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Celebrating “World Rivers Day” to Heighten Public Awareness in River Stewardship

Kicked off Ecological Conservation Project “In-To Tung Chung River”

Green Power, with support of the **Hong Kong International Airport Environmental Fund**, launched a three-year ecological conservation project “In-To Tung Chung River”. The kick-off ceremony is held at the YMCA of Hong Kong Christian College today on the World Rivers Day. The project aims to encourage active involvement of the public to protect Tung Chung River through collaboration among green groups, government departments and community groups. Findings of the Hong Kong Rivers Awareness Survey⁽¹⁾ are also announced today on the ceremony.

The survey was delivered as an online questionnaire during June and July this year. Compared to a similar survey conducted by Green Power in 2001, we found that public awareness on local rivers had risen markedly. More people are concerned about river ecology and support conservation of natural rivers and upgrading of artificial channels. In addition, there is also obvious change in river issues that people care about in the last decade.

Over 80% of the respondents said they were aware of natural rivers in Hong Kong that flow from the mountains towards the sea. The figure was an increase of 19 percentage points from the finding in 2001. As compared to 2001, more respondents indicated that they had actually seen the rivers, whether in the urban or rural area. **Mr. Henry Lui, Senior Conservation Manager of Green Power**, remarked that there are over 200 large and small rivers across the countryside and the urban area in Hong Kong. The findings showed that more people have paid attention to the rivers in their daily life and recognized that rivers originate from the mountain area.

Nonetheless, **Mr. Lui** added, there were quite a lot of misconception about rivers. Nearly 40% of the respondents did not know that local rivers constitute the water gathering grounds, and about 50% of the respondents wrongly thought that rivers were used for wastewater discharge. In fact, it is illegal to discharge wastewater into any of the local rivers in Hong Kong. About 20% of the respondents were mistaken that river works were carried out to improve water quality and wastewater discharge. The fact is, river works are conducted mostly for flood control and channel maintenance.

The most serious issues about local rivers were water quality and rubbish, according to 40% and 25% of the respondents respectively—both figures were lower than that in 2001. Flooding problem, on the other hand, was greatly reduced in public opinion—40% of respondents stated that it was the most serious issue in 2001 while only 2% said the same in this questionnaire. **Mr. Lui** attributed it to the government’s effort in improving water quality and flood prevention in the last decade. The responses also showed that the public were more concerned about the outlook and cleanliness of the rivers.

About 70% and 20% of the respondents, respectively, hoped to see that local rivers can be used for “ecological conservation, and academic study/research” and “river park”. The ranking was the same in 2001 albeit with different percentages. **Mr. Lui** pointed out that public expectation on the use of rivers had not changed much. 60% of the respondents would like to see more effort spent on river conservation, while 90% and 80% of respondents supported the protection of natural rivers and revitalizing the existing artificial channels.

River Park – The New Milestone of River Conservation in Hong Kong

Tung Chung River is the last remaining natural river in Hong Kong which retains much of its pristine landscape from the headwater to the estuary and the bay. It has a very high ecological and conservation value. **Mr. Lui** is concerned that the upcoming Tung Chung New Town Extension Project might pose threat to the environment and ecology of Tung Chung River as the planned development of Tung Chung West would overlap with the lower course of Tung Chung River.

In the past, natural rivers were often channelized to prevent flooding in new town development. To preserve Tung Chung River, the government intended to keep the natural river bottom and banks and integrate the river in the new town—the first such attempt in Hong Kong. A section of channelized Tung Chung River will also be revitalized. A river park will be built to restore the ecological environment and promote water friendly culture. **Mr. Lui** applauded the innovative river park proposal which would fulfil the public’s yearning call for river conservation.

Mr. Lui recommended that in designing the river park, the authority could take into account the public needs of leisure (e.g. reading, strolling, playing with water) and sports (e.g. biking and jogging). These were the activities mostly carried out near rivers, as the survey found. However, the authority should also be cautious not to bring too much crowd by the facilities



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that exceeds the carrying capacity of the environment. Some activities, such as angling, which are harmful to the ecology, should not be allowed in Tung Chung River.

Mr. Lui further pointed out that the survey had found that the public put more emphasis on the river function of “ecological conservation, and academic study/research” than of leisure and sports. Public awareness of river conservation was high. This should be considered in the river park design process.

Save Our Rivers

In-To Tung Chung River aimed to encourage the public to “save their own rivers”. One of the key projects was “citizen scientist” to engage the public in ecological surveys and regular monitoring, with the objective of building up important data for the conservation of Tung Chung River. **Chan Kin Leung Vincent, a student from Tung Chung Catholic School (Secondary Section)**, was one of the citizen scientists. He participated in mangrove survey and was responsible for recording mangrove snails after undergoing classroom and outdoor learning. Vincent was thrilled, “Before the training, I had no eyes for snails. Now I learned to observe the many different species which look alike in appearance! In Tung Chung Bay, there are more than a dozen snail species. It is really amazing!”

