PURPOSE

1. Good ecological resources are available in Hong Kong. However, in order to put these resources into effective and sustainable use, there must be a holistic strategy. Development of ecotourism, complemented by suitable “hardware” provision could be an important part of it. The feasibility of developing “ecolodges” (a hardware support for ecotourism) in Hong Kong is therefore worth looking into. Hence, this paper sets out to:

   a. research on the background of ecotourism and ecolodges;
   b. review overseas examples of ecolodges and their operation; and
   c. examine broadly the possibility/feasibility of ecolodge development in Hong Kong.

BACKGROUND

2. International travel and tourism has had a remarkable record of consistent growth. In 2005, international tourist arrivals worldwide exceeded 800 million (UNWTO, 2006). Despite moderate growth in 2005, world tourism growth still exceeded the average annual growth rate of 4.1% by almost 1.5% (UNWTO, 2006).

3. A similar growth trend was recorded in Hong Kong. Following the gradual implementation of relaxation measures on Mainland tourists, Hong Kong’s total visitor arrivals in 2004 rose 40% over the previous year to about 21.8 million, and reached over 25 million in 2006 (Tourism Commission, 2007).
4. In terms of economic contributions, total value added (VA) of the tourism industries\(^1\) in 2003 was $106.0 billion, or 9.0% of Hong Kong’s gross domestic product (GDP). Among them, the retail trade generated VA of HK$25.2 billion and contributed 2.1% to GDP, followed by the land passenger transport industry (2.0%) (Census and Statistics Department, 2005a). Even if we only look at the direct VA contribution of the tourism industry to Hong Kong’s GDP, it still amounted to about $29.3 billion in 2003, equivalent to 2.5% of the GDP (Census and Statistics Department, 2005b). It is therefore important that we should ensure long-term sustainability of this sector by maintaining our attraction as a tourist destination, whether to first-time comers or repeated visitors. One way to achieve this is through diversification of our tourism product, i.e. continuously upgrading our tourism infrastructure and developing alternative tourism, including ecotourism.

ECOTOURISM

5. Tourism can be classified into two main categories – conventional mass tourism (e.g. visiting famous buildings, monuments and fun parks) and alternative tourism (e.g. nature travel and adventure travel). The latter is generally small-scale, low-density and attempts to attract a special segment of the society, namely tourists with above average incomes and higher education (Muller, 2000).

6. Ecotourism is a branch of alternative tourism. It focuses on the learning experience of the traveller, and at the same time, the impact on the environment and the people of the host country (Honey, 2003). It is underpinned by sustainable development concepts and follows a set of principles on traveller behaviour and the mode of operation for the travel industry. According to the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) (2007), ecotourism is defined as “responsible travel to nature areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”. TIES (2005) has also drawn up a set

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\(^1\) In this paper, “tourism industries” include hotels/boarding houses, restaurants, air transport and water passenger transport, land passenger transport, retail, travel agents, cultural, amusement and recreational services as well as convention and exhibition organizing services.
of ecotourism principles to guide those who implement and participate in responsible tourism activities:

- Minimise impact
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts
- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people
- Raise sensitivity to host countries’ political, environmental and social climate

7. Ecotourism is currently the fastest growing sector of tourism, with an average annual growth rate of 20% to 30% (Egan, 2001). In 2004, ecotourism was growing globally three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole (TIES, 2005). It was also estimated that the 700 million travellers of that year spent a total of US$2-3 trillion on their trips annually and ecotourism represents 2% of that total. The significant growth is due partly to the increasing number of environmentally conscious consumers who are looking for an exotic travel experience and to be socially and environmentally responsible.

8. Chun (1995, p.107) states that “Ecotourism at its best would not only merge the interests of a rapidly growing segment of the tourist population with a conservation ethic, [there also exist] the possibility of profit for various segments of the tourism industry and a sustainable livelihood for local inhabitants”.

9. Ecolodge is “an industry label used to identify a nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of ecotourism” (Russell et al, 1995, p. x). Many ecolodge facilities are now being planned and developed in both developed and developing countries, not only to provide accommodation for ecotourists, but because of their particular features, they themselves could be regarded as a tourist attraction.

CONSUMER DEMAND FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

10. The Centre on Ecotourism & Sustainable Development (CESD) and
TIET analysed a range of recent studies from the US, Europe, Costa Rica and Australia, and concluded that consumer demand for responsible tourism is strong and growing, but largely passive (Honey, 2005). The studies show that a majority of tourists are interested in the social, cultural and environmental issues relevant to the destination they visit. They want to learn about the issues before and/or while travelling. A vast majority of them are interested in patronising hotels that are committed to protecting the local environment, and increasingly regard local environmental and social stewardship as a responsibility of the business they support. However, only a small percentage of tourists actually ask about hotel policies. Even fewer report change of their plans due to the responsible tourism issue.

