





Civic Exchange is a non-profit public policy think tank that undertakes research on issues important to local and regional communities in and around Hong Kong.

In early 2006 a meeting of members of the Living Islands Movement was held, facilitated by Civic Exchange. The aim of the meeting was to articulate a vision for the future of Lantau Island, and to identify the issues that needed to be thought through in order to achieve this vision. Following this initial meeting, members realised that many of the problems Lantau faces in creating a sustainable future are common to all of Hong Kong's rural lands. The process of coming together to discuss these issues in itself illustrates one of the powerful ways in which community groups can make a positive contribution to healthy civic debate on the future of Hong Kong. We hope that this debate will also contribute to government policy-making.

The authors of this report are the Living Islands Movement (LIM) and Civic Exchange. We are grateful to the many people who provided useful comments along the way.

That the initial three-hour facilitated meeting gave rise to a wider vision, far beyond members' initial expectations, shows that these processes are a powerful way to determine policies and resolve conflicts. LIM holds that these kinds of meetings are vital for the sustainable development of Hong Kong. Both LIM and Civic Exchange have long held that effective community involvement in government decision making can only be achieved by facilitation. LIM has repeatedly urged government to use facilitation in public consultation, instead of the traditional 'Town Hall' meeting which the LIM regards as largely counter-productive. The Council for Sustainable Development, in its first public consultation exercise, has shown how facilitation in public consultation can be used effectively.

This briefing paper forms part of Civic Exchange's ongoing work on sustainable planning, environment and conservation, and is supported by "Designing Hong Kong", a group focused on developing and promoting Hong Kong as a sustainable city. The paper specifically seeks to raise awareness of the value of Hong Kong's rural lands, and of the need for comprehensive planning for their future development so that they may continue to play important part in the diversity, economy and health of Hong Kong.

For further information about this report or related matters please contact:

Civic Exchange  
Room 701 Hoseinee House  
69 Wyndham Street  
Central  
Tel: 2893-0213,  
Fax: 3105-9713  
Email: [cloth@civic-exchange.org](mailto:cloth@civic-exchange.org)  
Please visit us at: [www.civic-exchange.org](http://www.civic-exchange.org)

*Photos on front cover:*

Pui O village and beach, copyright Paul Melsom  
Lantau Peak from Lantau Trail, copyright Neil McLaughlin

**Our Place - Our Time**  
**Hong Kong's Unique Asset - Our Rural Land**

**Hong Kong's beautiful and diverse natural assets must be conserved and managed in order to ensure our future prosperity and high quality of life.**

**The administrative and legal framework for planning, preservation, development and management must be amended to enhance the value of our natural assets: our rural land. Processes that encourage public participation, and new systems for identification, classification, ownership and appreciation of Hong Kong's unique natural assets are urgently needed.**

**Contents**

1. An Overlooked Value: The Geographical Uniqueness of Hong Kong
2. Hong Kong's Past Development Drivers
3. A Need for a New Perspective
4. An Example, Lantau - Where are We Heading?
5. Principles for the Future
6. Our Vision of Hong Kong's Rural Land
7. The Way Ahead

**1. An Overlooked Value: The Geographical Uniqueness of Hong Kong**

As the gateway to the Pearl River Delta, Hong Kong is widely recognised as an important centre of communications and commerce in Asia and has come to be known as 'Asia's World City'.

It is a less well-known fact that Hong Kong's location – between China and the open sea, and close to the equator – means that it has a diversity of trees, flowers, birds, insects and marine life unique in China and the world. Further details of Hong Kong's biodiversity are set out in Appendix A.

All world-class cities now recognise that 'green lungs' are an essential complement to the urban core. In Hong Kong, these green spaces are closer to urban areas than in most cities of comparable size. People do not have to travel far to enjoy them.

Hong Kong can claim to be more than 'Asia's world city': it is 'the world's unique green city', and possibly China's greenest. A better description of Hong Kong is "a national treasure of China".

