

The uphill battle for our green havens

By Olga Wong

20 Sep. 2013

Following a controversial suggestion that country parks could be used for housing, we look at how they were established in the first of a series.

The debate over the future of Hong Kong's country parks has been framed as a battle between homes for wildlife and homes for humans. But a look at the history of the city's green escapes suggests a key reason for their creation is being underplayed.

Secretary for Development Paul Chan Mo-po earlier this month floated the idea of allowing building in the parks, despite Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying's election pledge to preserve them. The parks have since emerged as the latest battleground between conservationists and the administration.

In fact, an internal government report written in 1965 reveals that preserving trees and animals was not foremost in the minds of the visionaries behind the parks. Rather, they were seen as a way to complement the homes of space-squeezed Hongkongers: an escape from the city for people too poor to take an overseas holiday and in need of free recreation.

Statistics from the years since suggest that the theory has become reality. In 2003, the year the severe acute respiratory syndrome swept the city, Hongkongers turned to the parks, with the number of visits up by 900,000 on the previous year. The effect was even more stark in 2008, the year of the financial crisis, which saw the number of country park visits increase by 1.2 million. There were about 12.9 million visits to country parks last year.

The story of the country parks started with the arrival of an American consultant, Professor Lee Talbot of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, at the invitation of colonial governor David Trench.

Talbot, now a world- renowned ecologist, flew, sailed and walked across the city for a month with his wife to plot possible locations for country parks. He has vivid memories of his mission - not least because it almost cost the couple their lives.

"Initially Marty [Talbot's wife] and I surveyed the whole area of Hong Kong from the aircraft of the Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force," Talbot, 83, tells the Post. "When my plane crashed in the ocean, the press called it 'Hong Kong's first underwater aerial survey'."

Talbot, a former US marine, was the pilot when he was forced to crash land off Lantau on March 7, 1965. The next day, the Post reported that "an Auster aircraft of the Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force, with two Europeans on board, made a forced landing into the shallow waters off Ma Wan Island at lunch time yesterday, after it had developed engine trouble.

"Dr Talbot and his wife, Martha, are in Hong Kong on a special assignment for the government to make a study of nature, flora and fauna," it reported.

Talbot and his wife were fortunate to escape without injuries and continued their mission to study the feasibility of a system of rural parks, reserves and recreation areas.

He wrote the government report titled "Conservation of the Hong Kong Countryside", including a map of the proposed parks.

While it took more than a decade for the parks to become a reality, of the 24 eventually established since 1977, 19 were in line with Talbot's proposals, including the Sai Kung peninsula, which he identified as a high priority for conservation.

The parks, which make up 40 per cent of the city's land area, are home to 64 per cent of the city's forests and more than 98 per cent of native mammals, birds, reptiles, insects and freshwater fish.

But Talbot's vision went beyond ecology: he saw a real physical, psychological and social need for Hongkongers to "regain equilibrium", like city dwellers in Europe and the United States.

"Hong Kong's population has increased by over 600 per cent in the past 20 years," he wrote in 1965. "And the bulk of its nearly four million inhabitants are concentrated in the very limited concrete and high-rise urban areas."

Rather than suggesting occupying more rural land for housing, Talbot, dubbed the "Father of Hong Kong Country Parks", said in the report that people needed rural mass recreation areas and wild open spaces to rest and to contemplate, where they can hike, camp, climb, birdwatch or just sit and enjoy nature.

His vision helps explain the unique nature of Hong Kong's country parks today: patches of wilderness within walking distance of the most densely packed urban areas.

"In meeting after meeting it has been emphasised to us that there is no place where local employees [who cannot afford a trip to Japan or the Philippines] can go to take vacations, so that as a consequence, people have gone for periods of over 10 years without ever taking leave," he wrote.

The parks would have other benefits, the report says. They would prevent people from chopping down trees that had been growing since the second world war for fuel, protect reservoirs from the effects of soil erosion and keep wildlife safe from hunting.

A separate report released by the commission of inquiry studying the 1966 Star Ferry riots offered more evidence for the problems Talbot had identified. The riots, prompted by a five-cent increase in the ferry fare, involved mainly young people, and the commission found that provision of recreation facilities and youth clubs to be lacking at a time when half of the city's population was under the age of 21.

Since their establishment, the idea of giving up country parks for development had been raised sporadically by developers and government supporters, said Jim Chi-yung, former chairman of the Country Parks Board. But pressure on the parks is peaking as the government contemplates where to build new flats to help tackle sky-high prices.

Chan's suggestion that building in parks should no longer be a taboo subject was quickly followed by a call by rural strongman Lau Wong-fat for their boundaries to be redrawn. The Heung Yee Kuk chairman was backed by other pro-government professionals, who said the borders of the parks were not "untouchable".

But Talbot defends the boundaries he drew 48 years ago and rejects any suggestion

that they were set arbitrarily, based on water catchments.

"The boundaries were selected because of the ecological characteristics of the lands and their potential to fulfil the needs of the Hong Kong people, including recreation and proximity to urban areas," he said.

The full study by Talbot, which started in early 1964, took 18 months. It included aerial reconnaissance covering the city and site visits by car, boat and on foot.

"While we did not have time for an intensive ecological survey, we applied our knowledge from park systems and conservation throughout the world," added Talbot, who later served as director general of the IUCN and who carried out environmental work in some 134 countries.

"We consulted everyone we could find who had experience or knowledge about the area, its conservation potential and its potential uses," he said, "Previous studies had been made, some based on ecological surveys and we consulted and built upon that body of information. We also surveyed all the areas by foot or vehicle."

Horace Albright, who oversaw the management of Yellowstone National Park and was director of the US National Park Service from 1929 to 1933, was among the international conservationists advised on the report.

The study also sought local views from the department of botany and zoology at the University of Hong Kong, the Birdwatching Society, the Natural History Society and the Hong Kong Gun Club.

As a result, Talbot proposed dividing the parks into zones, range from highly ecologically sensitive areas for protection to less sensitive areas earmarked for tourism, hiking and high density recreational use.

Dr Wong Fook-ye, who managed the city's country parks for almost 30 years, said Talbot's proposal was largely executed under the leadership of Murray MacLehose, who became governor in 1971.

"He was a pioneer, giving manpower and resources to set up the parks," Wong said. "The previous governor David Trench employed delaying tactics. He set up two more committees for further study after Talbot's report."

The Country Parks Ordinance took effect in 1976. The first Country Parks Board was also set up, comprising officials, lawmakers, ecologists and former editor in chief of the Post, R.G. Hutcheon. The following year, the first parks covering Shing Mun, Kam Shan, and Lion Rock were gazetted. By 1979, 21 parks were designated.

Wong said villagers were consulted: "That's why some private land within park areas has become unprotected enclaves today. They were excluded because of villagers' opposition. The government wanted to accomplish the task quickly."

"The principle was to protect it first and study later," he said. Since then, the department and ecologists have discovered 2,000 native trees and more than 400 birds inside the parks.