11. Statistical data from various studies showing the travellers’ views on ecotourism is summarised as follows (Honey, 2005):

- More than two-thirds of US and Australian travellers and 90% of British tourists, consider active protection of the environment, including support of local communities, to be part of a hotel’s responsibility.

- In Europe, 20% to 30% of travellers reported their awareness of the needs and values of sustainable tourism; 10% to 20% look for “green” options; and 5% to 10% demand “green” holidays.

- In Germany, 65% of travellers expect environmental quality; 42% “think that it is particularly important to find environmentally friendly accommodation”.

- Nearly half of those surveyed in Britain said they would be more likely to go with a “company that had a written code to guarantee good working conditions, protect the environment and support local charities in the tourist destination…”.

- A survey of US, British and Australian travellers revealed that 70% would pay up to US$150 more for a 2-week stay in a hotel with a “responsible environmental attitude”.
In UK, 87% said their holiday should not damage the environment; 39% said they were prepared to pay 5% extra for ethical guarantees.

**OPERATOR SUPPORT FOR RESPONSIBLE TOURISM**

12. In the same findings of the CESD and TIES, responsible tourism receives widespread support especially among specialist operators (Honey, 2005). Three-quarters of the tour operators surveyed say they have or are planning to produce a responsible tourism policy. These policies are designed to educate tourists and/or set operating principles. Since superior environmental performance brings them branding and price advantages, specialist tour operators targeting at “green” consumers are more likely to set and publicise responsible practices.

13. Operators’ views on ecotourism have been gathered in a number of studies with the following major findings (Honey, 2005):

- In a 2001 study of British tour operators, half (49%) reported that they had developed some form of a responsible tourism policy with an additional 26% said that they are planning to produce such a policy in the future.

- In a 2004 survey by Green Globe 21, 89% of Australian and International organisations that supply the tourism industry said that issues of sustainability and corporate social responsibility are extremely important to them; and 84% stated that minimising their impacts on the environment and assisting their clients to do the same are extremely important.

- A survey in Costa Rica found that businesses could set themselves apart from their competitors and thus yield price premiums if they routinely have superior environmental performances which will appeal to “green” consumers.

- Tour operators who focus on “green” consumers or larger
companies and those with higher visibility (such as multinational businesses) in the market are more likely to participate in voluntary environmental programs.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ECOLODGES

14. In view of the growing demand for ecotourism and operator support, many ecologes are now being planned and developed. Defined as a nature-dependent tourist lodge that meets the philosophy and principles of ecotourism, a key attraction of an ecodge is its surroundings and facility, having a unique character and activity/educational focus. Activities provided are usually nature/recreation based e.g. hiking, snorkeling, diving, sea kayaking, horse trekking, etc. It provides opportunities for relaxation, experiencing the nature as well as the culture and tradition of the area where it is located. It also allows visitors to learn to be a responsible traveller.

15. Ecolodges in general could meet the comfortable basic needs of tourists. They are generally small in scale to assure the sense of wilderness travel and human impact on the environment could be controlled. For example, Chalalan ecodge, located in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, has adopted the philosophy of minimum impact, using local materials and traditional techniques. Traditional Tacana-style cabins, which can accommodate up to 24 people, have been built.

Chalalan Ecolodge, local materials are used to respect the traditional building style of the community, San Jose de Uchupiamonas. Photo/Chalalan (2007) http://www.chalalan.com/chalalan_ing/albergue1.html
16. However, some ecotourism could also be of luxury standards. Examples include the Aquila Ecolodge and Kingfisher Bay Resort and Village in Australia, as well as the Crosswaters Ecolodge in Guangdong Province, as further described below.

*Design and Facilities*

17. Sustainable design and renewable energy would usually be adopted for the architecture of ecotourism facilities. The development of an ecotourism facility would integrate with the local environment, contributing to a unique character. As far as possible, local and recyclable materials with minimal impact on the environment (e.g. decking materials made from recycled plastic and wood waste) would be used. Other “green” features would include the use of oil lamps, solar-powered fans and showers and composting toilets (i.e. biological sewage treatment: generating its own energy from renewable sources such as solar or bio-gas and managing its own waste). Besides, conservation of water is advocated at all levels of operation. Grey water can be used for toilets, irrigation, and other compatible uses. Aesthetically, the lodge could be designed to blend in with the natural surroundings and incorporate local cultural characteristics, giving customers a sense of place.

18. “Green” measures are also incorporated into the operation of the ecotourism facility, e.g. through preventing waste-water from flowing into rivers or any other natural hydrologic systems, not allowing waste from the lodge to enter neighbouring properties or waters. In addition, solid waste management, treatment and disposal would be encouraged. For example, kitchen and garden waste will be composted.