If the current trajectory continues and our land is devoured through piecemeal development, a priceless asset will be destroyed forever. Future generations may hold us to account for allowing this to happen.

Further, Hong Kong will face increasing challenges to its pre-eminence among Asian cities as other cities in the region grow. Seoul and Singapore have put in place comprehensive development policies that spur economic growth while giving priority to quality of life issues such as pollution reduction and the creation of green spaces. As the regional economy takes off and other Asian cities compete to be economic centres, Hong Kong will be set apart increasingly by emphasis on its geographical uniqueness – which comes predominantly from the proximity of residential and commercial areas to unspoiled rural land – in attracting people to work, live, and visit.

**Our Place - Our Time**  
**Hong Kong's Unique Asset - Our Rural Land**

**2. Hong Kong's Past Development Drivers**

Hong Kong exists because it was a natural harbour for European traders in the 19th century. The shorelines were developed first, and development then spread further into Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. Roads were built, and settlements located away from Hong Kong's harbour grew. More recently, with expanded rail and improved roads, these early settlements have become large satellite towns. The spaces in between are a mixture of open country, urban sprawl and unplanned accumulations of houses resulting from the 'small house' policy. While the development pattern of the past fitted the purpose of building ample infrastructure quickly to support fast-growing economic activity, there was no overarching vision of how to make the most of Hong Kong's assets, both natural and man-made. Balancing these assets is necessary to enable continued economic growth and improved quality of life.

Today, we live in a place that is a mixture of:

- a highly concentrated central domain where people work and live;
- places for people to live that are either close to their work or accessible in a short time;
- a terrain of mountains and sea that provides a constant backdrop to that life;
- rural areas partly unspoiled and partly despoiled; and
- areas of 'untouched' rural land, much of which is readily accessible.

This 'untouched' rural land accounts for 70% of our land area including, among others, country parks, villages, green belts, protected coastal areas, and conservation areas. The majority is spread over the outlying islands, Sai Kung and other rural parts of the New Territories. It remains untouched partly because much of it is protected by laws and policies; and partly because it is a hostile environment for development.

Prior to 1997, Hong Kong's rural land was designated as 'Crown Land' (belonging to the Monarch). Post-1997, it has been referred to as 'Government Land'. Whilst the legal status of the land has not changed, there is now a perception that the people of Hong Kong have more control over it and expect their government to act accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

Our history of development has brought us to the present situation, in which the values of a wealth-focused generation; reliance on land-sale revenue; a growing population; and infrastructure investment have increasingly driven development of our rural land.

**3. A Need for a New Perspective**

Conditions in Hong Kong are changing and our urban planning must change with the times. Relevant factors include personal demands for more living space, changing values relating to open public spaces and a reversal of population growth.

Hong Kong is no exception to the norm in that we are living in the middle of a radically changing world. All cities should have processes in place that allow them to better understand future challenges and the changing values of their people.

---

<sup>1</sup> We no longer live in "Borrowed Place, Borrowed Time": the title of Richard Hughes' iconic book. It is now ours to have and to cherish, hence the title of this paper.

## **Our Place - Our Time**

### **Hong Kong's Unique Asset - Our Rural Land**

Some of these changes include:

- the halting and even reverse of population growth;
- the increasing accessibility and density of areas to the north of Hong Kong's border;
- competition from the increasing number of shipping centres and airports along the southern coast of China;
- changes to established notions of economic growth, including the tourist industry, due to increase in oil prices;
- increasing interest from residents and tourists in eco-tourism, fuelled by concerns about human impact on our natural and social environment;
- an increasing awareness that the 'quality of life' is important;
- the introduction of a 5-day week by the government that will inevitably spread to other sectors;
- an increasing awareness, largely brought on by the air pollution and the SARS epidemic, that a healthy environment is important; and
- an increase in demand for larger personal living areas.

None of these are trivial, but together they represent a cusp in the path of change to which we have become accustomed. Whilst in the past 'development' has simply meant 'building', it now has a much more comprehensive meaning in developed nations.

