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First Butterfly Survey in Sha Tou Kok Closed Area
63 species of Butterfly with 5 Rare Species

The narrow border zone extending from Sha Tau Kok to Mai Po, with a total area of 2,800 hectares, was designated as Frontier Closed Area in the 1950s. The area is undeveloped or has only low-density development, and has many habitats with high ecological value including fung shui woods, wetlands, abandoned farmlands and fishponds. Protected from development and human impacts, the Frontier Closed Area at Sha Tau Kok has safeguarded the precious nature and landscape.

The Policy Address of 2005 included the first proposals for reducing the Frontier Closed Area (FCA) and opening up 70% of the land for people and vehicles to access without the need for permits. After repeated studies, the FCA was reduced from 2,800 hectares to 400 hectares. On 15 February this year, the FCA including Sha Tau Kok – which had been closed for 60 years – was finally opened up in the first phase. Sha Tau Kok is next to Robin's Nest, which in turn is connected to Pat Sin Leng, Tai Po, and Wutong Mountain in mainland China. The ecological corridor covers some 5,600 hectares, comparable to the size of 300 Victoria Parks. Sha Tau Kok has varied ecosystems such as fung shui woods, streams, wetlands, forests and farmlands, according to the concept of biodiversity being higher with more habitats, we believe there is certainly ecological value in the area. However, no ecological record of Sha Tau Kok exists apart from a single ecological survey commissioned by the Planning Department in 2008. Green Power is launching the first butterfly ecology survey at the newly opened Sha Tau Kok, to fill the empty page on the area's ecology.

An initial report shows that there are at least 63 butterfly species, which account for nearly a quarter of Hong Kong's total. The survey results are encouraging, including 4 rare and 1 very rare species at Sha Tau Kok. In the survey, we also discovered a very rare species - Shiny-spotted Bob (*Isoteinon lamprospilus*). There have been few previous records of it in Hong Kong, other than some reported in the Northeast New Territories. The discovery at Sha Tau Kok allows us to further understand its distribution in Hong Kong, while proving the rich butterfly resources in Sha Tau Kok that are awaiting our exploration. Green Power now includes Sha Tau Kok in the Butterfly Survey programme, and soon a team of qualified surveyors will carry out regularly butterfly surveys in the area. We believe more rare species will be discovered.

Butterfly ecology likely to be impacted by development resulting from opening FCA

Development pressure on the newly opened up Sha Tau Kok is greater than facing other rural areas in the New Territories. Since the opening up of the FCA in February 2012, nine villages of Sha Tau Kok (Table 1) have been in the queue for opening up. As Sha Tau Kok is close to Fanling and most villages are connected to Sha Tau Kok Road, the area has become a magnet for all kinds of development additional to the New Territories Northeast Development Plan. Since the proposal was tabled in 2005, changes have been ongoing. Many villagers who have long left Sha Tau Kok gradually returned to build small houses. In recent months, a large-scale village housing estate emerged at Ha Tam Shui Hang. The situation is similar to Lam Tsuen, Tai Po; and Lung Kwu Tan, Tuen Mun. Over time, natural habitats are being invaded by rural developments of various sizes.

Previously, some political parties suggested a complete end to the FCA restrictions to enhance interaction between Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Sha Tau Kok was proposed as a trial “Border Industrial and Trade Region” to boost industries and ecotourism in the area. In fact, even before the closed areas are fully released, leisure farms and war games zones under the “Eco” and “Organic” labels have emerged in Sha Tau Kok. Abandoned farmlands have also been converted to parking lots, charging holiday visitors. Comparing the aerial photos of Sha Tau Kok taken in December 2006 and January 2012, we noticed that in some villages such as Sheung Tam Shui Hang the levelling of land has increased by 50%; and in Ha Tam Shui Hang the increase is 20%. It is expected that development of leisure facilities will accelerate even more. As in other rural areas, there will be both legal and illegal developments.

Robin's Nest as Site of Special Scientific Interest

Foreseeing the environmental impacts of opening up the FCA, the Planning Department carried out “Land Use Planning for Closed Area” in 2010, to formulate a land use planning framework. In March 2012, the Planning Department gazetted the statutory Outline Zoning Plan for Sha Tau Kok, after which most development plans have to be submitted to the department for approval, and hence regulated to a certain degree. However, small-scale development applications in Sha Tau Kok have rapidly increased after news on opening up the FCA was announced in 2005. Without the statutory Outline Zoning Plan, the government failed to regulate these developments. Some landowners also competed with time - before official regulations were in place, illegal dumping on farmlands had already commenced.

According to the current zoning plan of Sha Tau Kok, over 39 hectares of land are designated for “Village Type Development” and 7.38 hectares are for “Recreation”, meaning that these natural habitats could be developed in future for small houses, barbeque sites, golf courses or small car racing venues. By contrast, Conservation Area only occupies 2.76 hectares, which is hardly sufficient to protect the ecologically valuable places.

Green Power remarked that the closed areas could become a showcase for the government in putting the concept of sustainable development into practice. The idea of turning the closed area into a green corridor and developing ecotourism that benefits the public, local residents, the environment and cultural heritage at the same time. Firstly, the government should lose no time in preserving habitats with high ecological value and special scientific interest in Sha Tau Kok. As the woods of Robin’s Nest neighbouring Sha Tau Kok nurture many rare butterflies, this place should be designated as a Conservation Area or, following the example of She Shan in Lam Tsuen, as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. This can act as a buffer zone between the villages of Sha Tau Kok and the Robin’s Nest Country Park that is being planned.

Table1: The villages opening up in the first phase FCA opening since February 2012

Sheung Tam Shui Hang	Ha Tam Shui Hang	Shan Tsui
Tsiu Hang	Muk Min Tau	San Tsuen
Tong To	Tong To Ping Tsuen	Nga Yiu Tau