**EXAMPLES OF ECOLODGES**

*Aquila Ecolodge, Victoria, Australia*

19. Aquila Ecolodge is an exciting, multi award winning, and luxurious ecotourism facility providing a unique opportunity to enjoy the tranquility of the Australian bushland. It is surrounded on three sides by national
parks and on the fourth side by the Grampians Golf Course. It features four lodges in total and two unique award-winning lodge designs. All buildings are constructed on sustainable principles: using building materials that have been carefully selected for their sensitivity to the surrounding bushland environment and fire considerations, and employing innovative and leading edge technologies. As a responsible operator, it collects all its own water, generates power, and manages its waste on site. It gained Victorian Tourism Awards – ecotourism in 2003 and 2004. In addition, it has been listed as one of the world’s top 101 self-catering locations – Tree House Category by Tatler magazine in England as well as “Outstanding Achievement” in the Powercor Small Business Awards for 2004.

Demonstrating sustainable living principles, Aquila is an exciting, multi award winning, and luxurious ecolodge providing a unique opportunity to enjoy the tranquility of the Australian bushland. Photo/Aquila (2007)


Kingfisher Bay Resort and Village, Queensland, Australia

20. Kingfisher Bay Resort and Village, a four-star, international standard, fully-integrated, large-scale ecotourism resort, is another example. It has won numerous environmental, tourism and architectural awards, and is in perfect harmony with the sensitive ecological system of World Heritage listed Fraser Island. It offers all the amenities of a modern luxurious resort, having four bars, three restaurants, four swimming pools, spa, two tennis courts, general store, beauty therapy and massage, child care centre and a junior eco-rangers programme. In addition, a variety of activities are available including whale watching, fishing, ranger guided tours, nature walks, rainforest treks, bird watching, canoeing, wine tasting, bush tucker talk and taste, dolphin cruise, adventure, swimming, etc.

Photo/Kingfisher Bay (2007)
http://www.fraserislandresort.com/kingfisher_bay_resort/index.html
**Lapa Rios, Costa Rica**

21. The Lapa Rios Ecolodge is located in the Osa Peninsula in southern Costa Rica, within a 400-hectare private reserve of lowland tropical rainforest. The development comprises 16 bungalows. The site is remote and is not supported by adequate municipal infrastructure, and because of its remoteness, the area is short of trained construction workers and demands a high cost to bring in conventional building materials. However, community involvement, local building materials, and time-tested practical solutions to the challenges contributed to the success of the project.

22. As a start, it signed up to take part in the Costa Rica Government’s “green” certification programme (Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) 1999). This helped them improve their methods and practices through the discipline inherent to certification, for example, using biodegradable products and organic foods, which may be difficult to source if not for CST.

![Natural lodging experience at Lapa Rios](http://www.laparios.com/lodge.html)
23. In 2003, it received the prestigious “Five Leaves Sustainability Certification Award” (the highest recognition awarded by the Costa Rican Ministry of Tourism). It is also the 2005 recipient of the US Secretary of State’s Award for Corporate Excellence, being recognition awarded to US companies operating overseas for their outstanding corporate citizenship, exemplary employment practices, and responsible environmental stewardship. It was the first time a small “green” business has received this prestigious prize.

24. Lapa Rios was also recognised as one of the five best ecolodges in the world by Conde Nast (Green Award, 2005), and voted one of the best hotels and resorts in Mexico and Latin America by Conde Nast readers (Readers Choice Award, 2005) (from Carbonera, 2006). In addition, it has been honoured as a 2007 Corporate Sustainable Standard-Setter by the highly respected Rainforest Alliance Organisation.

25. Lapa Rios adopted the standards of TIES, including minimising impact, building environmental and cultural awareness and respects, and providing financial benefits and empowerment for local people and teaching them how to use land and resources wisely. It established a 400-hectare biological reserve and encourages hotel guests to contribute to education programmes and to campaign to protect the national environmental park. By making use of funds generated by guided tours, it helped to rebuild and promote a locally run turtle conservation project. It supports/sponsors the Corcovado Park Ranger Project by providing the park ranger salary to help support their efforts to crack down on illegal hunting. In addition, it provides direct financial benefits and empowerment for local people by only hiring locals in projects including management and establishing the Carbonera School, a local community primary school providing education for local children.

26. In terms of design and facilities, it used green building concepts (70% of the materials used to build the bungalows are renewable materials and no live trees were cut for the construction) and developed a comprehensive and sustainable environmental management system. Energy-saving generators and solar panels
were installed. Waste management and recycling programme in the hotel and the nearby communities and water conservation plan were implemented. Biodegradable products for guests (shampoo, etc) and employees (detergents, etc) are used. In addition, local and fresh produce is purchased and its gardens maintain primarily endemic species of plants. Besides, the vehicles used for transportation are in good mechanical conditions and renewed every 2-3 years.

