

Developer halts work on Sai Wan beach site

Developer suspends work on Sai Wan site

Public outcry pays off

Amid strong public pressure, the developer behind the construction of a private retreat at scenic Sai Wan beach says he has decided to suspend the work temporarily until a solution acceptable to all parties is found.

Simon Lo Lin-shing, under fire for despoiling a pristine site, said in a statement last night that "in the interest of maintaining harmony" work would stop from yesterday.

But a conservationist representing nine green groups questioned the sincerity of Lo's decision, as construction of two ponds on the site was already almost complete and said he should go further and restore government land damaged during the work.

It was the first public statement by Lo, chairman of Mongolia Energy Corporation, since a South China Morning Post report last week about the project on Sai Kung's Tai Long Wan coast sparked a public outcry.

"In the past few days, construction work on a plot of land in Sai Wan has caused the expression of differing opinions in the community, and considerable speculation reported in the media, which have created unnecessary disagreements," said Lo, who has been refusing press interviews.

"In the interest of maintaining the prevailing harmony within society, I hereby announce that the construction on the site is to be suspended from Wednesday.

"We will commence discussions with the related departments and organisations in the hope of finding a solution that is acceptable to various parties," he said, without saying what he would do with the site.

Lo bought nearly all the land at the abandoned Sai Wan village at a cost of no less than HK\$16 million and has hired a contractor to convert the site into a private retreat that local villagers say will consist of two artificial ponds, a tennis court and a lodge. Conservationists, lawmakers and others have voiced strong protests, and more than 50,000 people have signed on to a Facebook group that calls for immediate suspension of the work.

Conservancy Association campaign manager Peter Li Siu-man, spokesman for an alliance of nine green groups set up to protect Sai Wan, described Lo's announcement as totally insincere.

He said that during a visit to the site yesterday, workers told him the construction of the two artificial ponds had just been completed and they intended to move out the diggers on Friday.

"No matter what he does now, Lo has to right his wrongs first. To show his sincerity, he had better restore the government site from which he removed vegetation and trashed with the diggers," he said.

Li said Lo had contacted the group to seek a meeting but they felt it was not an appropriate time unless Lo showed "some good gestures or goodwill". He said plugging the zoning loopholes was still necessary to prevent similar incidents.

As the site is not covered by any zoning, the development does not require planning approval.

Environment officials can do nothing as no pollution breaches have been found and the work does not require prior environmental assessment.

Temporary suspension of the work came after news that the area was part of an archaeological site had raised hopes that antiquities officers could step in.

But a spokeswoman for Lo said the company's lawyers said it was not a statutory archaeological site.

A government official familiar with heritage policy said the [Sai Wan](#) site was among 200 archaeological sites across Hong Kong not covered by the Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance.

Under the ordinance no person shall "excavate, carry on buildings or other works ... on or in a proposed monument or monument", including a declared archaeological site, without a government permit.

A spokeswoman for the Antiquities and Monuments Office said the [Sai Wan](#) site was included in an alert system for private developments but the government had not received any development application that would have triggered such an alert.

Since 2008, all public projects have required heritage impact assessment including the impact on archaeological sites. There is no such requirement for private projects.

Recognised as an archaeological site in the 1980s, there were at least two investigations at [Sai Wan](#), in 2000 and in 2001, when a large stone core, believed to be prehistoric, was recovered. North of [Sai Wan](#), the Ham Tin archaeological site is regarded as having high interest, as cultural relics from the late Neolithic and Bronze ages have been found.

The Ham Tin site has been covered by an outline zoning plan that recognised the site's cultural heritage value, while the [Sai Wan](#) site is not protected by any statutory zoning plans.

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Work to stop at Sai Wan site

Excavation work at a controversial Sai Kung site near a protected park will be suspended today amid mounting pressure from green groups and villagers.

Lawmakers, green groups and individuals were outraged when the site at Tai Long Sai Wan was stripped bare by diggers.

A Facebook group protesting the destruction has reached more than 60,000 members since it was discovered.

The site, originally a deserted village, was bought by businessman Simon Lo Lin-shing for HK\$16 million. While Lo claims it is to be developed into an organic garden with public pools, villagers believe he plans to build a private lodge, with artificial ponds and a tennis court.

While the site is surrounded by the Sai Kung East Country Park, it is not a part of it.

A spokesman for Lo issued a statement yesterday saying that work on the Sai Wan site ``created unnecessary disagreements'' from ``differing opinions in the [Sai Kung] community and considerable speculation [from] the media.'' The statement added: ``We will commence discussions with the related departments and organizations in the hope [of finding] a solution that is acceptable [to] various parties.''

An inspection of the site on Monday revealed no serious damage to vegetation despite the extensive excavation work, Secretary for the Environment Edward Yau Tang-wah said.

VERNON NEO

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Save natural treasures

I am saddened by the recent developments near Sai Wan beach.

It is a place I have visited many times as a hiker. Now it is under great threat of being ruined. A businessman has bought a plot of land there and is developing it for his own private pleasure.

In 2005 I visited Sai Wan with a small film crew on an assignment to shoot environmental hot spots in Hong Kong. We were producing it for the visitor centre of a government department.

It was clear all along that Sai Wan was an environmental disaster waiting to happen.

Why wasn't action taken to protect it? The Hong Kong government surely has the financial resources to save these spots from selfish rich individuals? Spots like Sai Wan should be declared a country park. These places belong to all of us.

It also means the same danger is lurking for other important ecological sites, most notably Sha Lo Tung (near Tai Po) with its beautiful old villages that would make a great outdoor museum. The Hong Kong government should act to rescue these natural and cultural treasures and save them for the enjoyment of all.

Kees van Es, Tai Po

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