



PUTTING THE ECO INTO TOURISM

BY CANDY CHIN AND MARGARET NG YEE-MAN



For those who are willing to see beyond the concrete and glass, Hong Kong can be full of natural wonders. Early one Sunday morning, a group of 37 people, including members of a tai chi class who are giving up their regular practice session, pile onto a coach and set off for the Pak Tam Chung Country Park in Sai Kung.

They are taking part in a day trip to New Territories East organised by a tour company called Hong Kong Traveller. The trip is billed as an eco-tour and the packed itinerary promises a seafood lunch in Sai Kung and a tour of Ma On Shan to learn about its history of iron mining. But the main attraction is the East Dam of High Island Reservoir, one of the eight geosites of the Hong Kong Geopark which opened in November last year. The International Ecotourism Society describes eco-tourism as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”.

Although it has yet to enter the mainstream of tourism in Hong Kong, eco-tourism is becoming increasingly popular, thanks to growing environmental awareness and the publicity surrounding the recent opening of new ecological sites.

Hong Kong Traveller is just one of the many tour companies big and small, that offers eco-tours in Hong Kong. Destinations range from the newly-established Geopark in Sai Kung to the internationally-recognised Mai Po wetlands and the fragrant strawberry fields in Kam Tin.

The tour company says their clients range from nature enthusiasts to families seeking an alternative to shopping and theme parks.

Once the coach stops at Pak Tam Chung Service Centre, Fion Au Wai-yin, one of the tour’s three guides, rushes to the nearby taxi rank.

This is because large coaches are banned from entering the Geopark

without a permit, so Au has to arrange for 10 taxis to transport the whole group to the geological site. The distance between the coach stop and the site would take two and a half to three hours to cover on foot. The eco-tour groups are unable to get permits because these are only issued by the government to academic groups and school tours in order to control visitor traffic and conserve the geological treasures.

The tour guide, Au, says the complicated transportation arrangements are a reason why not many operators offer eco-tours of the East Dam. Once they get to the site, the tour members are awestruck when one of the guides tells them most of the geological features in New Territories East are actually remnants of a crater with a diameter comparable to the length of the whole of East Rail.

As a frequent traveller and nature lover, Lau is glad to be on the tour. He says it would be difficult to find another place with such amazing rock features in the world. “I studied the classification and formation of rocks when I was in secondary school. But it is only through joining the eco-tour that we can have close contact with these amazing landform features,” he says.



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Chung Kin-man, a mountaineering expert who stars in a government publicity film for the Geopark, says the site has encouraged greater public interest in the geology of Hong Kong, “In the past, people went hiking there without acknowledging how distinct and rare the rocks actually are,” he says. “Now with all the promotion, the Geopark turns into a Nathan Road every Saturday. So many people are eager to visit the Geopark.” The Geopark



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CANDY CHIN



COURTESY OF AGHK

Biciline offers cycling eco-tours to Nam Sang Wai with chances to get on board a crossing boat.

The Rock Cleaning Angels are cleaning the graffiti on the rocks at the East Dam.

has become so popular that free geo-tours co-organised by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department and Friends of the Country Parks were fully booked soon after applications were accepted. The unofficial tours to the park are also booming. Some taxi drivers say they ply the route in and out of the Geopark throughout the day.

As the only connection between the dam and outside the park is a winding, single-track road, they have to make way for vehicles coming in the opposite direction by pulling into a passing place. Not restricting big vehicles would be a disaster.

Chung expects more people to visit the Geopark by boat when summer arrives and he is urging the government to do more on promoting personal safety. “Sometimes, it is risky for individuals to go hiking in the Geopark. They are not experienced enough to go by themselves.” But ecological consultant Martin Williams says the arrival of too many visitors could be detrimental to the environment of the park.

“The wilder parts of Geopark should not be for access by lots of people, especially casual visitors who might want to just arrive, have quick look, and go,” says the main writer of the Tourism Board booklet, *Discover Hong Kong Nature*, and a nature tour leader

and ecological consultant. He adds: “It is better to allow people to cycle there, maybe renting bikes. Maybe an electric minibus or two shuttling along the road would be good.”