Chalalan Example: Partnership for Community-based Ecotourism

27. Chalalan is located in the Madidi National Park jungle, in Bolivia’s Amazon region. The Park was established in 1995 and is characterised by a wealth of biological resources and a variety of ecosystems. Madidi is home to over 4,739 species of plants, 1,370 species of vertebrates and 867 tropical birds, making it a priority for conservation (Chalalan, 2007). The park is composed of snow-capped mountains, glaciers, high Andean lagoons, deep valleys and canyons, cliffs, torrid rivers and waterfalls (Chalalan, 2007). All these unique features make up some of the most stunning scenery.

28. The development was initiated by a small group from the Quechua-Tacana community of San Jose, de Uchiapomonas. It shows the success of an independent, community-owned corporation in developing and operating an ecotourism project. Help was sought from Conservation International which facilitated both the design and grant-application process. Three years later, the Inter-American Development Bank granted US$1.4 million to San Jose for the construction of an up-market ecolodge and for a local training programme on ecotourism. In 1998 the construction of the Chalalan Ecolodge was completed and started operation. In 2001, the ownership rights of the lodge were formally transferred to the community and as a result, subsidies were no longer granted.

29. The project is a successful demonstration of sustainable development, balancing environmental, social and economic needs, as further explained below.
Environment

30. The ecolodge was designed to blend in with its environment using conventional building techniques and environmentally friendly local materials. Protecting the environment around Chalalan has been the greatest concern and various actions have been taken to ensure environmental sustainability. For example, the sewage treatment system (for bathrooms, kitchen & showers) implemented was certified by the Bolivian Ministry of Sustainable Development and the Environment’s environmental manifesto. This system combines the effect of the sun and biological process to treat the effluent. Solid waste would be separated, with organic waste going to a compost heap while inorganic waste would be collected by the Rurrenabaque municipal refuse collection service. Solar energy is used to light the bedrooms and common areas of the lodge and the use of fossil fuels would be kept to a minimum. Water is purified and being treated with special filters.

Solar Panels are used at Chalalan
Photo/Chalalan (2007)
http://www.chalalan.com/chalalan_ing/elalbergue.html

31. Prior to the establishment of the Park, the area was an open zone where logging and hunting were common. The Park is now separated into several zones. The core tourism zone covers a small area leaving a large “buffer zone” as protection area with restricted access.
Social

32. The ecotourism operation does not only generate local incomes, but also contribute to community spending on public services. For example, it has improved education facilities for 150 students by building a new school-house and hiring additional teachers. Besides, there is an increase in cultural and communal pride among inhabitants (Robertson & Wonder, 2005). A full-day programme with a demonstration of farming techniques and a “cultural night” with traditional art, music and dancing is designed as part of the Chalalan tour package. The interest expressed by the tourists has already made the members of the local community, especially the youth, more proud of their heritage (Robertson & Wonder, 2005). One communal leader said, “Before, the youth were ashamed to play the flute and the drum. It was embarrassing. Now, they are proud to do it” (Robertson & Wonder, 2005, p. 75).

Economic/Finance

33. There has been a sustained growth in patrons since the lodge opened in 1998. Patron numbers rose from 200 in 1998 to 700 in 2000 and 1,160 in 2002 (G. Mamanì personal communication, from Robertson & Wonder, 2005). Almost all patrons pay between US$205 and 400 to Chalalan for an all-inclusive package tour to the lodge, depending on group size and number of nights stayed (two to three nights are standard) (Robertson & Wonder, 2005, p. 72). The significant economic benefits deriving from ecotourism contribute to
several stakeholders including (i) dividends paid out to community shareholders (associates); (ii) investments for future tourism enterprise (shareholders); (iii) profits allocated to a communal fund for collective spending (whole village); and (iv) rotational wage employment (salaried workers) (Robertson & Wonder, 2005, p. 69). As indicated in several interviews, profits net of running costs, maintenance, depreciation and new investments are about 10 to 15% in terms of gross revenues (Robertson & Wonder, 2005).

**Nanling Zhongheng Ecotourism Development Project** (南嶺中恆生態旅遊發展計劃), Guangdong Province

34. The Nanling Zhongheng Ecotourism Development Project is located within the Nanling National Park, the largest in Guangdong Province. It was a project spurred by private initiatives, aimed at the following (Chen Liang, 2004):

- Targeting upmarket customers;
- Emphasising long-term profit;
- Taking advantage of the good designs of foreign landscape architects; and
- Achieving environmental sustainability by charging enough to keep visitor numbers down.

35. Besides, the owner stressed, as responsible investors, the importance of collecting data of the local environment and the lifestyles of local communities for ecotourism and ecolodge development.

