

**Sustainable Development:**  
**Eco-tourism Business Opportunities Conference 2002**

**Executive Summary**

Hong Kong has successfully positioned itself as the top tourist destination in Asia.. While the most widely regarded attractions are the city's cultural blend, the abundance of shopping opportunities, the spectacular views and cuisine, a growing interest has been noted in various studies of a new type of tourist requirement. In a study carried out by the Hong Kong Tourism Board in 2001, some 21 percent of visitors, equating to two million people, expressed an interest in taking part in eco-tourism based activities.

In order to capitalise on this demand, the aims of the two-day conference held in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre on 5 to 6 June 2002 were to:

- initiate discussions within the tourist-based business community that would lead to real action in eco-tourism developments
- learn about the recent trends within the local and international field
- demonstrate the potential of eco-tourism as a market-based conservation tool.

**Speakers & Attendees**

The list of local and international speakers drew from many fields relating to the tourism industry. The key speakers included:

- Ms. Rebecca Lai, Commissioner for Tourism, Tourism Commission, Economic Services Bureau
- Ms. Clara Chong, Executive Director, Hong Kong Tourism Board
- Mr. David Hall, Head of Group Public Affairs, The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Ltd.
- Professor Peter Hills, Director and Chair, Centre of Urban Planning & Environmental Management, The University of Hong Kong
- Dr. John Ap, School of Hotel and Tourism Management, Hong Kong Polytechnic University
- Mr. Anthony Wong, Managing Director, Asian Overland Services, Malaysia
- Ms. Cathy Parsons, Executive Director, Green Globe Asia Pacific
- Mr. David Man, President of Eco-tourism Awareness Group
- Mr. Bill Leverett, General Manager, Hong Kong Dolphinwatch Ltd.
- Ms. Debbie Wong, Splendid Tour and Travel Ltd.

The packed conference had attendees from the private sector, tour operators, hospitality industry operators, as well as academics, government figures and non-governmental organisations.

**Key Points**

**Defining Eco-tourism:** Although not a direct aim of the conference, it rapidly became clear that a universal definition of eco-tourism has not been adopted. While trying to avoid getting bogged down in this sticky issue, speakers prefixed their speeches with their own interpretations. The key concern was over-use of the term to market tour operators' products that were not necessarily achieving the aims of 'preserving or conserving natural resources' as determined by one definition. The terms "eco-tourism" and "sustainability", while not inter-changeable, were heavily connected in many of the speakers' approaches.

**Interest in Eco-tourism:** Studies have shown that a significant proportion of visitors (21%, according to a study carried out by the Hong Kong Tourism Board in 2001) to Hong Kong have an interest in participating in eco-tourism activities. While as yet, it seems that there have been no analyses to determine the amount of additional revenues this could provide the tourism in Hong Kong, the potential for capitalising on this interest remains high.

**Governmental Support:** In their opening speeches, Ms. Clara Chong and Ms. Rebecca Lai of the Hong Kong Tourism Board and the Hong Kong Tourism Commission respectively, spoke of the pledge by the Chief Executive to raise the standards of the environment in Hong Kong in line with his pledges during October 1999 policy address. This combines with the Chief Executive's recognition of tourism as being one of the top four areas of development and revenue generation for the SAR. Citing the government's Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry: *Towards an Environmentally Sustainable Development*, Ms. Lai spoke of the positioning of the Sustainable Development Unit directly under the authority of the Chief Executive as evidence of the government's commitments.

**Mass Tourism vs. Eco-tourism:** Hong Kong has been hugely successful as a destination for mass tourism. The number of visits by mainland Chinese tour groups helped to sustain Hong Kong during recent troubled times when many other key destinations saw significant reductions in tourist arrivals. However, mass tourism often comes at a price to the environment. Through the government's Environmentally Sustainable Development Strategy, it is hoped to minimise the impact of this travel market while allowing economic gains to increase. All speakers agreed that the economic value of eco-tourism was substantially less than that of mass tourism. However, Mr. Bill Leverett claimed that eco-tourism need not necessarily be of a small scale. Citing his company's Dolphinwatch tours, Mr. Leverett argued that in certain circumstances large groups of tourists have less of an impact. For example, he said, a single large boat with many tourists is less disturbing to the unique Chinese pink dolphins than a fleet of smaller boats with fewer occupants. According to Mr. Leverett's figures, 'eco-tourism' activities, when receiving a wide definition, accounted for nearly HK\$600 million per year, much of it from domestic 'tourists'.

