

December 2008

Next to Nature

Overview

Visitors to Hong Kong expect skyscrapers and the hustle and bustle of a big city, and are often surprised to find that most of the territory is green. In fact, about three quarters of Hong Kong is countryside – urban areas makes up less than 25 per cent – and nearly 40 per cent of Hong Kong's total land area (1 100 square kilometres) is committed to conservation and recreation. Hong Kong's countryside is unique in its accessibility – only a stone's throw from the city – and exhibits a remarkable variety of scenery and landscapes, ranging from pristine sandy beaches to craggy mountain peaks.

The Country Parks

Hong Kong has 24 country parks and 17 'special areas' dedicated to conservation and recreation, covering 40 per cent of Hong Kong's land area, including scenic uplands, mountains, forests, marshes, coastline and islands. There are also four marine parks and one marine reserve covering a total of nearly 2 500 hectares, including scenic coastal areas and important marine habitats. The parks are also used for scientific study and education purposes and a special School Visit Programme ensures that many schools and students get to experience Hong Kong's 'great outdoors'.

Hongkongers take great pleasure in their natural environment, with an average of 12 million 'visits' a year to the country parks for activities including hiking, camping, barbecuing and family picnics. Well-maintained footpaths and country trails provide easy access, with four long-distance hiking trails especially popular – the MacLehose Trail (100km), the Lantau Trail (70km), the Hong Kong Trail (50km) and the Wilson Trail (78km).

The Urban Parks

Hong Kong's cityscape contains more than buildings – parks and gardens are abundant. Varying in size from large planned parks to the smaller, garden surrounds of historic temples, these open areas serve as green lungs in the busy city. Larger parks, such as Kowloon Park and Hong Kong Park, offer a tranquil retreat from busy shopping and business districts. Victoria Park is a popular venue for sporting and recreational events, while Nan Lian Garden epitomises the art and elegance of Chinese gardens in the Tang Dynasty style. Planned central parks are ubiquitous in Hong Kong's new towns, such as Tuen Mun and Sha Tin.

Mai Po Inner Deep Bay Ramsar Site and Mai Po Marshes Nature Reserve

The Mai Po Inner Deep Bay is an internationally important wetland listed under the Ramsar Convention. The Ramsar Site comprises 1 500 hectares of mudflats, fish ponds, reed beds and mangroves and is a feeding and resting ground for over 370 species of birds, including rare and endangered species. Within the Ramsar Site, the World Wide Fund for Nature Hong Kong manages the Mai Po Marshes Nature Reserve – an outstanding example of a non-governmental organisation working in partnership with the government to achieve objectives in wetland conservation. In winter the reserve and its surrounds are home to some 50 000 water birds.

Endangered Species

Hong Kong is a sanctuary for some of the world's endangered species.

Examples include:

- Black-faced spoonbill
- Saunders' gull
- Chinese white dolphin
- Romer's tree frog (endemic)
- Pitcher-plants (*Nepenthes* species)
- Birdwing butterfly (*Troides* species)



Hong Kong Wetland Park

With such a wealth of natural assets, both the Government and the Hong Kong Tourism Board are keen to promote ecotourism, and various initiatives have been launched in recent years. Most ambitious in this regard is the Hong Kong Wetland Park, which opened in May 2006. With a 10 000 square metre visitor centre and 60 hectares of reserve, it is the first of its kind in Asia and the largest of its kind in the world. A series of wetland habitats have been constructed, such as marsh, reed beds, fishponds and wet woodland to maximise biodiversity. A world-class conservation, education and eco-tourism facility, it received over 1.2 million visitors in the first year.

Environmental Endeavours

Since 1997, the Government has planted nearly 20 million trees, and during that time a combined total of over 100 million trees, shrubs and annuals have been planted. Tracts of native woodland have been restored in the New Territories.

Artificial reefs have re-built fish resources in selected sea areas and helped enhance their marine biodiversity. Redundant ships and piers, old tyres and specially designed steel and concrete structures have been used to great effect. Over 220 species of fish now use these artificial reefs, including many highly valued species such as groupers, breams, snappers and sweetlips.

Conservation efforts to protect the population of endangered Chinese white dolphins have been encouraging – a marine park was established to help protect their habitat and numbers around Lantau are stable. The population was recently estimated at 1 300 in the Pearl River estuary, with around 200 in Hong Kong waters.

Organic farming in Hong Kong received a huge boost when the Government established the Organic Farming Support Service in 2000. Since then, organic farm numbers have risen from 15 to 110, with a corresponding increase in organic crop produce. Organic markets are increasingly held across the territory.

Unique Geology

Hong Kong has an extensive coverage of hexagonal rock columns on its extreme eastern coastline. While other hexagonal rock formations, such as the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, are made of basalt, those rocks centered around Sai Kung are acidic volcanic compositions. These rock columns, which cover over 100 square kilometres including marine exposures, can reach a height of over 100 metres. The Government is actively considering the designation of a geological park for purposes of conservation and appreciation by locals and tourists.

Biodiversity

Hong Kong has a rich biodiversity considering its comparatively small size:

- About 3 000 species of flowering plants
- Over 400 species of native trees
- About 480 species of birds – over a third of the total bird species in China
- Over 50 species of mammals
- Over 230 species of butterflies
- Over 110 species of dragonflies
- 1 000 species of marine fish – 30 per cent of the species found in the South China Sea
- Over 150 species of coral

The vast majority of this biodiversity can be found in protected areas.

For more information, please visit
www.afcd.gov.hk,
www.discoverhongkong.com