

Mystery work wrecks island's shell beach

Green group slams lands officials

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Updated on *Mar 04, 2009*

Lands officials have come under fire from a green group over alleged unauthorised works on Ma Shi Chau Island - a proposed geological park - where a beach filled with sea shells has been partially covered.

Dense vegetation on a piece of land about the size of six football pitches at Shui Mong Tin, on the island, has been cleared. The site has been levelled, and concrete steps, retaining walls and drainage built.

A beach bordering the site has also been partially covered with concrete. The beach itself is part of a nature trail on the island, which is known to hold the city's oldest sedimentary rock formation with marine fossils embedded in it. While the work site was beyond the boundary of Ma Shi Chau special area protected under the country park laws, it was within the site of special scientific interest that had no legal protection, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department said.

The Lands Department said most of the land that had been cleared was privately owned. About 10 per cent of the site was believed to be government land. No one had been held responsible so far and the reason for the work was unknown. Lands officials inspected the site in September and January, and on February 20 posted a notice asking that the government land be vacated before March 7.

"We are seeking legal advice on whether there is possible breach of lease conditions concerning the construction of the structures on private land," the department said.

Ma Shi Chau, along with neighbouring Centre Island Yeung Chau and a small

unnamed nearby island, was designated as a special area in 1999 for its unique and diverse geological features which are believed to be 280 million years old.

It had been a site of special scientific interest since 1982 for its rock formations. It was not clear why Shui Mong Tin was excluded from the special area.

Last October, Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen unveiled a plan to turn Hong Kong's rich rock landscapes into geological parks for tourism. The Ma Shi Chau special area was among the sites selected.

Young Ng Chun-yeong, chairman of the Association for Geoconservation, said his group was angry that lands officials had not taken the case seriously and now the damage was irreversible. "We tipped them off in September last year but they did not take it seriously."

Mr Ng said they had seen mechanical diggers on the site in September and immediately informed the District Lands Office in Tai Po which later told them that there was little they could do as the site concerned was privately owned.

Mr Ng said he was disappointed to see the work had spoiled the shell beach, an excellent outdoor classroom for geological studies.

"It was a 100 per cent beach full of sea shells like those in Western Australia. It used to be a very good outdoor classroom on how these beaches might be transformed into marble after millions of years," he said.

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The site on Ma Shi Chau Island before the unauthorised works took place.



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