

South Lamma
Meeting with Mr. Chan, Village Head, Tung O
Monday 9th January, 2012

Preliminary Report

Background

South Lamma is an area of outstanding natural beauty and historical interest in Hong Kong. The area is zoned for agriculture, conservation and coastal protection. There are two sites of special scientific interest. The last known nesting ground for green turtles is found here, as are breeding areas for Romer's tree frogs, both of which are protected species.

Recently, an application by a developer to turn this ecologically sensitive area into a hotel, marina and housing complex was turned down by the Town Planning Board (TPB). The Planning Department stressed that South Lamma should be earmarked for conservation. Indeed, in the 2001 South West New Territories Development Strategy Review, The Planning Department identified South Lamma as a potential Marine Park/Reserve. The report states:

*"The coastal waters off South Lamma has a rich diversity of fish species, corals and green turtles. Black Finless Porpoise are also found there. The Country and Marine Parks Board has endorsed the above waters as suitable for Marine Parks designation with the implementation issues such as programme and management, to be investigated in due course."*¹

The planning intention in Lamma's Statutory Outline Zoning Plan makes the connection between Lamma's natural assets and its potential for leisure and tourism. The plan is clear on the vision for the island:

"The general planning intention is to conserve the natural landscape, the rural character and car-free environment of Lamma Island; to retain Luk Chau in its natural state; and to enhance the role of Lamma Island as a leisure destination. The ecologically and environmentally sensitive areas including the Sham Wan SSSI, the South Lamma Island SSSI, mountain uplands, woodland and the undisturbed natural coastlines should be protected.

Future growth of the settlement is limited to the existing villages and development nodes. The existing low-rise, low-density character of the traditional villages and other residential areas should be retained. Supporting Government, institution and community and open space facilities have been allowed for. Opportunities have also been provided for the enhancement of the waterfront of Yung Shue Wan and integrating recreational and visitor attractions. It is also the planning intention to preserve the cultural heritage of

¹ See: http://www.pland.gov.hk/pland/en/p_study/comp_s/swnt/final-report/final-report.htm, section 4.4.3.4

Lamma Island, which is one of the most ancient settlements in the territory. The heritage sites could also serve as visitor attractions to enhance the role of the island for conservation and as a leisure destination.”

Living Lamma supports the planning intention for Lamma and the implementation of a Marine Park/Reserve at South Lamma. We are now investigating how this can be achieved.

South Lamma Today

Following the TPB’s decision, Living Lamma visited South Lamma. The visit focused on Shek Pai Wan, a magnificent crescent shaped bay, after reports of insensitive concrete works carried out by the Home Affairs Department (HAD) and “dumping” at the south end of the beach. Here is the report of that visit:

South Lamma Concrete and Construction

Living Lamma also wrote to the Lands Department and put in a complaint about the design of the concrete wall erected by the HAD, both for its visual impact and the potential for beach erosion that it will cause. We are still awaiting the outcomes of these enquiries, though initial responses from HAD fail to acknowledge any problems with the visual aspect or the potential environmental problems caused by their ‘hard engineering.’

The rest of this report will focus on the outcome of talks with Mr. Chan, Village Head of Tung O, which took place at Mr. Chan’s invitation on Monday, 9th January, 2012 and provided insight into the intention of the construction site at Shek Pai Wan and highlighted shortcomings in minor works and environmental protection in the area.

What is Happening at Shek Pai Wan?



The previously densely vegetated area along the path that leads to the ancient temple at Shek Pai Wan has become a waste ground of construction material and rubbish, dotted with Lands Department notices marking the area as GOVERNMENT LAND.



Mr. Chan explained:

Some 20 years ago villagers used to fish in the river that brought fresh water off the hillside and flowed out into the sea near the steps to the temple. The river was so wide that its mouth provided a typhoon shelter for 6 small boats. Year ago, when the land was farmed by villagers, the vegetation that encroached on the river was periodically cut back allowing the river to flow. When farming stopped, this essential maintenance was not carried out and so the vegetation began to encroach on the river.

At the same time, the volume of rubbish brought in by the tide increased. With the force of the downward flow of the river impeded, this waste completely blocked the mouth of the river. (In October last year, Living Lamma members took part in a beach clean up at Shek Pai Wan. The volume of waste was so great that volunteers did not even realize they were standing on water. See picture below.)



Mr. Chan has contacted government about this, but no action was taken. However, in 2008, without any notice or discussion with the village head, HAD widened the footpath, reducing the path of the water from the hillside to a trench that is less than a foot wide (See picture below – HAD works using facing stones).



Mr. Chan showed how these works had caused flooding to the houses in Tung O village and how the loss of the river had caused a stagnant pool to form in front of his property.



As government has not undertaken any maintenance, Mr. Chan is attempting to reinstate the river himself by widening it, removing blockages and reinforcing the banks. Eventually he would like to build 3 houses on his land and have a camping ground for students.

Next Steps

It is shameful that rivers and streams in Hong Kong are allowed to die because of lack of care and government works that alter the flow of the water with damaging consequences. The volume of waste brought in by the sea is unimaginable in an area earmarked for a marine park. Clearly, at a policy level, stronger action is needed to protect waterways and combat marine pollution.

Putting the environmental degradation aside, South Lamma is still an area of outstanding natural beauty. Expert help is needed to restore the rivers and streams in a way that will prove a long-term solution. We suggest the following measures:

1. Identification of experts
2. Site visits with experts
3. Group meetings with all stakeholders
4. Formulation of an action plan
5. Immediate clean up of the beach and building site

6. Undertaking of works necessary to reinstate the river and streams

7. Promotion of South Lamma for eco-tours and heritage hikes

Experts should include representatives from all relevant government departments, local village heads and the District Councillor, as well as members of relevant NGOs such as WWF and the Conservancy Association.

A Note of Caution

In Hong Kong, there is no “Waterways Commission”, a body that seeks to preserve and maintain the ecology of Hong Kong’s rivers and streams. When rivers and streams fail to function or flooding is caused, the Drainage Services Department is charged with providing a solution, often with devastating consequences.

This happened in recent years in the Yung Shue Long valley on north Lamma. A stream, where children used to come to feed fish, has been transformed into an ugly, stinking nullah, which brings sludge and rubbish upstream from the sea (see picture below). It would be tragic for this to happen to South Lamma because of government’s inability to provide suitable restorative action.



Living Lamma will circulate this paper to relevant government departments and NGOs. We hope to find support for sustainable environmental improvement that will benefit the community. For more information, please write to livinglamma@yahoo.com or call Jo Wilson on 29820920 / 90423241.