

## Tsang opens HK's first geopark

Staff Reporter

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The government opened Hong Kong's first geopark on Tuesday as part of a plan to stimulate the local economy, preserve the environment and encourage eco-tourism.

Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen said at an opening ceremony that the geopark reflected two important achievements.

“First, Hong Kong's geological resources are unique and world-class. Secondly, we have in place adequate legal and administrative systems to protect and manage the Hong Kong National Geopark.”

The geopark covers about 5,000 hectares and is made up of eight areas across the Northeast New Territories sedimentary rock region and Sai Kung volcanic rock region.

By joining the national geopark network, Tsang said Hong Kong could preserve geological and topographical resources, promote earth sciences and develop eco-tourism.

“We will re-double our efforts to preserve these special geological features of ours, and promote them to the rest of the world,” the chief executive added.

To celebrate the opening of the geopark, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) will organise a series of

educational activities.

These include guided tours on Sundays and public holidays from November to next March and activities for students at Lions Nature Education Centre in Tsiu Hang, Sai Kung.

The mainland has already opened several geoparks, for example, including in Lushan, Zhongnanshan and Caoling.

## Slice of city named national geopark

Authorities aim for World Heritage status in hunt for eco-tourism dollars

Olga Wong and Adrian Wan

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A 49-square-kilometre tract of some of Hong Kong's most rugged land and seascapes has been designated China's 183rd national geopark in a move that officials hope will boost tourism and lead to World Heritage status as early as next year.

The park boasts one of the world's biggest collections of hexagonal rock columns, formed by volcanic activity, among eight distinctive features.

Speaking at a ceremony, Chief Executive Donald Tsang Yam-kuen said gaining national status meant the city's geological resources were unique and world-class, and that legal and administrative systems to protect and manage the park were adequate.

"I hope that when people think about Hong Kong, they will not only admire our skyscrapers and be attracted to our busy shopping areas, but also the unique geological formations and natural beauty," he said at the ceremony at the High Island reservoir, site of the hexagonal columns.

Recognition follows an application to mainland authorities earlier this year. Next step, the government said, was to seek World Heritage status from the United Nations next year for the park, the two

sections of which stretch from Tung Ping Chau in the north to the Ninepins in the south.

Tourism Board chairman James Tien Pei-chun said the park had great potential to attract visitors but, having spent half an hour travelling from Central, he said transport arrangements needed to be improved to make it easier for people to get there.

"Natural attractions aren't a great source of income, but they diversify the activities for tourists in Hong Kong," he said.

Senior geopark officer Dr Yeung Ka-ming said the park was not very big but was "the largest in the world in terms of the number and the diameter of hexagonal rock columns". The columns were formed 140 million years ago when volcanoes erupted. The volcanoes eventually collapsed, leaving vast depressions called calderas that eroded over millions of years to their appearance today.

The park's features will be covered by three zones - core protection, special protection and comprehensive protection - with different levels of access. Sensitive or hazardous areas will be restricted to boat trips, while hiking trails will be provided in others, such as Tung Ping Chau, Tolo Channel and High and Sharp islands.

Yeung said more work had to be done before an application could be made for the park to join Unesco's network of geoparks. "More than HK\$1 million will have to be spent on finding a competent management team that puts conservation before anything else, and on raising Hongkongers' interest in earth science before we will stand a chance," he said.

No new law was required as the geopark areas would be protected by the Country and Marine Parks Ordinance by next year, Yeung said.