**Local Natural Resources:** All speakers agreed that for its size, Hong Kong has a wealth of natural tourist resources. The key resources included:

- Country Parks
- Marine Parks and Reserves
- Mai Po Marshes
- Tsing Yi Wetlands Park
- Heritage sites
- Beaches
- In-shore waters

Key nature-based activities identified that could be sold to tourists included the following:

- Hiking (Country parks)
- Bird-watching (Mai Po)
- Viewing marine life on glass-bottomed boats (Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park)
- Diving (Marine Parks and Reserves)
- Wildlife watching (Lantau Island)

- Sailing (in-shore waters)
- Heritage tours (boarder regions)

**Resource Management:** Due to their limited nature, responsible management practices were said to be necessary to ensure the sustainability of these resources. Dr. Yeung Ka-Ming, Senior Country Park Officer, claimed that while eco-tourism itself was not in his field, managing the impact of visitors to Hong Kong's country parks posed similar challenges. Good signage, litter bins, adequate maps and other such items were cited as key to keeping the impact to a minimum. Several attendees requested the government allow their publications to be available at more easily accessed outlets than simply the government shops that are open at inconvenient hours.

For certain resources, such as Mai Po Marshes, numbers of visitors are limited and will remain so due to the fragile ecosystem that cannot support an influx of tourists during vital seasons.

Ms. Debbie Wong of Splendid Tour and Travel Limited spoke of frustration when trying to set up new 'eco-tours'. Ms. Wong's company had encountered a significant level of resistance from un-named sources to any new ideas being put forward and called on the government to help in pushing through proposals with an eco-tourism element.

**New Developments:** The largest tourist development in Hong Kong is currently the Disneyland theme park at Penny's Bay in Lantau Island. This large island will also see the development of a cable chair allowing visitors to ascend to the Big Buddha at Po Lin Monastery. While the former has come under heavy criticism from environmentalists for a plethora of reasons, the latter could be classed as a 'sustainable development'. A cable car will allow for mass tourism while reducing the need for new roads and increased motor vehicle emissions from the large numbers of visitors.

However, the development that was paid most attention during the first day was the Tin Shui Wah Wetlands Park project, slated to open in 2005. With the first phase of development now open to the public, it is hoped that an estimated 500,000 million people per year will visit the park. Many environmentalists are watching the development with interest as the government has recently said it will outsource the management of this project to a private company. This means that the park will be run along a 'for profits' line.

During the second day, a boat trip was taken around Aberdeen with representatives from the Planning Department. A lively debate ensued over the sustainability of developments in the area.

**Grass Roots Representation:** One attendee noted the absence of any 'grass-roots' representative, such as the remote village or island-dweller, the typical beneficiary of many small-scale eco-tourism developments. It was noted that these are the people who can help to maintain the microenvironment when given economic incentives to do so.

**Eco-tourism Certification:** TBC

### Conclusion

**Definition:** A background debate was the definition of what constitutes eco-tourism. Concerns exist over the misuse of the term to entice tourists. Through efforts from NGOs such as Green Globe, it is hoped that emerging standards together with a

certification system will be rolled out allowing consumers to determine whether an outfit truly adheres to 'sustainable' principles.

**Potential Developments:** Hong Kong has good, although somewhat limited, resources to promote itself as an eco-tourism centre. The common sentiment was that eco-tourism based activities could add to the coffers of Hong Kong. The panellists were divided as to the scale that eco-tourism could play within overall tourism industry. A number of small-scale eco-tourism outfits are already in operation in Hong Kong, targeting activities such as wildlife watching, kayaking, nature walks and heritage tours.

**Political:** Concern was raised over the seemingly worsening environmental conditions that pose a threat to any branding of Hong Kong as a 'green' city. The government's Agenda 21 strategy and other studies, such as the recent cross-boarder air pollution study, indicate the government's awareness is growing, with the Sustainable Development Unit reporting directly to the Chief Executive's office. However doubt was voiced as to the political will to carry out reforms in the face of challenging economic conditions. An example of the widespread media reporting on the poor quality of air has given rise to a serious challenge to the Hong Kong Tourism Board to present the greener face of Hong Kong to the international market. While the air pollution study was a step in the right direction, environmentalists have said that a lack of specific action to tackle the findings have been put forward. Tour operators also called on the government to assist in raising the profile and giving assistance, not necessarily of a financial nature, to operators wishing to provide 'eco-tours'.

**Education:** A growing awareness of the environment in everyday life, the media and government has led to an increased awareness of the general public of eco, or nature-based tourism as a means to spend the vacations. Speakers and participants said, however, that this awareness is still in a fledgling state in Hong Kong. Continued and increased education will be needed to boost the sector.