

New national geopark is for more than amusement, experts say

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Hongkongers should learn to conserve and appreciate the city's newly opened national geopark instead of expecting it to be another amusement park, geologists say.

Conservation must come before tourism, said the chairman of the Association for Geoconservation, Young Ng Chun-yeong, regarding suggestions on building a luxury spa centre in the Hong Kong National Geopark.

A journey into the area was no leisurely stroll in the park, and visitors should be physically prepared and try to grasp the basics of geology before finding themselves in the middle of the rugged 49 sq km area, he said on Commercial Radio's *Beautiful Sunday* programme.

The park, boasting one of the world's biggest collections of hexagonal rock columns, is split into two parts, one around Sharp Island in Sai Kung and the other to the north around Double Haven. It was designated China's 183rd national geopark last week, and officials hope it will boost tourism and lead to World Heritage status as early as next year.

"Our geopark scored well in the national geopark assessment, but Unesco's assessment is going to be tougher," Ng said. "And if we built superfluous and redundant facilities like a luxury spa centre in the park it will stand a

much smaller chance."

Eco-education and Resources Centre director Ken Ching See-ho said it was understandable that ordinary visitors would have difficulty getting their heads around the science of specific rock formations despite the government's effort to educate people through leaflets and on the park's website, so guided tours were important. But the government must improve training so that the guides could explain the rock columns, which were formed 140 million years ago, he said.

Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department deputy director Dr Leung Siu-fai said training for tour guides was under way, and the government would underline education about the correct ways for the public to appreciate the geopark.

Tourism Board chairman James Tien Pei-chun said at the launch of the park that it needed more toilets and a snack shop.

On yesterday's show, Ng said: "I hope leaders in the tourism industry understand what a geopark needs. The main objective should be to make sustainable developments to the park. We shouldn't expect anything like Starbucks or five-star hotels."

The park's features will be covered by three zones - core protection, special protection and comprehensive protection - with different levels of access. Sensitive or hazardous areas will be restricted to boat trips, while hiking trails will be provided in others, such as Tung Ping Chau, Tolo Channel and High and Sharp islands.

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