



COUNTRY PARKS



THE ISSUE

Nature and biodiversity are the keys to our life support system. In Hong Kong, we enjoy a rich biodiversity and the government recognizes the importance of biodiversity conservation. As stated in Hong Kong's first Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (BSAP), the government will prioritize actions to safeguard the city's biodiversity from 2016-2021.

Hong Kong's incredible country park system, covering 40% of the city's land area, comprises scenic hills, woodlands, reservoirs and coastlines across the territory, with a vast range of biodiversity, making them an invaluable resource for recreation and educational purposes. The Hong Kong government is proposing to enhance their recreational and educational potential through the construction and upgrade of facilities, museums, glamping sites, tree-top adventures, and eco lodges.

WWF supports the government's overall objective to enhance the recreation and education potential of country parks, making them accessible to the community, while ensuring to conserve country parks' biodiversity and special areas of scientific interest.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

In 2018, the government Task Force on Land Supply launched a five-month public consultation on 18 land development options to boost land supply and ease the housing crunch. The Task Force expects a shortfall of at least 1,200 hectares of land area. Government figures show that over 600,000 housing units can be provided by the planned new development areas – about 25% more than the total housing demand until 2051. There is no land shortage problem in the longer term.

According to research done by the Liber Research Community, Hong Kong now has almost 1,200 hectares of brownfield sites – farmland polluted by industrial activity. The total area of the big clusters outside planned development areas is nearly 390 hectares. Among them, there are four brownfield clusters with individual areas bigger than 30 hectares. The cluster in Wang Toi Shan in Pat Heung alone has 71 hectares.

Speeding up the resumption of these brownfield sites and devising a fair compensation mechanism for planned development projects would ease the short-term housing problem without sacrificing our precious natural areas.

Building on our natural areas would not only cause irreversible damage to the city's ecology, but is detrimental to local biodiversity and will take longer to produce housing than building on brownfield sites that already have the necessary infrastructure. However, the government has played down the brownfield option, arguing that it would involve huge infrastructure costs as the sites are scattered in remote locations and are irregularly-shaped.

Developing country parks and reclamation would be a long process of over 20 years requiring planning, environmental impact assessments, approvals and complicated engineering work. There are other more immediate options available for housing, such as brownfield sites. The government should safeguard the integrity of Hong Kong's country parks and valuable marine habitats and species by not reclaiming in, or close to, ecologically sensitive areas, to prevent irreversible damage to our natural spaces.

It is also questionable to use agricultural land for housing development. Local agricultural land secures food safety and supply stability and helps to support biodiversity in wildlife species, particularly providing places for many farmland birds to forage. As such, agriculture land that is actively managed, or fallow arable farmland with ecological value and potential for cultivation, should be conserved. A compensatory mechanism to landowners to release private farmlands for rehabilitation should be formulated.

WWF believes the government should first build on brownfield sites that already have the necessary transport facilities or infrastructure in place to address short-term housing problems, to avoid sacrificing our precious natural environment.

OUR ASK

WWF-Hong Kong supports the government's overall objective to enhance the recreation and education potential of country parks, making them accessible to the community and we recommend the above strategies and measures to best conserve country parks biodiversity and special areas of scientific interest. WWF-Hong Kong believes the government should:

- Align the management strategy of country parks and special areas with those used in national parks in the Mainland;
- Conduct a comprehensive assessment on pressure on local biodiversity and balance this with the release of education and recreation potential;
- Implement a wise-use zoning of country parks and special areas; and,
- Introduce a training and accreditation of eco-guides and oversight on operators.

Holistic town planning and sensible land policy can help to strike a balance between conservation and social needs, maintaining both green spaces and urban development. We urge the government to adopt a "brownfields first" policy to make use of available areas rather than considering rezoning green belts with ecological value.

In planning and land policy we recommend;

- the Town Planning Board should reinstate its role to reject unsuitable brownfield applications. No applications for new brownfields should be accepted and enforcement on all unauthorized use of brownfields should be strengthened to prevent further expansion;
- Speed up the resumption of brownfield sites and devise a fair compensation mechanism for planned development projects;
- Establish an open and comprehensive land database to enhance transparency in decision making and facilitate holistic urban planning; and,
- Identify unprotected areas of high ecological value, which should remain "development free" and assign them permanent protection by incorporating them into the country park and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) systems.