36. The project can be regarded as sustainable as it has struck a balance among natural conservation, community development and economic benefit. Priority has been given to hire local workers to increase employment, purchase local raw materials to foster the local economy and engaging the local community in the planning, development, operation and management of the project. Besides, old buildings/architecture have been preserved to respect the local history and buildings/architecture. For example, an old reception hostel built in 1980s has been renovated to become the Orange House for tourist accommodation.
More importantly, the Nanling Zhongheng Ecotourism Development Project has served as a catalyst to stimulate growth in ecotourism in the Nanling area, which has a rich endowment of natural resources and attractive natural scenery. A number of ecotours have already been organised, many by the local community.

Crosswaters Ecolodge (十字水生態度假村), Guangdong Province

Another example of ecolodge development in Guangdong is Crosswaters Ecolodge. It is located in the forests of Nankun Shan Mountain Reserve. The overall ecotourism plan for Nankun Mountain Reserve includes the development of a five-star ecolodge (Crosswaters), a boutique 25-room lodge called Sumoaping River Lodge, a three-star Village Lodge, a visitor and Interpretation Centre
in Shangping Village, a Bamboo Museum, retail and civic centre in the village, and enhancement and building of new trails. The reserve is regarded as an ecotourism destination providing a variety of experiences and accommodation facilities. – from three-star to five-star. Mountain climbing, hiking, boating, birding, tubing, cycling, walking, swimming, astronomy, wine tasting, fruit picking, wellness activities, and fish farming are just some of the experiences available to tourists.

39. The team, which included EDSA, well-known Australian Ecolodge, architect Paul Pholeros, leading bamboo architect Simon Velez and BUZ Design, carried out intensive and in-depth environmental, social and metaphysical analyses. They conducted three different on-site visits, and spent time understanding and studying the lifestyle of the Keija people (the local minority Chinese community). The team involved the local people in the planning process from the start so that they could tap into the local wisdom and knowledge of the Keija tribe to develop the site into a true ecolodge.

40. Moreover, it succeeded in convincing the developer not to demolish the local village, but celebrate it and turn it into a rural tourism attraction. The project not only respects the spirit of the place but enriches it through thoughtful, sensitive sustainable planning and design.

The Crosswaters Ecolodge development upholds the site’s ecological balance and the harmonious relationship between the Keija people and their surroundings.

Photo/Futurarc (2007)
http://www.futurarc.com/this_edition/crosswaters.cfm##
Most of the building materials used for the Crosswaters Ecolodge were recycled and reused. For example, the boardwalks are made of railway ties.

Photo/Futurarc (2007)
http://www.futurarc.com/this_edition/crosswaters.cfm#

41. The inclusion of the Keija people from the beginning of the planning process, employment of sustainable planning and design principles, creation of economic opportunities for the locals and confining development only on disturbed areas are the key concepts of the development, which contributed to its gaining of the ASLA (American Society of Landscape Architects) 2006 Professional Awards – Analysis and Planning Award of Honour.

THE CASE FOR HONG KONG

Growth of Ecotourism

42. Given its predominant urban features, Hong Kong has never been widely recognised as a destination for ecotourism. But increasingly, international tourists, especially those from Japan and Europe, have started to appreciate what this small city has to offer in terms of natural scenery and ecological resources. Ecotourism can be promoted as a part of tourists’ itinerary to enrich their travel experience during their stay in Hong Kong, even for a very short trip. Moreover, as ecological and traditional cultural resources are usually present together in the rural areas, it makes good sense to consider ecotourism and heritage tourism in a package.
43. With a relatively low initial investment, ecotourism and ecolodges provide opportunities to help generate employment, enhance the local economy and allows room for small operators to grow. Taking Kat O Chau as an example, the fading out of fishing activities has forced the traditional village to turn to tourism. Many old village houses have been substantially renovated in response to tourism demand (SCMP, 2006).

44. The Tourism Commission is promoting green tourism in the Northeast New Territories under the principles of nature conservation and sustainable development. The project in the Plover Cove and Tolo Channel area and Tung Ping Chau includes enhancement of basic facilities, promotion of an island-hopping tour and complementary conservation and educational initiatives. The opening of the Hong Kong Wetland Park in 2006 also provides an important venue for nature watch and education.

45. Concurrently, the Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTB) is also helping with the promotion of ecotourism. For example, in September 2006, it started the Nature Kaleidoscope programme, a six-month pilot scheme under which 160 long-haul tourists were
taken on a half-day junk tour and visit to various nature and cultural attractions, including the old Hakka village of Lai Chi Wo on Tap Mun Chau in Mirs Bay. According to a HKTB spokesman, the tour was well received, pointing to a potential for further growth in this sector. Other efforts of HKTB include publication of promotion pamphlets on green tourism and a guidebook on bird watching.