Williams believes Hong Kong has a wonderful natural environment and that eco-tourism has great potential here. It’s a view echoed by Professor Lawal Marafa Mohammed, a professor of geography and resource management (GRM) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. As an international city in a sub-tropical region, Hong Kong has greater biodiversity and geodiversity than cities like London and New York.

Another advantage is that Hong Kong’s ecological and geological wonders are easily accessed from the urban areas – it is only a 45-minute bus ride from Kowloon Tong to Sai Kung.

“Hong Kong has a high potential of developing eco-tourism,” says Marafa. “It is just the way of doing it that matters.”

Developing eco-tourism is not just good for the economy, but also for educating people about their environment. While the Hong Kong Traveller group was touring the East Dam site, a group of secondary school students was cleaning graffiti off some rocks using simple tools such as sandpaper and brushes. They were

participants of a voluntary programme called “Rock Cleaning Angels”.

The programme begins like the other eco-tours, with participants learning about the geological features and the logistics of dam construction. Then, they are taught how to clean the rocks.

Rock Cleaning Angels is organised by the Association of Geoconservation Hong Kong, AGHK. According to Virginia Tam Wai-djong, a leading volunteer for AGHK, some visitors like drawing graffiti on the rocks, ruining the beautiful natural landscape and rock structures.

Tam says the volunteers are unable to remove all the graffiti because they do not use chemical solvents that would destroy the structure of rocks.

“Through actually participating in beautifying the environment, we hope participants can gain a better understanding of the geological history of Hong Kong and have a greater awareness of preserving our geological heritage,” she says.

AGHK is not alone in offering alternatives to traditional trekking and sightseeing. Biciline is a social enterprise specialising in cycling eco-tours in New Territories West.

It was launched by the Jockey Club Tin Shui Wai Integrated Services Centre in 2007, a unit under the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals. Biciline hires



young working-class people from Tin Shui Wai, which has been described as the “City of Misery”, as a means to enhance their self-esteem.

To date, Biciline has organised tours to Nam Sang Wai, Bak Nai, Lau Fau Shan and Tsim Bei Tsui. Kam Tin and Ping Shan are the two newest routes.

Kinki Chow Mei-ling and Kimchi Leung Pok-hei are the two young tour guides for the Nam Sang Wai route. They took *Varsity* on a typical tour and began by giving a briefing on how to protect the environment. During the tour, they stopped to introduce some specific spots and answer questions.

According to Chow and Leung, participants tend to only pay attention when there is beautiful scenery or when there is something unique that catches their eye.

The guides also discuss timely news and information about the natural environment with participants during the ride. For instance, they will talk

about how the recent weather has influenced the strawberry harvest as they cycle alongside the strawberry fields in Kam Tin.

Canji Li Nga-gi, team leader of Biciline, thinks Hong Kong people are not so keen on traditional eco-tours. Although there is a growing interest in eco-tourism, many still find it boring to just walk around.

Cycling eco-tours are different. The bicycle is a carbon-free vehicle that can keep participants excited and enthusiastic throughout the tour. Li says: “Making people feel interested is the first step for them to embrace nature.”

Rock Cleaning Angels and Biciline show there is room for small-scale eco-tours to develop in Hong Kong. However, it is difficult for small-scale community enterprises to compete with big corporate tour companies who focus on taking tourists shopping, dining and on visits to fashion outlets, and where the tour guides can make extra income from the sales.

After all, for eco-tourism to operate according to the principles of the International Ecotourism

Society, the groups should not be too big. Martin Williams says that it is important to keep the client-to-guide ratio low or the people on the tour may have little idea of what is going on and they may be shown little of interest.

Back at the Hong Kong Geopark, some members of the Hong Kong Traveller tour group gather around a tour guide speaking through a microphone. She is explaining the formation of High Island’s magnificent 140 million-year-old hexagonal volcanic columns. Meanwhile, other tour members are busy taking snapshots. Putting the “eco” into tourism will require a mindset that extends beyond the sightseeing paradigm of mass tourism; one that encompasses protection, exploration and understanding. Despite its image as an urban metropolis, Hong Kong possesses an abundance of natural attractions. What it needs now is to develop a deeper understanding of eco-tourism principles, an understanding that is still very much in its infancy. **N**