

Lantau as "recreational and leisure garden"

Clive Noffke

Lantau has long been seen as a last bastion against decades of development. Its relative remoteness until recently has served as its best protection. This island is of outstanding natural beauty, a place of stunning coastal and mountain vistas, and home to numerous species of wildlife of all types.

With the coming of the Airport and the associated land link in 1997, the physical protection from harmful development that Lantau enjoyed was removed. In 1998, a union of 6 Green Groups produced *A Conservation Strategy for Lantau*. This documents primarily the special and extensive biodiversity of the island. However the majestic landscape and coastal areas were also discussed.

This document was sent to the Chief Executive and all members of the Executive Council, with a petition to conserve this precious island.

Also in 1998, the Territory Development Strategy Review affirmed the conservation importance of Lantau. Major residential and economic developments were to be limited to North Lantau, to maximize the new infrastructure. In other words, there would be no significant development outside the already destroyed 25% of natural coastline.

In 1999, the Chief Executive pledged in his Policy Address to extend Country Parks. On Lantau this meant the proposed Lantau North Country Park Extension. This pledge has however not been honoured as yet.

In July 2001, The South West Lantau Development Strategy Review noted that "the predominantly undisturbed natural landscape, rural character, extensive coastlines and sheltered water bodies provides unique opportunities to satisfy demand for both active and passive recreation activities and other tourism pursuits."

A plan was produced showing the recommended development strategy. This shows amongst others, the recommendation of Hei Ling Chau, Sunshine Island, and the unspoilt section of the North Lantau coast as conservation areas.

In September 2003, Planning Department's consultants, Urbis, presented for public discussion the first of their Landscape Value Maps

for the Territory. Usefully this was Lantau. For the purposes of the study, Lantau was divided into some 90 Landscape Character Areas, each of which was separately assessed. As may be expected, the map shows the highest landscape values as being applicable over most of the island, including the natural coastline.

The 2030 document which we are studying also says encouraging words about preserving Lantau. We read:

"It is our planning intention to conserve the beautiful countryside of Lantau. At the same time opportunities for acceptable recreational uses will be explored to ensure that Lantau will remain as a recreational and leisure gardens of Hong Kong, as well as an important resource for eco-tourism."

One would have thought that this encouraging history of study and conclusions all extolling and recommending the preservation of Lantau would have set the matter in stone, so to speak. Nothing could be further from the reality. This past year has seen a glut of infrastructure constructions proposed which if they eventuate will put paid to any idea that Lantau as a whole is to be conserved.

The first of these was the proposal and now a funded study, to destroy Hei Ling Chau and Mui Wo by constructing a Superprison and associated massive bridge.

The second was the proposal and now a study, to land the Macau-Zhuhai-HK Bridge on part of the unspoiled North Lantau Coast.

If these were not bad enough, the Chief Executive in his Policy Address this year has announced the formation of a Lantau Development Task Force. The terms of reference include:

- "To provide a high level policy steer on the economic and infrastructural development of Lantau", and
- "Provide a planning framework to ensure a balanced and coordinated approach is taken to the planned developments"

Particular emphasis is given to the "timely delivery" of projects. None whatever is given to the environmental aspects.

Projects that the Task Force currently see as priorities include a Value Added Logistics Park at Tai Ho, a tourism node at Sunny Bay

(Yam O renamed), and possible tourism and recreational development at Chi Ma Wan and North East Lantau.

The Chief Executive has also pre-empted the findings of the Port Development Study, and announced that Container Terminal 10 will likely go to North Lantau.

What we now clearly have is:

- i. An abandonment of Lantau as a conservation area as a whole. The island is being viewed by the Chief Executive and big business simply as a land bank for development;
- ii. A usurping of the functions of the Planning Department by a committee;
- iii. The piece-meal nibbling away at Lantau, until all that will be left will be the inaccessible mountains.

There is little point enunciating conservation plans for Lantau in this 2030 study, when the grim reality is that they are breached even while the ink is still wet.