**Strengths and Opportunities for Ecotourism**

46. Good ecological resources are available in Hong Kong. Our topography and sub-tropical climate provide a wide range of habitats to support a rich variety of flora and fauna. There are more than 3,100 species of vascular plants, of which about 2,100 are native; some 50 species of mammals; 450 species of birds; 80 species of reptiles and more than 20 amphibian species, and 160 species of freshwater fish. Insect diversity is also very high with more than 230 species of butterflies and 110 species of dragonflies (AFCD, 2007a). In addition to rich biodiversity, other undisturbed natural resources include rustic landscape, scenic hills, inshore waters and natural beaches. Most of these resources are well protected as over 40% of the land area in Hong Kong has progressively been designated from the 1970s as country parks or special areas (Jim, 2000).

47. Such resources already support many nature and cultural activities, including snorkeling tours in Sai Kung or Kat O, dolphin watch tours to waters around Lantau and Peng Chau, as well as visits to the Mai Po Marshes Nature Reserve.

48. Although the presence of these resources alone does not give Hong Kong an edge over other locations with even richer natural endowments, our strategic advantage lies in the fact that being such a small city, Hong Kong offers strikingly different forms of tourist activities within a close distance. While our main attractions may still be concentrated in the city centre, we are only a step away from our countryside with most of our natural resources being easily accessible from most urban locations. Thus, promoting ecotourism would not only strengthen Hong Kong’s appeal as an international
destination, but also give tourists more options and a mix of urban and natural/cultural travel experience. Also, offering different services and products to travellers can help diversify risk.

Sai Kung, Hong Kong’s “back garden”, finds a rich variety of flora and fauna

Photo/Hong Kong Tourism Board (2007)
http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/interactive/photolib/index_photo1.html

Mai Po Marshes Nature Reserve, over 60,000 waterbirds including endangered species such as Black-faced Spoonbill have wintered in and around in recent years.

Photo/WWF Hong Kong (2007)

49. Other than promoting ecotourism in Hong Kong to the mass traveller, it may also appeal to those who travel for the sole purpose of enjoying the nature. Compared to many other ecotourism
destinations, Hong Kong can be easily reached through its highly developed network of air services with other major cities in the Mainland and the world. Eco-hotspots elsewhere in the world are usually quite inaccessible, and seldom located so near an international airport. Also, Hong Kong is relatively safe and politically stable compared to many other ecotourism destinations. In addition, as a city equipped with modern amenities, Hong Kong is “friendly” to the amateur ecotourist and those travelling with families.

**Importance of Ecolodges**

50. As noted above, true ecotourism espouses a total experience and a set of responsible behaviour of both the tourist and the operator. Ecolodges, built and operated in accordance with the requisite protocol, are therefore important as they provide the environment to acquire the knowledge and cultivate the behaviour.

51. Overseas surveys also indicate that ecotourists consider it important to stay at an environmentally friendly accommodation, and would be willing to pay a premium for it. Ecolodge development in remote countryside locations can cater for the adventurous, wanderlust and ecologically oriented tourists from overseas countries. However, the present accommodation in most of the rural areas in Hong Kong is “well below the standards of even the most basic expectations of international tourists” (Tourism Commission, 2003). If comfortable ecolodges are built, and quality of interpretive guides and friendly services are provided, there would be potential of creating an alternative niche market.

52. Indeed, while many existing ecolodges in other parts of the world may be very basic and targeted at backpackers, there are also some that are built and designed to luxury standards. In Hong Kong, there is scope to develop either form.

53. Besides economic benefits, ecolodges would bring minimal environmental impact through the use of responsible materials and practices in their day-to-day operation. Often very little
infrastructure is required and if sustainable design and facilities are adopted, impact on the environment, transport and other infrastructures would be kept to minimum. It is also a good way to promote a market for “green” products, such as solar-powered water heaters.

54. Ecolodge development may also help restore the deteriorated environment/landscape. While decline in agriculture in Hong Kong has led to widespread farm abandonment, tensions between landowners’ desire to develop the land and the need to protect these sites very often arise. Over the years, wide tracts of rural land have turned into open storage yards and other incompatible land uses, destroying the character of the rural landscape. However, as open storage uses and rural workshops serve an important supporting role to our port, we do not aim at driving them out completely, but to contain their proliferation and minimise their adverse impacts on the environment and surrounding uses. We believe that implementation of new customs policies\(^2\) in the Mainland could help to reduce demand of port backup land in Hong Kong, and some of these uses are therefore expected to phase out gradually. The tarnished environment then needs to be repaired and ecotourism and ecolodges can serve as one means for restoration by putting in place an environmentally friendly use of the land which can at the same time provide economic incentives to support conservation efforts.

55. Last but not least, ecotourism and ecolodges would contribute to overall sustainable tourism development and conservation in Hong Kong by raising awareness among local communities, stakeholder groups and government officials, and changing public attitudes toward conservation.