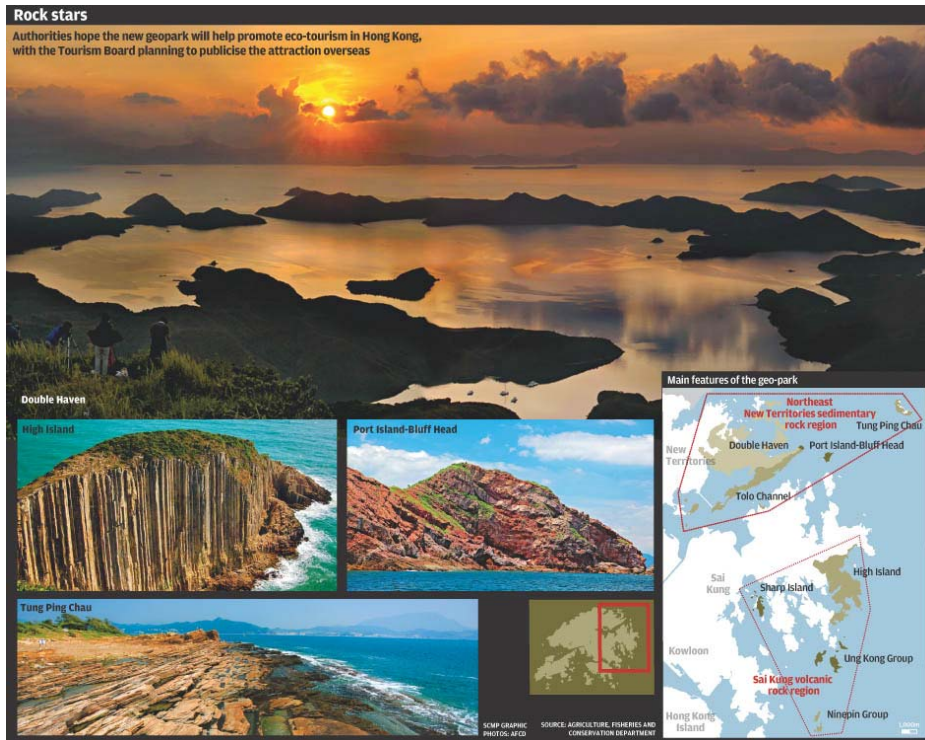
The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department is organising educational activities, including guided tours on Sundays and public holidays, from later this month to March, and "rock classroom" activities will be held for schoolchildren at the Lions

Nature Education Centre in Tsiu Hang, Sai Kung.

Department director Alan Wong Chi-kong said 20 staff would be hired to manage the park and prepare for world geopark status next year. The department had already provided training and guidelines to the tourism sector. "The park offers the city a chance to keep up its international status," Wong said. "Eco-tourism can boost the economy, as a shopping paradise might no longer be attractive enough to mainland visitors."

The Tourism Board will promote the park overseas, including Japan, as the city's eco-tourism attraction.

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A visitor admires a feature of the Hong Kong National Geopark, which was opened yesterday. The park, which covers about 5,000 hectares of rugged land and seascapes, has been designated China's 183rd national geopark in a move that officials hope will boost tourism and lead to World Heritage status as early as next year.

## We can rock the world (if we duck the concrete)

Updated on Nov 06, 2009

Hong Kong is sold to tourists as a city of shopping, eating, excitement and bright lights. They are attractions that serve us well in terms of revenue and filling hotel rooms, but only give a snapshot of what we can offer. Much overlooked is our natural environment, which is generally consigned to the back pages and small print of brochures. In a world that is more than ever conscious about protecting and enjoying nature, the opening this week of our first national geopark was a smart decision.

The night view of Hong Kong Island from the Tsim Sha Tsui promenade is justly promoted as a "must see". Photographs taking in the scenic sweep from The Peak are tourist essentials. Ranking beside them should be the hexagonal rock columns and other geological treasures along the New Territories coast from Sai Kung. They are difficult to get to and therefore little known.

Dedicating the 49 square kilometre region as China's 183rd geopark and pushing for it to get international and UN World Heritage status are sound moves. Its eight distinctive areas contain Hong Kong's oldest and newest volcanic features. Of them, the column wall near the east dam of High Island Reservoir is the most stunning, but beauty and natural wonderment abound in each. Authorities have to move concertedly ahead with plans to make them easily accessible. But better transport links and hiking trails are a double-edged sword

for so unspoilt an area. Tourism requires safety and sanitation. In a geopark, this does not mean restaurants, shops and concrete paths. Efforts to protect and preserve have to be of the essence.

Nature is not viewed by the government as a big revenue earner. Schools do not give it a significant place in their curriculums. Strong international and local promotion of so magnificent an asset as the geopark will change that. With the natural environment and quality of life increasingly taking global centre stage, it is in our interests to make the most of what we have. In doing so, though, we have to take the utmost care not to harm what we have for so long overlooked.