The purpose of this paper is not to study the whole spectrum of likely disruptions, stressors and value changes that lie ahead for the whole of Hong Kong, but to find a focus; move to understand new challenges, and gain consensus on a new perspective for our remaining rural land.

#### **4. An Example: Lantau - Where are We Heading?**

On Lantau Island, the last 15 years have seen the encroachment of the airport, building of a new town, and many other commercial developments and proposals. The founding of the Lantau Development Task Force (LDTF) to fast-track developments indicates that the government is habituated to the past mode of piecemeal development, without consideration of Lantau's inherent value to Hong Kong and Southern China.

The LDTF's report, the 'Concept Plans' for Lantau, was not preceded by any consideration or consultation of an overarching development policy. Nor have these Concept Plans been put into the context of a vision for the whole of Hong Kong as it moves into the future. The concepts proposed in the LDTF's report are a string of unrelated notions that do not take into account all the needs of Hong Kong or Lantau communities.

Meanwhile, many issues are ignored, such as:

- the economic decline of the local communities of Lantau;
- the exit of young people because of the lack of jobs and amenities for younger people;
- the run-down condition of many villages and widespread dumping of rubbish;
- the need for revision of the small house policy, which has created an unsightly and unhealthy urban sprawl;
- the lack of policy and action relating to the public acquisition of land forming the

## **Our Place - Our Time**

### **Hong Kong's Unique Asset - Our Rural Land**

environmental and cultural heritage of Hong Kong;

- public works based on standards and guidelines more suited to the urban environment than to rural and untouched areas;
- the need for an in-depth study to determine what economic benefits could be wrought from sympathetic and sustainable developments in the rural lands together with protection of 'untouched' lands; and
- the role of Lantau as a green belt separating Hong Kong from the increasingly polluted manufacturing hub of Shenzhen and the extended Pearl River Delta region.

There is no broad vision. The report continues the trajectory of the past: piecemeal physical development based only on commercial and engineering considerations; and lowest-common-denominator solutions resulting from an iterative planning process in which different government departments pursue narrow and often conflicting policy interests. It is this kind of planning that has brought Hong Kong's urban areas to where they are today.

Efficient and financially attractive as this kind of development planning may be in the short term, it can not continue. We reached a stage in our development at which ignoring the issues set out above will create a serious decline in our life and our economy.

The preservation of Lantau, with its vast 'untouched' rural land, will be an essential ingredient in the future quality of life in Hong Kong.

#### **5. Principles for the Future**

It is increasingly obvious that we have reached a tipping point in Hong Kong's development. The piecemeal approach of the past is no longer sufficient to cater to the needs of current and future generations of Hong Kong citizens.

We need to reassess the values upon which previous development plans were based. We need to consider what values citizens now hold, and decide how these can be integrated into development plans. This process will inevitably have a strong impact on Hong Kong's rural and 'untouched' lands.

#### **6. Our Vision of Hong Kong's Rural Land**

Our vision of Hong Kong's rural land areas includes:

- an appreciation of the immeasurable contribution of Hong Kong's rural land areas to the physical and mental well-being of our community, which is essential to all communities that seek to preserve and enhance their quality of life;
- the recognition that, at a time when the Central Government professes the need to protect local environments nationwide, HK's countryside is a unique and irreplaceable asset;
- a belief that in a world and a region which is now consuming more than the sustainable natural capital available, Hong Kong's rural lands must be preserved;
- the recognition that Hong Kong's rural lands provide an essential training and educational ground for younger generations to learn about and appreciate the benefits of a natural environment;
- a conviction that the values and practices which have driven Hong Kong development since its inception, and which have as their base the consumption of these natural assets,

**Our Place - Our Time**  
**Hong Kong's Unique Asset - Our Rural Land**

are not appropriate for these remaining rural land areas;

- a belief that the 'money making at all costs' paradigm must now give way to a 'sustainable wealth' paradigm, where 'wealth' is considered in its broader sense. This will lead to the development of policies and practices that create a presumption for the conservation and preservation of the remaining rural land areas, waters and coastline of Hong Kong.

