

Sai Wan case? I don't know, says minister

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It's not too far as the crow flies from the Sai Kung seafood restaurant where environment minister Edward Yau Tang-wah was having lunch to scenic Sai Wan where a businessman is stripping bare an area behind a pristine beach, but for Yau it could have been half a world away.

"It's on private land, I don't know much about it," Yau said of the site next to the Sai Kung East Country Park where diggers are tearing up land close to Hong Kong's most stunning stretch of coastline. "I am not even sure where it is."

The minister was asked to comment yesterday while hosting a lunch to promote the Hong Kong National Geopark - the boundaries of which actually take in the excavation site on part of the famed Tai Long Wan coast.

Yau's attention at the time was occupied by more esoteric matters - dishes created to represent features of the geopark, including volcanic lava *lao sha pau* (custard buns) and golden hexagonal columns (deep-fried shrimp rolls).

Some of those dishes referred no doubt to the Tai Long Wan coast, which the geopark's website says showcases "a breathtaking coastal landform of volcanic rocks" that has

been "justifiably rated as No1 of Hong Kong's top 10 natural attractions".

Yau said he would look into the work on a 10,000 square metre site where landowner Simon Lo Lin-shing plans to build an organic garden but where villagers say he will in fact build a private lodge with artificial ponds, a tennis court and separate apartment.

Yau did not comment when asked how the government could protect such scenic spots from destruction. His press secretary later clarified that Yau meant he was not fully informed of the details of the case when he said he didn't know much about it.

Green groups said the government was too weak to protect the city's natural landscape and said they were considering a protest against the development.

"The government's conservation policy fails to function. It's a world-class scenic spot but no departments can stop the destruction," said Joe Man Ka-kit, a spokesman for Friends of Tai Long Wan, a group formed by hikers 10 years ago.

Alan Leung Sze-lun, conservation manager of WWF Hong Kong, said such damage could easily be prevented if developers were required to conduct environmental assessments of construction close to country parks or reserves.

Leung said an existing rule regulated development at a certain distance from marine parks and it should be extended to cover land projects close to country parks.

The Environmental Protection Department (EPD) said the project did not need its approval and it had not found any pollution breaches. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department said it could not step in since the work did not spill into the country park. The Planning

Department also has no role to play since the site is not yet covered by any statutory zoning plan.

The Lands Department found unauthorised excavation on government land at unspecified locations, but said the development seemed to be in line with a land lease that allows activities for agriculture purposes.

Leung said the EPD should look into whether the project violated an environmental impact assessment law which says earthworks should be treated as a designated project unless the work is for the purpose of forestry, agriculture or fisheries. A department spokesman said an environment impact assessment was a substantial process requiring time and resources and was "designed primarily for large-scale developments".

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