

Digging pollutes the pride of Plover Cove

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Recent visitors to Bride's Pool, a scenic landmark in Plover Cove Country Park, have found the usually clear waters tumbling down its famous waterfall stained a muddy brown.

The discoloration was caused by excavations upstream by workers hired by the owner of a private plot within the country park who plans to build village houses there.

It illustrates the difficulties of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department in monitoring activity on nearly 480 hectares of private land within 18 of the 20 country parks that cover more than 400 square kilometres of Hong Kong's countryside.

Under the Country Parks Ordinance, owners can apply for developments that are "compatible" with the surrounding environment. No application has been received for the Bride's Pool site.

"Yes, what's wrong with that?" the site's owner, Leung Sai-lin, said when asked if she planned village houses on the site, which she bought from its indigenous holders.

The department said it had noticed the clearance and excavation work in October and workers on the site had been prosecuted for felling 13 trees and driving vehicles into the country park. They were fined HK\$2,500 and HK\$1,000.

A spokeswoman said the department was collecting evidence to prosecute the workers for polluting the stream. The owner was not prosecuted, she said, since it was the workers who were caught red-handed.

Despite the department's regular inspections, 127 trees inside country parks were felled illegally from 2006 to 2008. The department has received about 30 complaints about damage to the parks, including two about illegal changes of land use since 2004.

In 2008, 13,000 square metres in Tai Lam Country Park, mostly private land, was found to have been excavated and trees felled.

Last week, similar activities took place on a private site of about 5,500 square metres in Sam Tam Lo, inside Plover Cove Country Park. The Plover Cove site, once accessible from the Bride's Pool Nature Trail, was fenced off yesterday with a sign saying "Private property". A sign for Oriental Property Agency, which sells village houses, was seen on the site.

Land Registry records show the site, an ancestral property, was originally owned by Li Tsit Hing-tso and managed by Lee Hon. In October, a provisional sale and purchase agreement was signed with Leung Sai-lin, although the transaction has not been officially registered.

Leung is a director of Keystone Electric Wire & Cable. From Dongguan yesterday she confirmed she had bought the site and planned to build village houses there. But the Lands Department said it had not received an application.

Plover Cove Country Park has the most private sites of all country parks - 110 hectares. The adjacent Pat Sin Leng Country Park is second.

Under the Country Parks Ordinance, the government can request that the Land Authority discontinue or modify a land use if it will substantially reduce the enjoyment and amenities of the country park. The authority rejected an application to build nine village houses on agricultural land at Tai Mei Tuk in the same country park in 2008.

Peter Li Siu-man, campaign manager of the Conservancy Association, said the penalty for illegal works inside country parks - a maximum fine of HK\$2,000 and three months' jail - was too lenient. He said pollution might threaten the breeding ground of dragonflies and urged the government to buy private sites in the parks to offer them protection.

Professor Nora Tam Fung-yee, chairwoman of the Country and Marine Parks Board, urged the government to give more resources to the department.

Tam said she would follow up on the Plover Cove issue at an upcoming board meeting.

The Environmental Protection Department said it would inspect the site.