We consider these concepts not only to be a matter of prudent ecological and landscape conservation, but to be a necessity for the future well-being, prosperity and quality of life of the people of Hong Kong.

## **7. The Way Forward**

We propose the following two Areas of Focus and six steps for Further Action regarding our rural land.

### **Areas of Focus:**

- Future planning must be holistic, strategic (overall Hong Kong, within the PRD, and within China), and long-term. Laws, procedures and systems for planning, preservation, development and management should be adjusted or created to achieve these goals;
- A culture of caring for the environment should be fostered and encouraged within the government and the community.

### **Further Action:**

1. An assessment of Hong Kong's real economic, environmental and social needs should be made, and a vision for future development defined for broad and in-depth community discussion;
2. Existing and past problems in planning, preservation, development, and management of rural land should be identified and addressed. For example: are existing planning and development policies adequate? Are they meeting the community's needs? Do they employ a comprehensive understanding of development? What kind of communities, with their own micro-economy and culture, do we want to build? What has been the impact of individual policies, such as the small house policy? What obstacles and conflicts of interests arise from different authorities governing different aspects of our rural land and natural assets?
3. Existing natural assets should be identified and catalogued; threats identified; and options for their protection tabled for discussion. Does Hong Kong understand what its carrying capacity is?
4. An overarching planning and development policy should be determined to guide future development. New principles, standards and guidelines must be created for rural land to guide all aspects of planning, development and works;
5. A set of objective economic, environmental and social parameters should be developed and included in the assessment of future projects. Proper value must be awarded to natural attributes, including existence value. Expert help should be engaged in environmental assessment and planning;
6. Nature conservation and respect for nature should form part of school curriculum. Our rural land belongs to the next generation, and it is our responsibility to teach them how to care for it.

# Hong Kong's Unique Asset - Our Rural Land Our Place - Our Time

## Appendix A

### **Hong Kong's Natural Assets**

Hong Kong is a small region of China, 65 km wide and 40 km long, with a population 6.87 million. Despite its small area and the fact that it has one of the highest population densities in the world, Hong Kong boasts incredibly rich and surprisingly diverse flora and fauna. It is located at the northern limit of the distribution of tropical Asian flora, and is the only region in the world where tropical and temperate species merge without some form of natural barrier (such as ocean, mountain or desert) separating them. Hong Kong's habitats are of great scientific significance.

Hong Kong has 21 Country Parks and three Special Areas, covering 41,320 hectares or 40% of Hong Kong's total land area. It is in these Country Parks that many small hill streams can be found, draining steep ravines rich in low trees and flowering shrubs. This natural landscape fascinates visitors.

Hong Kong has:

- 400 known native species of tree (as compared with 33 in the United Kingdom). Hong Kong Island alone has more plant species than the United Kingdom;
- 2,124 known native species of flora (as compared with 30,000 in all of China, and 240,000 in whole world);
- 226 native species of butterfly (as compared with 55 in the UK and 17 in New Zealand);
- 2,200 species of moth, (as compared with 12,000 in all of China);
- 110 native species of dragonfly (as compared with 40 in the UK, 145 in Taiwan and 251 in all China);
- 458 species of resident and natural migratory birds, 124 of which breed in Hong Kong; and
- 102 species of amphibians and reptiles.

To put these comparisons in context, Hong Kong's land area is 3.4% of Taiwan, 0.45% of the UK, 0.012% of China and 0.41% of New Zealand.

*The above summary was extracted from a report entitled "Ark~Eden - a vision for sustainable development on Lantau", March 2005. This document provides a plan for Lantau Island as an alternative to that envisaged in the Concept Plan for Lantau. Instead of being structured with concrete the plan emphasises ecology and environment. Ark~Eden is available at: <http://www.hkoutdoors.com/lantau-news/ark~eden.html>*