

The coast guardians - SCMP Jan 8, 2008

Having been up all night patrolling the beach near Lung Mei Village in Tai Po, business student Gilbert Ho Tsz-hin is cold and tired. But the 18-year-old can barely contain his excitement as his torchlight cuts through the pre-dawn gloom to reveal starfish, crabs and sea urchins on the rocky shore.

You can only see them at low tide, he says, grinning as he carefully photographs the creatures.

His friend Simon Wong Chi-kin is equally delighted. The 24-year-old computer programmer has just spotted a ghost crab, and tries to snap the tiny crustacean before it scuttles out of sight. Capturing the wildlife activity is a great break from my daily routine, he says.

Ho and Wong are members of the Hong Kong Wildlife Forum www.hkwildlife.net, a Chinese-language online community of nature lovers campaigning to save this 200-metre stretch of coastline near Tai Mei Tuk from redevelopment. The Tai Po District Council wants to dredge about 10,500 square metres of seabed and top it with sand to create a HK\$130 million artificial bathing beach, with a breakwater at each end and bathing facilities and a car park.

The project was mooted 10 years ago in response to residents' requests for more swimming facilities in the district but several civic groups, including the Association for Geoconservation and the Conservancy Association, are challenging the plan as not making environmental and economic sense.

When an environmental impact report released in a public consultation last month declared the Lung Mei shoreline to be of low ecological significance, the forum's message boards erupted in heated debate, with members sending in photos of marine life from the beach to dispute the finding.

Website stalwarts Dickson Wong Chi-chun, a biology teacher, David Poon Yin-nam, a former researcher on tidal ecology, and founder Owen Chiang Wai-on quickly organised field trips to catalogue marine life at the site.

We didn't want to just sit around complaining as wildlife species were being destroyed.

We want to tell people it's alarming, says Chiang, an IT worker.

Over two weekends last month, volunteers recorded more than 100 marine species at the beach, from the common pistol shrimp to the rare northern dragonet fish - five times the number cited in the government report.

We were amazed to find so many species at such a small beach, says Wong. But we're also angry as the expensive artificial beach will be funded by taxpayers' money, our money.

If we stay silent, the plan might go ahead and set a precedent for other developments. So we have to voice our concern, Wong says.

Chong Dee-hwa, an independent fish expert who visited Lung Mei beach with the group, wants a more thorough ecological impact assessment before the project goes ahead.

While officials here are proposing to turn a natural coastline into an artificial beach, countries such as Germany and Japan are learning from mistakes and trying to restore the natural environment to waterways which have been artificially modified, Chong says. People realise rivers ecosystems have been destroyed after being straightened, concreted or tunnelled, he says.

Peter Li Siu-man, campaign manager for the Conservancy Association, says the Lung Mei project shouldn't be viewed in isolation. It reflects loopholes in the government's planning process and the environmental impact assessment has downplayed the ecological value of Lung Mei, he says. Describing the proposed site as relatively small, Li says it won't accommodate many swimmers. Building a swimming complex in an urbanised part of Tai Po is another option. At least it won't damage the natural coastline and the wildlife.

The water in the Lung Mei area isn't suitable for swimming, especially with sewage runoff from nearby villages, activists say.

Constructing a bathing beach in an area of poor water quality is irresponsible, says Wong, citing the environmental report which projects that water quality would be poor 24 per cent of the time during the swimming season, and very poor 14 per cent of the time, even after the completion of sewerage works.

Construction of the artificial beach could also damage nearby mangrove stands, says Poon, who has studied outcrops at Ting Kok less than 500 metres from Lung Mei.

The concern over loss of invaluable geological heritage in the dredging process has also brought objections from the Association for Geoconservation. Many stretches of beautiful shoreline, such as that in Tseung Kwan O, have been lost to reclamation, says association convener Cindy Choi Mo-ching.

The environmental impact assessment report describes the foreshore landscape and rocky beaches as highly valuable landscape, she says. Why should we sacrifice our scarce natural resources just to build an artificial beach?

Campaigners want a more strategic approach to evaluating the ecological value and potential impact of a development project. The artificial beach is touted as offering year-round recreation for non-swimmers, but activists say the beach already forms an excellent ecotourism site. If well promoted, it can raise public appreciation of the environment and bring economic benefits to nearby villages.

Places such as Lung Mei, which are teeming with marine and other wildlife, are irreplaceable natural classrooms. It's something you can't learn in a textbook, says Ho. You won't get to know the actual living environment unless you go out to explore nature.

Wong says: We're lucky to be living in Hong Kong because the green areas are easily accessible. It's so convenient for us to enjoy the beauty of nature.

That's why forum members plan to organise a field trip to Ha Pak Nai in Yuen Long, where they fear plans for a 45-hectare coastal tract may affect migrant birds and other wildlife in the nearby Mai Po wetlands. The plans include a public golf course, luxury villas and an environmentally themed hotel.

Hong Kong is an environmental treasure trove and people should value the great diversity of wildlife in such a small place, Wong says. Too often, he says, valuable nature spots are reclaimed or developed before people realise their true value.

This isn't about stopping development but aiming for controlled and sustainable development, he says.

The government should select places for development carefully, and consider areas of low ecological value. But short-term economic gains are being allowed to override conservation and sustainability.

The damage is irreversible, Wong says. We're in debt to the next generation.