

**ACE Nature Conservation Subcommittee
Meeting on 30 January 2013 at 2pm
Conference Room 1617, 16/F, East Wing,
Central Government Offices, 2 Tim Mei Avenue, Tamar, Hong Kong.**

Confirmed Minutes of Meeting

Present

- Prof CHAU Kwai-cheong (Chairman)
- Professor FUNG Tung
- Dr. HAU Chi-hang, Billy
- Professor NG Cheuk-yee, John
- Miss Yolanda NG
- Professor Nora TAM
- Dr. TSANG Po-keung, Eric
- Ms. YAU Lai-ping, Pansy

Absent with Apologies

- Dr Gary W J ADES
- Dr TAM Yat Cheung, Alfred

In attendance

EPD

- Mr Albert LAM – Deputy Director (2)
- Mr Elvis AU – Assistant Director (Nature Conservation and Infrastructure Planning)
- Miss Sian LI – Senior Administrative Officer (Nature Conservation) (Secretary)

AFCD

- Mr YK CHAN – Assistant Director (Conservation)
- Dr Winnie Kwok – Senior Wetland and Fauna Conservation Officer

For Agenda Item 3

- Dr Ng Cho Nam, Vice Chairman, HKBWS
- Mr Lo Wai Yan – General Manager, HKBWS
- Mr Yu Yat Tung – Project Manager, HKBWS
- Ms Yeung Lee Ki, Vicky – Assistant Project Manager, HKBWS
- Mr Chung Chun Kit, Johnson – Project Officer, HKBWS
- Ms Fong Hoi Ning, Helen – Project Officer, HKBWS

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1. The Chairman welcomed Members to the first meeting of the Advisory Council on the Environment (ACE) Nature Conservation Subcommittee (NCSC) of this term. He briefed members that the NCSC was tasked to advise the Administration, on nature conservation matters, including the management of the Mai Po and the Inner Deep Bay Ramsar Site; and to examine nature conservation proposals referred to by the Administration. In previous terms, the NCSC was consulted on different issues, for example the management of the Hong Kong Wetland Park, species management and survey on butterflies and freshwater fish, control of proliferation of *Mikania micrantha* etc. The NCSC were also consulted on various Management Agreement (MA) schemes under the New Nature Conservation Policy.

Agenda Item 1: Confirmation of Minutes of the Last Meeting held on 30 November 2012

2. The minutes of the meeting held on 30 November 2012 was confirmed without any amendment.

Agenda Item 2: Matters arising

3. The Chairman reminded that as in the ACE meetings, Members were required to declare potential interest before the discussion of the meeting. A Member declared that he was a general member to the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (HKBWS), but did not belong to its Executive Committee nor was part of the project team for the MA proposals “Fishpond Conservation Scheme in Ramsar Site 2013 – 2015” and “Hong Kong Got Fishpond - Eco-fishpond Management Agreement Scheme 2013 – 2015” to be discussed under agenda items 3 and 4. After consulting Members, the Chairman decided that the Member could participate in the discussion of the two HKBWS MA proposals, but would be asked to refrain from NCSC’s deliberation.
4. Invited by the Chairman, Mr Elvis Au introduced the background of the MA scheme. The Government announced in 2004 a new nature conservation policy to better achieve the nature conservation objectives, especially enhancing conservation of ecologically

important sites which are in private ownership. 12 priority sites (Priority Sites) of high ecological importance for enhanced conservation were identified using a scoring system drawn up by an expert group which comprised key academics with expertise in ecology, major green groups and other professionals. Under MA scheme, competent non-profit making organizations may enter into management agreement with the landowners or tenants through the financial assistance provided by the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF). It provided the landowners or tenants with financial incentives in exchange for management rights over their land or their cooperation in enhancing conservation of the sites concerned. Three MA projects have been carried out at Priority Sites, including the Long Valley and Ho Sheung Heung Priority Sites, Fung Yuen Priority Site and the Ramsar Site and Deep Bay Wetlands outside Ramsar Site Priority Sites. In 2011, considering that most of the activities being carried out under the MA scheme were for the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural environment rather than generating income, and were by nature almost inevitably not profitable, the ECF agreed to amend its funding guideline to expressly provide continuing funding support to the MA scheme. Nonetheless, all MA applications would still be supported on a time-limited basis and each application had to be assessed on its own merits. Furthermore, in light of the increasing public concerns over the need to protect country park enclaves against incompatible uses and for enhancing the conservation of country parks, the ECF also supported the extension of the MA scheme to cover country park enclaves as well as private land in country parks.

Agenda Item 3: Nature Conservation Management Agreement Proposal – Fishpond Conservation Scheme in Ramsar Site 2013 – 2015

Agenda Item 4: Nature Conservation Management Agreement Proposal – Hong Kong Got Fishpond – Eco-fishpond Management Agreement Scheme 2013 – 2015

(NCSC Paper 1/2013)

5. The Chairman informed Members that according to Section 2.5 of the Guide to Application for Nature Conservation Management

Agreement Projects, the ACE NCSC will be consulted on the proposal, and its recommendation will then be submitted to the ECF Committee for endorsement.

