

PROTECTION OF COUNTRY PARKS AND SPECIAL AREAS

Executive Summary

1. About 44,240 hectares (ha) or 40% of Hong Kong's land area has been designated as country parks or special areas under the Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208). At present, there are 24 country parks and 22 special areas, which comprise scenic hills, woodlands, reservoirs and coastlines. According to the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), country parks/special areas (collectively referred to as "country parks" hereinafter) are renowned for their natural beauty. They are also the cradle of nature for interesting wildlife and are the best nature classroom. The AFCD is responsible for the management of country parks. In view of the large area covered by country parks and the increasing public concern about nature conservation, the Audit Commission (Audit) commenced a review in April 2013 to examine the AFCD's work in the protection of country parks.

Patrolling and law enforcement

2. Country parks are protected by the Country Parks Ordinance against activities which might not be compatible with the natural environment. Surrounded by or adjacent to country parks are sites left outside the country park boundaries, known as "country park enclaves" (enclaves). Not being regulated by the Ordinance, enclaves are susceptible to incompatible developments which could degrade the integrity and quality of the related country parks. The AFCD deploys its Ranger Office staff to patrol country parks and enclaves to prevent and detect damages and encroachments (paras. 2.2 to 2.6).

3. *Patrolling practices.* Audit visited three Ranger Offices and found room for improvement in their patrolling practices, such as: (a) target frequencies for routine patrols not always set/met; (b) coverage of patrol routes not regularly reviewed; (c) few check points (items to be inspected) for patrol routes; and (d) enclaves not adequately inspected (paras. 2.7, 2.9 to 2.12 and 2.16 to 2.18).

Executive Summary

4. **Hill fire prevention.** AFCD staff keep watch on hill fire from fire lookouts. The staff made use of binoculars to spot hill fire. No electronic devices were adopted to enhance and automate the process. Under the Country Parks and Special Areas Regulations (Cap. 208A), lighting of fire outside designated places (e.g. barbecue sites) is generally prohibited in country parks. Discarding lighted cigarettes in a manner likely to cause a fire is also not allowed. However, smoking is not disallowed in country parks (paras. 2.32, 2.33, 2.36 and 2.37).

Regulating incompatible developments

5. **Protection of enclaves.** In his 2010-11 Policy Address, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region stated that enclaves would either be incorporated into country parks, or have their proper uses determined through statutory planning. There were 77 enclaves covering a total area of some 2,000 ha. 23 of the 77 enclaves were covered by Outline Zoning Plans for land use control. In October 2010, the Administration decided to take measures to protect the remaining 54 enclaves. The AFCD and the Planning Department (PlanD) would work together to take follow-up actions. The AFCD would incorporate 27 enclaves into country parks, and the PlanD would cover 27 enclaves by Outline Zoning Plans. As at June 2013, the PlanD had initiated statutory planning process for 23 enclaves. The AFCD had only initiated designation process for incorporating 3 enclaves into country parks. A total of 28 enclaves are still not covered by any protective measures (paras. 3.2, 3.4, 3.6, 3.7, 3.9 and 3.13).

6. **Public works projects in country parks.** In 1991, the then Director of Agriculture and Fisheries approved an encroachment of the South East New Territories Landfill in Tseung Kwan O onto a site of 18 ha in the nearby Clear Water Bay Country Park. At present, the Landfill is still in operation. There is no definite timeframe for the restoration and return of the 18 ha of land to the AFCD. Audit is concerned that the land which has already been used for landfill purposes may no longer be compatible with the country park objectives (paras. 3.36, 3.39 and 3.40).

Executive Summary

Publicity and educational activities

7. *School education programmes.* The AFCD conducted school visits and other school education programmes to disseminate conservation messages to students. While school visit programmes were generally well received and effective, the AFCD rejected many schools' applications for the programmes due to insufficient time slots. Besides, such programmes are currently unavailable for secondary schools. The AFCD has developed an education kit to supplement its school education programmes. However, the AFCD had not ascertained the number of schools which had adopted the kit. Regular training on the use of the kit was also not conducted for teachers (paras. 4.5 to 4.10).

8. *Publicity of the Hong Kong Geopark.* Included in the country parks is the Hong Kong Geopark. In pursuit of the Geopark objectives, the AFCD enlists the support of non-governmental organisations and the private sector to publicise the Geopark and promote geo-tourism. The AFCD did not enlist these partners in an open and transparent manner, and did not have formal contracts with them, but their service descriptions and website links were advertised on the government website. This may give an impression that the AFCD is advertising commercial activities on a government website (paras. 4.22, 4.27, 4.30 and 4.32).

Way forward

9. In 1993, the AFCD and the PlanD found 14 potential sites with conservation value for designation as country parks. As at August 2013, 9 of the 14 potential sites had not been designated as country parks. In the past two decades, Hong Kong has undergone a lot of economic development. Today, there are also great competing demands for land use and multifarious factors affecting the designation of new country parks. It is timely for the AFCD to revisit its strategy for the designation of new country parks in future (paras. 5.3, 5.4 and 5.6).

Audit recommendations

10. **Audit recommendations are made in the respective sections of this Audit Report. Only the key ones are highlighted in this Executive Summary. Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should:**

Executive Summary

Patrolling and law enforcement

- (a) require all Ranger Offices to set target frequencies for routine patrols (para. 2.23(a));
- (b) review the adequacy of the coverage and frequency of routine patrols in individual Ranger Offices (para. 2.23(b));
- (c) consider setting more check points for inspection (para. 2.23(f));
- (d) keep in view the advance in technology for automated fire surveillance systems that may be applied in country parks (para. 2.41(a));
- (e) examine the desirability of restricting smoking in country parks (para. 2.41(b));

Regulating incompatible developments

- (f) critically review the progress made by the AFCD in protecting enclaves with a view to devising a more effective strategy (para. 3.22(a));
- (g) continue to monitor possible incompatible development activities at enclaves for necessary follow-up action (para. 3.22(b));
- (h) follow up the expected timeframe and the required restoration work for the return of the 18 ha of land in the Clear Water Bay Country Park to the AFCD (para. 3.41(a));

Publicity and educational activities

- (i) take measures to further enhance the school education programmes (para. 4.11(a));
- (j) conduct an evaluation of the education kit and ensure that adequate support is provided to users (paras. 4.11(b) and 4.11(c));

Executive Summary

- (k) **review the adequacy of the collaboration arrangements between the AFCD and its Geopark partners (para. 4.35(a));**
- (l) **improve the transparency and accountability in the recruitment of Geopark partners (para. 4.35(c));**
- (m) **review the appropriateness of advertising Geopark partners' commercial activities on the government website (para. 4.35(d)); and**

Way forward

- (n) **revisit the AFCD's strategy for the designation of new country parks (para. 5.10(a)).**

Response from the Administration

11. The Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation agrees with the audit recommendations.