

Keep the concrete jungle out of our country parks

■ LEADER

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Our country parks are cherished. We should treat them as though they are sacred. Yet this reverence does not appear to be shared by those developing a parcel of private land within the Plover Cove reserve. One of our most pristine, serene places is being despoiled.

What is taking shape on the site is unclear. One of the men behind the plans says HK\$200 million is being put into what will in effect be a park within a park, open to public use. Plans for a giant statue on a hill speak less of a public park than a tourist attraction. The involvement of a property developer and the tearing down of 11 two-century-old Hakka houses so that new ones - or a columbarium - can be built tell a more familiar story for the New Territories.

There's no mystery about the damage that clearing of the land has caused. Bride's Pool, an attraction downstream from the site, has been muddied by runoff water spilling over sandbags. A total of HK\$3,500 in fines has been handed out for the illegal cutting down of 13 trees and driving of vehicles through the country park. It's also clear that for all the talk of the project and the work already carried out, authorities have not given it the go-ahead.

Although this is private land, activity of such a nature is at odds with the need to carefully preserve our country parks. There are strict laws governing use of their trails, attractions and facilities. But there is another reality: that ancestral land within the parks takes up about 2 per cent of their area. The government has consistently shunned calls to buy it back and insisted that mechanisms to control development and police law-breaking are effective.

Such assuredness is unjustified. There have been repeated infringements of laws, sometimes with devastating consequences. Illegal works described by conservationists as "shocking" were discovered in Pat Sin Leng Country Park and on adjacent government land last year; they included a long concrete road, a bridge over a stream and 150 felled trees. A total of 127 trees were illegally cut down in country parks between 2006 and 2008. It's clear that the cavalier and often lawless attitude of some people towards development in the New Territories extends beyond ancestral property to all land, regardless of its zoning.

The presence of country parks doesn't mean that time has to stand still on the private land within them. What is envisaged has to be sensitive to the parks, though; large-scale projects that disrupt wildlife, water catchment areas and serenity obviously aren't what we want or need. Nor do we require parks within country parks that have nicely manicured lawns, snack pavilions and concrete paths - we go to the country parks to escape such traits of our concrete jungle. Whatever is planned has to be firmly within the law and scrupulously monitored.

Penalties aren't harsh enough. The HK\$25,000 maximum fine for cutting down trees and HK\$2,000 for damage, with an additional HK\$100 a day for recurring offences, aren't deterrents when multimillion-dollar projects are in the offing. They are a fraction of what applies in other places, where parkland is held in the highest regard. These need to be reviewed and policing stepped up.

Our country parks are our escape from noise, pollution and stress. Within their 41,582 hectares - 38 per cent of our land area - are the greenery, animals, insects, waterways and other natural features that make hiking, camping and picnicking so enjoyable. Every effort has to be made to preserve them.