6. The Chairman invited Dr Winnie Kwok to brief Members on the proposal. Dr Winnie Kwok highlighted the keys elements of the proposal as follows:-

- i. With ECF's funding support, the 14-month pilot project had been successfully held in both the Ramsar Site and "Deep Bay Wetland under Ramsar Site" Priority Sites. As the current project would complete by end of February 2013, HKBWS had submitted funding applications with a view to seeking ECF's support to continue the project for another two years.
- ii. By way of background, the fishponds located in the Northwest New Territories were the largest stretch of continuous and contiguous wetland remaining in Hong Kong. They were of intrinsic ecological value. In the past, fishpond operators in the Deep Bay area adopted traditional farming practices involving regular drain-down of fishponds. The drained ponds and the exposed pond bunds provide suitable feeding and roosting habitats for waterbirds. Under the MA Project, fishpond operators were required to undertake the traditional and ecologically sustainable operation regime to manage their fishponds to provide suitable feeding and roosting habitats for waterbirds. In addition to the conservation elements such as drain-down of fishponds and ecological monitoring of fishponds, HKBWS' proposed to conduct various eco-tours.
- iii. Based upon the results of all-round evaluation criteria set for the Application, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department and the Environmental Protection Department considered the proposed application beneficial to the ecology and biodiversity of the concerned Priority Sites and recommended support for the two projects. Furthermore, it was essential to maintain the momentum of the conservation efforts made in the previous MA project.

- iv. The above two proposals were in fact complementary with each other as they cover fishponds in the two adjacent Priority Sites namely “Ramsar Site” and “Deep Bay Wetland outside Ramsar Site”. The fishponds within these two Priority Sites are contiguous and ecologically interdependent on each other with similar ecological functions. The large areas of fishponds within and outside the Ramsar Site in the Deep Bay area (some 730 ha in total) form an integral wetland system of ecological importance. Should the two projects be implemented together, the contiguous fishpond ecosystem in Deep Bay would be conserved more effectively with synergies created as demonstrated in the Pilot Project.
7. Upon Members’ enquiry on how to quantify the effectiveness of the Pilot Project, Mr YK Chan and Dr Winnie Kwok responded that bird surveys conducted by HKBWS had shown that fishponds after draining supported a significantly higher abundance of waterbirds than they did before draining. A Member suggested that with reference to the Waterbird Monitoring Programme for the Mai Po Inner Deep Bay Ramsar Site, the Government might be able to tell whether these MA schemes could successfully attract more migratory waterbirds, including indicator species like Black-faced Spoonbill, to Hong Kong where more feeding grounds were provided under the MA Projects. The Chairman opined that these MA Projects would also help preserve the traditional fish farming practice and intangible cultural heritage.
8. The Chairman invited the representatives from HKBWS to join the meeting and to present their proposal. The Chairman then invited views from Members.
9. Several members enquired about and gave their views the long-term sustainability of the MA projects. Members noted that the support of fishpond operators would be crucial to the success and sustainability of the MA projects. Members’ suggestions included that HKBWS might encourage fishpond operators in providing quality aquaculture products and obtaining accreditation to enhance their competitiveness or to train fishpond operators to conduct eco-tours, promoting consumption of local food, recruiting volunteers etc). Professor Ng Cho Nam, Mr Yu Yat Tung and Mr Lo Wai Yan of HKBWS noted members’ suggestions. They responded that

through the MA projects, fishpond operators were given financial encouragement to continue the traditional management of their ponds. Some of them might also build a sense of accomplishment when they were given the chance to show their traditional knowledge to participants of eco-tours. However, without financial encouragement to fishpond operators, it was unlikely for the projects to become self-sustainable in the long run. That said, by enhancing communications with fishpond operators/owners, it was hoped that the MA Projects would help gain their support in nature conservation and to maintain the long-term sustainability of pond-fish farming.

10. On assessing the effectiveness of the MA Projects, several Members suggested that different areas (ecological benefits on waterbirds and vegetation cover on fishpond bunds, enhancement in the visitors' awareness and recognition on nature conservation and fishermen's contribution) should be assessed, and benchmarks should be used where appropriate. A Member also suggested using a more scientific approach in assessing the overall ecological benefits brought by the MA projects.
11. As a follow-up question, the Chairman enquired what would be the optimal scale for these MA projects to achieve the conservation purpose. Dr Ng Cho Nam and Mr Yu Yat Tung responded that under these MA schemes, all fishponds within the Priority Sites would be conserved and surveyed, whilst education activities would be carried out in only selected fishponds.
12. A Member suggested that HKBWS should make clear in the proposal that the major objective of the projects is to enhance the feeding grounds for waterbirds. The Member also enquired about the budgets for these MA projects. Mr Lo Wai Yan responded that the increase in budgets would be for carrying out more promotion and education activities.
13. Noting that Members did not have further questions, the Chairman invited representatives of the HKBWS to leave the meeting.
14. After deliberations amongst members, the Chairman concluded that the NCSC gave support to the MA application, but would advise HKBWS the following:

- (a) HKBWS should make clear in the proposal that the major objective of the projects is to enhance the feeding grounds for waterbirds. On top of waterbirds and other taxa groups as proposed in the application, HKBWS was required to conduct ecological baseline studies on the vegetation cover on fishpond bunds, and to include the management of fishpond bunds that benefits the wetland ecosystem;
- (b) HKBWS was required to use benchmarks in assessing the effectiveness of the habitat conservation management measures. HKBWS should also assess the impacts of the conservation management measures on the abundance and distribution of waterbirds in Deep Bay. The results should be reported to NCSC at regular intervals;
- (c) HKBWS was suggested to incorporate a volunteer programme with a view to raising the awareness of the public in nature conservation;
- (d) On public education aspect, HKBWS was required to conduct visitor surveys to facilitate the evaluation of the effectiveness of the projects in enhancing the visitors' awareness and recognition on nature conservation. The design of this questionnaire needs to be vetted and approved by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department; and
- (e) HKBWS was required to conduct education programmes for the fishpond operators so as to promote the sustainability of the traditional fish-farming practices and enhance their awareness on the importance of fishpond conservation.

Agenda Item 4: Any Other Business

15. There was no other business for discussion at the meeting.

**Secretariat
Nature Conservation Subcommittee,
Advisory Council on the Environment**