

Training stepped up to get it right at geopark

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An accreditation system for geopark guides has been set up to raise standards after some tour guides gave wrong information.

Young Ng Chun-yeong, chairman of the Association for Geoconservation, said tour guides working for some local travel agencies were often laymen and their performance in the field was unsatisfactory.

"Some do not know much about the rocks in the [Hong Kong] Geopark and say wrong things about them. Some don't know enough about the place and bring tour members to dangerous places," said Ng, who helped the government set up the geopark and the accreditation system.

In a television news report yesterday, a guide wrongly told visitors that the hexagonal columns of volcanic rocks at the High Island Reservoir were formed by "lava pumped out from under the sea".

The column shapes were actually formed by a rapid cooling process of lava spewn out of a volcano. She also incorrectly said the rocks contained impurities.

Ng said it was a requirement for Hong Kong to develop a list of well-trained guides if the park was to be nominated for Unesco world geopark status. The geopark opened in November, covering 50 square kilometres of land and sea in Sai Kung and the northeastern New Territories. It has been recognised by mainland authorities as a national geopark.

The first batch of 12 guides was selected out of 20 candidates on Saturday in a field assessment.

To be recommended as a guide for the geopark, applicants must have a post-secondary academic qualification and should have at least one year's experience as a guide.

They must also have completed recognised courses in geotourism, preferably with first aid and mountaineering skills.

Ng formed an assessment board with two geography scholars and Michael Wu Siu-ieng, chairman of the Travel Industry Council. Assessments take place through interviews and, if necessary, a field-evaluation process.

Recommended geopark guides will be provided with regular training and reassessed every two years. A list of guides will be linked to the websites of the geopark and Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department.

A spokeswoman for the department said there were about 1.2 million visitors to the geopark between November and March. Most of the 232 tours it organised were fully booked.

Wu said travel guides in general did not have specialist knowledge of geology and the accreditation would help promote the attractiveness of geoparks to overseas visitors.