over US\$ 200 million). Regulating the trade in CITES-controlled species is the responsibility of the Hong Kong Agriculture and Fisheries Department, through the Animals and Plants (Protection of Endangered Species) Ordinance, Cap 187. In 1989 penalties for offences under this legislation were substantially increased but they still do not reflect the damage caused by this illegal and highly lucrative trade.

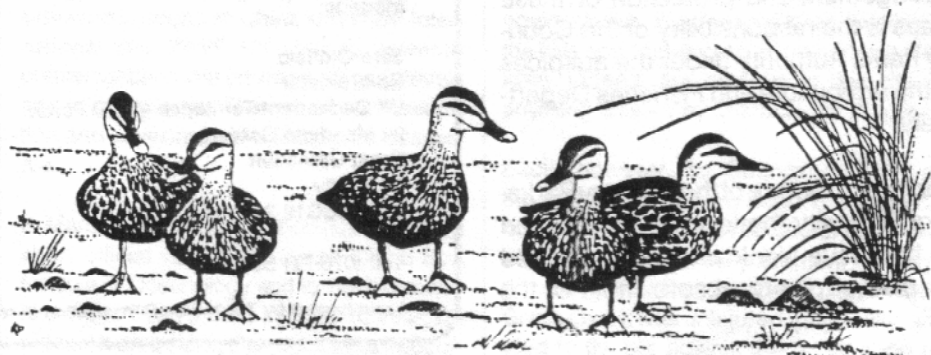
* CITES is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. The UK ratification of CITES covers its Dependent Territories with the exception of Anguilla, Turks and Caicos and the British Antarctic Territory. Anguilla and Turks and Caicos have recently expressed interest in joining the UK's ratification.

MAI PO MARSHES - A SITE OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE

Mai Po Marshes is situated in the north-west of the New Territories bordering Deep Bay on the west and China on the north. It is the largest estuarine area in Hong Kong covering 380 ha of mudflats and shallow shrimp ponds. Its international importance as a site for bird conservation is mainly due to the large flocks of migratory birds which it attracts. In total 250 bird species have been recorded in the Deep Bay area. Threatened species include Dalmation pelican *Pelecanus crispus*, peregrine falcon *Falco peregrinus*, and the Asian dowitcher *Limnodromus serripalmatus*.

Protection of Mai Po as a nature reserve was proposed in 1968 by the Provisional Council for the Use and Conservation of the Countryside, established by the Hong Kong Government as part of a review of the Colony's conservation provisions. In 1976 Mai Po was declared an SSSI but still not given legal protection. Since 1978 it has been granted some protection under the Wild Animals Protection Ordinance which restricts public access. Part of the Marshes are now managed by WWF-HK as the Mai Po Marshes Wildlife Education Centre and Nature Reserve.

At present the Hong Kong Government is reconsidering the inclusion of Mai Po in the List of Wetlands of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. This is urgently needed to secure long term commitment to the conservation of Mai Po.



TRANSPORT & DEVELOPMENT PLANS

As reported in the Guardian, 23 July 1990, the British administration intends to build a new airport and complex of container ports in Hong Kong. There are also plans to develop the rest of the transport system and for a land reclamation programme. The total cost of all the major projects planned for Hong Kong is estimated at HK\$227 billion (£17 million).

Chinese support for the works programme and in particular the new airport is considered necessary to attract private investment. However, China has plans for a airport on its side of the border. Fortunately, earlier plans for a Chinese airport on land reclaimed from Deep Bay close to Mai Po were not developed. The site for the new airport in Hong Kong has been chosen as Chep Lap Kok island. There is concern that serious losses of wildlife will take place when the airport is developed, particularly as similar habitats on the northern shore of Lantau are also likely to be lost to development.

HONG KONG'S COUNTRY PARKS

Hong Kong has a total area of 1068 sq km and a population of around 5.5 million. Dense urban development accounts for only around 16.5% of the land area and farmlands for about 9%. Much of the remaining countryside is dominated by rugged hills unsuitable for agricultural or urban use. Over 40% of the land area is reserved for countryside recreation in the form of Country Parks. These cover nearly all the publicly-owned countryside that is worthy of conservation.

21 Country Parks have been established under the Country Parks Ordinance which came into force in 1976. Management and protection of these areas is the responsibility of the Country Parks Authority under the auspices of the Agriculture and Fisheries Department.

Zoning is a feature of the Country Parks. High-intensity 'honeypots', developed as barbecue-picnic sites, are situated on park edges to absorb most of the

impact of visitors. Low-intensity pursuits such as hiking and camping are restricted to the main footpath networks and there are wilderness areas where access is discouraged or prohibited.

The increasing demand for rural leisure facilities is placing a great strain on the Country Park system. With nearly 10 million visitors annually there are growing conflicts between the aims of conservation and recreation. Many of the Country Parks are situated close to built-up areas and some are within walking distance. The most popular parks are, however, those which are most remote from urbanisation. Hill fires are the most serious ecological problem within the heavily utilised Country Parks.

Environmental education facilities and stronger deterrent legislation are needed to safeguard the Country Parks together with new steps to take the pressure away from the most popular sites. In addition, remaining agricultural and village lands outside the Parks need to be incorporated into an integrated countryside conservation system.

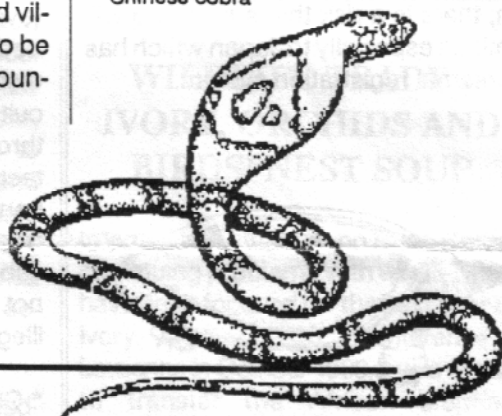
Source: Yim, C.Y. (1989) Changing patterns of country-park recreation in Hong Kong. *The Geographical Journal* 155 (2): 167-178.

NOTICE: INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON MARINE BIOLOGY OF HONG KONG AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

This will be held from 28 October to 3 November 1990 at the University of Hong Kong.

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