\(^2\) New customs policies include relaxation of the “4 up and 4 down” and “1-truck-1-driver” rules, so that an inbound tractor to Mainland is no longer required to carry out the same trailer and container during its outbound journey, and that every cross-boundary freight vehicle can now engage one assigned driver and one back-up driver with the back-up driver permitted to drive any cross-boundary freight vehicle operated by the same enterprise that engages him. Moreover, they also allow establishment of “logistics pipelines”, a designated point-to-point non-stop cross-boundary truck service whereby trucks do not have to stop at the boundary control points because they are pre-cleared at designated points of origin pending deferred clearance upon arrival at designated receiving points and “inland freight villages”, a facility designated for distribution operations and cargo consolidation where cargo can be cleared for import/export outside control points.
Identifying Locations for Ecotourism and Ecolodge Development

56. The priority sites for enhanced conservation included in the new nature conservation policy are possible locations for ecolodge development.

57. Another potential area could be the land to be released from the Closed Area adjoining the boundary with Shenzhen. Over the past few decades, restrictive access has inhibited development, and therefore created valuable habitats within the area. As the opening up of the area would undoubtedly raise expectations on the relaxation of development restrictions, we need to plan carefully for uses of the land to ensure that these valuable ecological resources are safeguarded. The potential for ecotourism at this location would be examined under the ongoing planning study on the Closed Area.

THOUGHTS ON HOW TO TAKE FORWARD

Stepping Up Promotion

58. International demand for ecotourism is growing. However, Hong Kong is rarely considered a destination for nature tours because few travellers know about the availability of ecotourism products. Ecotourism in Hong Kong is still at the very early stage. There is a strong need to enrich knowledge and raise awareness of international tourists by actively promoting our unique ecotourism products and attractions. Nevertheless, demand for ecotourism and ecologdes in Hong Kong is uncertain. More research on the feasibility, especially the financial viability, of ecolodge projects for application in Hong Kong is required, including a more thorough search for possible locations for their development.

Setting Standards

59. For ecolodge development, there should be some standards and guidelines for the facility and operation, making reference to international standards and experiences. We can also devise a mechanism to ensure the standards are maintained.
**Experimenting Through Pilot Projects**

60. Other than undertaking desktop studies, we can, as a start, encourage the application of some of the ecolodge principles on existing accommodations, such as the government-operated youth and family camps in the New Territories to stimulate a “green” culture and public demand for such facilities, thereby supporting growth of private ventures.

61. We can then promote the concept to the community and allow the private sector to take the lead. The Government will take up the role as a facilitator, focusing on removing institutional barriers and providing an environment that is conducive for such development.

62. We recommend that a pilot scheme could be launched to demonstrate how to develop and run an ecolodge. We can identify a site where natural resources as well as distinctive local character and heritage value are found. Conservation of heritage buildings/structures in villages and townships should be encouraged and if possible, can be rehabilitated/restored for ecolodge development to promote cultural tourism to effect synergy of ecotourism and cultural tourism. Reference can be made to the Nanling Zhongheng Ecotourism Development Project and the Crosswaters Ecolodge in Guangdong Province, and the Chalalan Ecolodge in Bolivia.

**Facilitating Public-Private Partnership**

63. It has been said that “ecotourism in Hong Kong will flourish if the private and public sectors work together to educate tourists on what they can discover” (Lew Young, Mai Po reserve manager, Travel Trade Gazette Asia: Singapore, 1999, p. 1). This implies that local communities, non-government organisations (NGOs), the private sector and Government can work together to promote ecotourism.

64. Apart from the exemplary model of Chalalan’s partnership for a community-based ecolodge development, the “Action Model on Sustainable Development in Long Valley” and Green Culture
Island – Peng Chau (detailed at Annex A) also show that sustainable tourism can be effectively achieved through public-private partnership. Both projects contribute to sustainable development, being at the same time environmentally sustainable (preserve the ecological value of the wetland and the island), economically viable (create employment opportunities and generate income for local communities) and socially equitable (strengthen social network/enhance social cohesion).

65. These experiences show that Hong Kong has the capability to develop ecotourism. For the pilot scheme mentioned above, various stakeholders such as NGOs, universities, local communities or even overseas experienced operators/organisations could be invited to undertake its management. This could ensure the first ecolodge development project can meet international standards and provide best practice, thus promoting ecotourism and traditional cultural tourism in Hong Kong.

66. Local NGOs and even private enterprises can also help by training up tour guides on knowledge of the nature and foreign language skills. Other than offering professional introduction of the attractions to visitors, the tour guides can also help educate tourists about environmental and social responsibilities. These are important factors for increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty, and it is particularly true for ecotourism, the marketing of which depends largely on word of mouth. Tourists who return home with enhanced knowledge, pleasant memories, unique experiences and feelings of rejuvenation, would share with family members and friends their travel experiences. This can help to sow the seeds of referral.

