



DEEP BAY WETLANDS



THE ISSUE

Wetlands are among the most ecologically important and vulnerable ecosystems on Earth. In Hong Kong, the Deep Bay wetlands and the Mai Po Nature Reserve act as an overwintering site and staging site for tens of thousands of water birds that migrate along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, from the Far East of Russia to Australia and New Zealand. Mai Po and the surrounding Deep Bay wetlands support 51 globally threatened or near threatened species, including the critically endangered black-faced spoonbill.

In 1995, about 1,500 ha of wetlands of Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay area was listed as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention, which formally recognized its conservation, cultural, education and economic value.

In order to preserve the ecological integrity of the Deep Bay wetlands from development, the Town Planning Board has designated a Wetland Conservation Area (WCA) and a Wetland Buffer Area (WBA). The WCA is intended to conserve the ecological value of all wetland habitats including the reserve and fish ponds which form an integral part of the Deep Bay wetlands. WBA aims to protect the ecological integrity of wetlands within and prevent any development that would have a negative off-site disturbance impact on the WCA.

While these land use planning guidelines and environmental legislation in the Deep Bay area are intended to help protect the Deep Bay wetland ecosystem from undesirable development, existing conservation policies are ineffective in safeguarding the ecological value of privately-owned wetlands. Unauthorized pond-filling activities and bird traps still occur within the WCA.

There is constant pressure for reclamation of fishponds for residential developments, open storage, port back-up facilities and other development activities. Although the principle of "no-net-loss in wetland" needs to be met by all development projects, the disturbance caused by increasing human population and activities have adverse impact on the wetlands.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

Under the management of WWF-Hong Kong, the reserve has become an iconic wetland for Hong Kong and South China – providing food and habitat for 60,000 individual birds from over 400 species every year. Alongside the Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay Ramsar site, the reserve is home to various types of local wildlife including aquatic fauna, insects, amphibians, reptiles, fish and mammals.

In March 2015, WWF-Hong Kong launched the Discovering Biodiversity in Hong Kong Wetlands initiative. This project conducted numerous ecological studies with the help of 450 citizen scientists clocking up 6,600 man hours, to determine the biodiversity status of the Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay wetlands. The survey raised the number of wildlife species in the area to over 2,050. The species counts continue with the biodiversity checks by One Planet Youth and City Nature Challenge activities each April, providing invaluable data for long-term ecological monitoring and habitat management decisions.

Mai Po is one of the most important biological hotspots in Hong Kong and it plays a hugely important role in the community. The reserve is a cornerstone of Hong Kong's nature conservation sector and is vital to WWF's education programmes.

OUR ASK

The partnership between the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and WWF-Hong Kong on the management of Mai Po Nature Reserves sets a good model of wise-use management strategy for other wetlands. We advocate a holistic strategy plan for wetlands, with a focus on enhancing the conservation awareness of local communities and other stakeholders.

WWF-Hong Kong believes that the protection of our coastal wetland areas of Deep Bay and Mai Po Nature Reserve must extend from managing the mudflats, mangroves to the *gei wai* and fish ponds in the Wetland Conservation Area (WCA). Attention must be paid to the Wetland Buffer Area (WBA) and the water passing from uplands through the wetlands all need research and to be actively managed.

WWF does not support high-density development in the Wetland Buffer Area. We would like to see degraded wetlands and abandoned agricultural land in the WCA and WBA surrounding Mai Po brought within the Ramsar Site. Private land with high ecological value, in principle, should be zoned for conservation purposes; however, in practice it is often difficult to realize the conservation potentials.

Conflict between conservation needs and property rights of landowners is intensifying; yet existing conservation mechanisms are inadequate to resolve this. In the Inner Deep Bay wetlands, many of the fish ponds are owned by private developers and development is permitted under the current Public-Private Partnership (PPP) scheme, but PPP alone is ineffective from a conservation perspective.

Proactive intervention is needed to ensure these wetlands are protected and managed to optimize their conservation value.