

10th December, 2020

Frequent visits to countryside during pandemic
Bring more hygiene product wastes
Green Power appeals to visitors to keep countryside clean

As the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic has restricted travel overseas to a great extent, visits to the countryside have become the new norm, bringing loads of rubbish to the countryside. Green Power had earlier revealed in its annual “Hong Kong Countryside Rubbish Survey”⁽¹⁾ that the increase in hygiene product waste was observed by 90% of respondents. The situation has now become alarming. The survey showed marked increase in disposable masks and disinfectant wet wipe waste. Green Power urges the public to handle the hygiene waste properly and take them away to keep the countryside clean and safe for all.

Survey shows respondents opted for visiting the countryside instead of travelling outside Hong Kong and joining other leisure activities under pandemic restriction

The survey revealed a noticeable change in countryside visits during the pandemic. Forty percent of respondents visited the countryside more frequently, from an average 2.8 monthly visits previously up to 6.4 this year. About half of these people admitted that these visits were a substitute to travelling outside Hong Kong and other leisure activities banned due to the pandemic. With the rise in the number of visits to the countryside, waste problem has also escalated. More than half of the respondents stated that various kinds of rubbish increased. Ninety percent of the respondents pointed out that the most apparent increase was in hygiene product wastes such as disposable masks and disinfectant wet wipes. Besides, over 60% of respondents agreed that the situation on hiking trails was severe, the figure being a record high compared with past surveys.

40% of visitors produced waste of ‘disposable masks’ and ‘disinfectant wet wipes’

Senior Conservation Manager of Green Power, Mr. Henry Lui, said that during the pandemic there were more promotions of local tours in the media which could explain the rubbish problem in the countryside. The survey showed that the top three rubbish generated by countryside visitors were discarded tissue paper, food packaging and plastic bags, as these accounted for 60%, 50% and 40% respectively. On average each visitor produced one to two pieces of such rubbish item during their visit.

Mr. Lui pointed out that the types and volume of rubbish produced by visitors have not changed over the years, but this year two items were prevalent in the survey: disposable masks and disinfectant wet wipes. About 40% of respondents admitted that on average they generated 1.5 pieces of disposable masks and two pieces of disinfectant wet wipes per visit. He stressed that it was inevitable that more hygiene products were used during this difficult time. However, special care had to be taken in handling such waste as they were easily carried by wind and could pose a greater hygiene risk to the landscape and pose an ecological issue. He explained that the use of qualified cloth face masks should be encouraged, instead of using disposable ones.

However, the survey also found that 35% of respondents had cut visits to the countryside, 90% of them indicated that the pandemic was the reason. The decrease was quite drastic -- from an average three monthly visits in previous year down to 0.9 this year. **Mr. Lui** said that the change in habit was polarizing, which could mean people who used to hike avoided going to the countryside, while many who seldom visited the countryside before chose to spend more time with nature during the pandemic. Some of these visitors failed to handle their wastes properly and thereby worsening the rubbish problem.

More people acquired the habit of bringing their rubbish away when visiting the countryside

Mr. Lui appreciated that more than half of the respondents said they would bring the rubbish away from the countryside. The figures had been increasing in recent years. In 2017, the Government began to remove rubbish bins from hiking trails in country parks and the public had slowly acquired the habit of taking away their own rubbish. He suggested that these visitors should bring their own water-proof or reusable plastic bags and to take dampened or dirty rubbish away with them.

The Government had also set up water-filling stations or drinking-water fountains in the countryside since 2019 and encouraged the public to bring their own water bottles to reduce consumption of drinks in disposable packaging. The survey found that 90% of respondents did bring their own water bottles, and about 65% and 55% were aware of the measures and locations of water-filling facilities respectively. **Mr. Lui** observed that the measure of providing water in the countryside had produced favourable effects. The hygiene of water-filling stations and water fountains, however, should receive special attention during this period of the pandemic.

The public take self-initiative in cleaning up under the Group Gathering Ban

Clean-up activities of the countryside are often held by different groups. With the Government's Group Gathering Ban now in effect, some 10% of respondents still participated in clean-up activities. About half of these were self-initiated while carrying out other countryside activities. This reflected that the public was generally concerned about the problem in the countryside and are willing to take action to clean up such rubbish. **Mr. Lui**, however, hoped that anyone visiting the countryside should handle waste they generated and not leave the problem to other people. The rubbish could be easily blown away to places hard to reach and that could have an environmental and ecological impact.

Instead of organising countryside clean-up activities by volunteers, this year with the pandemic problem, **the 28th Clean Up the World in Hong Kong**, organised by **Green Power** and supported by **HK Electric** was conducted via social media. A campaign Facebook page was created to spread the message of reducing countryside waste at source. Volunteers from HK Electric were invited to share ideas of upcycling from waste in videos. The message is very clear -- Take your own rubbish away and leave the countryside clean.

Clean Up the World in Hong Kong Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/CUW.HK

⁽¹⁾ *The annual "Hong Kong Countryside Rubbish Survey" was first launched in 2016. This year the survey was conducted between 23 October and 16 November, 2020. A total of 481 responses were received. The survey was conducted online with respondents being over the age of 16 and had visited the countryside within the past year.*

- THE END -