**Accessibility Considerations**

67. Though countryside is situated close to our core urban areas, access to some of the most scenic areas is difficult. However, the development of ecolodges, instead of, say, residential units, has the advantage of not requiring very convenient access. Overseas examples indicate that if the facility is reputable, visitors would be
willing to take laborious journeys there, thus limiting the need for road access. However, pedestrian paths and bicycle routes may need to be improved. For the less mobile guests, ecolodges could also operate golf carts or other forms of environmentally friendly transportation for them. For major ecotourism destinations, consideration may be given to developing car/coach parks at the “gateways”, so that visitors can change to walking or cycling as they enter areas of ecological/environmental sensitivity.

**Fire Safety Considerations**

68. Similar to the constraints faced by Small House in rural areas, provision of emergency vehicular access (EVA) may not be possible in remote countryside area due to insurmountable constraints like site constraints, topographical constraints, land ownership constraints, etc. Other than encouraging the use of fire-resistant building materials, the EVA requirements may need to be further examined, perhaps through the setup of an inter-departmental working group. Reference can be made to the Guidelines on Specifications, Installation and Maintenance of Fire Service Installations and Equipment for the new fire safety requirements of the New Territories Exempted Houses which allows for the implementation of alternative fire safety measures such as automatic sprinkler system where construction of EVA is not feasible or practical.

**Sewage and Drainage Considerations**

69. Another consideration is inadequate main sewage or drainage in the countryside. Similar to overseas examples, biological systems will be encouraged rather than the conventional septic tanks. However, in certain parts of the New Territories such as the Deep Bay area where a zero discharge policy is in force, there need to be stringent requirements on any proposals for sewerage treatment and discharge. More thoughts will be required if there should be any development proposal within this area.
CONCLUSION

70. Ecolodges can help support growth of ecotourism in Hong Kong. Ecotourism and ecolodges can promote travellers’ respect for the nature and provide opportunities/venues for environmental education. It would also help strike a balance between conservation and development and contribute to long-term sustainable development. In view of the many advantages, further detailed market analysis and feasibility studies of ecolodge development in Hong Kong would be highly recommended.

Planning Department
October 2007
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Examples of Public-Private Partnership Schemes for Ecotourism Development in Hong Kong

1. The “Action Model on Sustainable Development in Long Valley” is a project funded by the Sustainable Development Fund and carried out by the Conservancy Association (CA). Taking into consideration of the characteristics of the local neighborhood, economy and ecology, the plan aims to improve the environment through engaging the community. Long Valley is the largest single piece of freshwater wetland in Hong Kong. It provides an important habitat for birds and supports a rich biodiversity. There are also several indigenous villages, where many villagers still practise traditional agriculture for a living. CA commenced the project since 2005 and has carried out a number of activities.

2. Local engagement activities including various visits and gatherings (e.g. a kickoff ceremony and Hong Kong Island eco and heritage tours) were organized to strengthen social network within local community. Besides, activities such as rubbish clean up and Mikania removal were organised to enhance both community cohesion and environment. To preserve and enhance the long term ecological value of Long Valley, various actions have been taken: conducting ecological studies and habitat surveys, practising organic farming and providing associated training for farmers, and formulating sustainable development plan. To develop it into a popular community-based ecotourism location, local eco-guide training was provided, ecotours were organised and local organic farm produce was promoted. Other events include maintenance of feng shui wood and associated training; establishment of Long Valley Green Village Market and promotion of Long Valley ecotours and design of more ecotour routes (CSD, 2006a).

3. Another example receiving grants from Sustainable Development Fund is “Green Culture Island – Peng Chau” carried out by Green Peng Chau Association. It is a 2-year project commenced in June 2004 and ended in May 2006. It is a sustainable community development project, which conserves and showcases the tradition and cultural features, protects historical and natural heritage, and
establishes balanced development and a harmonious community (CSD, 2006b).

4. Peng Chau has a very long traditional background and the traditional way of living has been conserved by the indigenous residents. Also, rich biodiversity is available on the island. The island has a great potential to be developed into an ecotourism destination. The Association trained a number of eco-tour instructors who guided over a thousand people from education institutions, NGOs, and the wider community touring Peng Chau (CSD, 2006b). In November 2004, the Association cooperated with local primary schools and their students introducing the ecotourism and sustainable development project in Peng Chau to over 120 teachers from different provinces of China (CSD, 2006b). They also received a group of community administrative personnel from various Southeast Asian countries. Talks were conducted for 20 schools on building the concept of sustainable development through ecotourism. To improve the environment and create job opportunities, organic farming has been encouraged and an Organic Farming Education Centre was opened in 2005.