Mr. Huen Cheuk Kee, a youth worker, was another participant. “The campsite that I manage is right by the estuary of Tung Chung River. I often bring teenagers here to the mangrove. But I didn’t realize there is such abundant biodiversity! I find it very meaningful that the data I help collect can be used to protect Tung Chung River in future and also allow more people to know about the diverse species here!” he said.

Consolidate efforts to protect Tung Chung River ecology

Guests attending today’s ceremony included: **Mr. Lee Kui Bui, JP, Head of the Sustainable Lantau Office of the Civil Engineering and Development Department, Mr. Kan Yim Fai, Assistant Director/Operations & Maintenance of the Drainage Services Department, Mr. Luk Wai Hung, JP, Assistant Director/New Works of the Water Supplies Department, Mr. Mike Kilburn, Assistant General Manager of Sustainability of the Airport Authority and Dr. Cheng Luk-ki, Director of Green Power.**

In addition, there were representatives from various community groups and schools that participated in In-To Tung Chung River: **Tung Chung Catholic School, YMCA of Hong Kong Christian College, The Salvation Army Lam Butt Chung Memorial School, Hong Kong**



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Playground Association, Eco-Environment Conservation and Education Association, and Good Family Farm, etc.

Mr. Lee Kui Biu, JP, Head of the Sustainable Lantau Office of the Civil Engineering and Development Department remarked “Tung Chung River is an ecological treasure. Our department is actively protecting the ecologically valuable areas as we plan for the sustainable development of Tung Chung River. We will restore about 600 metres of channelized river, and revitalize part of Tung Chung River into a River Park to improve the overall environment and promote water-friendly culture including ecological education and leisure services for the public. We are very happy to be a supporting organization of In-To Tung Chung River and hope the public will learn more about the conservation of Tung Chung River and Lantau through the project. Let us build a greener and better Lantau together.”

Mr. Kan Yim Fai, Assistant Director/Operations & Maintenance of the Drainage Services Department explained, “Flood prevention has always been one focus of our department. The planned development of Tung Chung West will overlap with Tung Chung River, considering the unique ecology of Tung Chung River and public expectation, we will retain the natural riverbed and river banks of Tung Chung River. The future River Park is also a new milestone of our work as it will serve both flood prevention and ecological conservation purposes!”

Mr. Luk Wai Hung, JP, Assistant Director/New Works of the Water Supplies Department added, “The upper course of Tung Chung River belongs to Shek Pik Water Catchment Area. The water is of fine quality. Protecting the ecology of Tung Chung River can help maintain good drinking water quality.”

Mr. Mike Kilburn, Assistant General Manager of Sustainability of the Airport Authority concluded, “We are grateful to work with Green Power in launching In-To Tung Chung River Programme. It is a valuable demonstration of how government departments, green groups and community groups can work together to protect our environment.”

⁽¹⁾ *The “Hong Kong Rivers Awareness Survey” was delivered as online questionnaire from June to July in 2018. A total of 1,303 responses were received. A similar survey in 2001 received 1,522 responses.*



Tung Chung River

Tung Chung River is the last remaining natural river in Hong Kong which retains much of its pristine landscape from the headwater to the estuary and the bay. Numerous precious fish species inhabit in the premium water, including the rare Beijiang Thick-lipped Barb. A large area of natural mangrove and mudflat lies at the estuary which is home to many important creatures. Further out in Tung Chung Bay waters is the breeding and nursing grounds for Horseshoe Crab, seahorses, pipefish and other commercially valuable fishes.

“In-To Tung Chung River” programme

In-To Tung Chung River is a three-year programme fully supported by the Hong Kong International Airport Environmental Fund with the objective of engaging the public in “saving our own river” with collaboration among green groups, government departments and community groups. The concept of holistic river basin management is advocated to conserve Tung Chung River and its ecosystem services more comprehensively. One key project is to build a database of Tung Chung River ecology by collective efforts of citizen scientists who participate in ecological survey and regular monitoring. A public platform will be created to facilitate exchange between the public and the government. The public can learn more about river conservation and related measures by the government (such as the River Park proposal in Tung Chung New Town Extension) and have the chance to express their opinion. In addition, a series of guided tours and workshops will be held for the public to explore and protect the ecology and hydrology of Tung Chung River.

Supporting Organizations: The Civil Engineering and Development Department, the Drainage Services Department, and the Water Supplies Department

Collaborative Organizations (listed in no particular order): Tung Chung Concern Group, Tung Chung Future, Eco-Environment Conservation and Education Association, Good Family Farm, Yat Tung Neighborhood Union, Hong Kong Playground Association, Tung Chung Catholic School, YMCA of Hong Kong Christian College, The Salvation Army Lam Butt Chung Memorial School, The Nature Conservancy

To learn more: <http://www.greenpower.org.hk/tcriver>