



3 November 2021

**Comments on Northern Metropolis Development Strategy Report
under the Policy Address 2021**

Hong Kong Wetlands Conservation Association (HKWCA) welcomes and supports the proactive approach on wetland conservation proposed under the Policy Address 2021. The measures including resumption of about 700 ha of private wetlands and fish ponds by the Government and creation of three wetland conservation parks with a total of 2000 ha provide ultimate and long term conservation and wise use of these valuable remaining wetlands in the Greater Bay Area not only for biodiversity, but also for the Hong Kong people and the future residents of Northern Metropolis to actively enjoy and make a living.

We also agree with the major functions of these proposed parks which integrates ecological conservation and enhancement, preservation and promotion of modernized aquaculture industry and job opportunities, emphasis of scientific research and opportunities for education and recreation. For aquaculture development, we think how to make traditional pond fish culture sustainable should also be included. After all, traditional pond fish culture is not only an intangible cultural heritage, but also provides good feeding habitat for the water birds including the endangered Black-faced Spoonbills. The future wetland conservation parks will also provide ample opportunities to study and experiment wetlands management and restoration. Similarly, how to design and run effective education/public engagement programme, facilities and materials and how to manage the visitors are worthwhile research topics. Hence, scientific research should be expanded to cover these two areas and the knowledge gained will greatly help the conservation and management of wetlands in GBA and beyond.

At the same time, it is also a substantial challenge to have a comprehensive design and management scheme to achieve these functions. We suggest the government to explore different options of running these parks so as to come up with the most effective structure that can ensure collaboration and co-learning among the varied stakeholders. A partnership spirit will facilitate the formulation of common goals, reaching consensus on the plan and actions, and achieving continual improvement in conserving and managing these valuable wetlands for wildlife and people. In this regard, we think the option of setting a statutory Wetland Trust in accordance with a



respective ordinance should be explored. The merits of this new institution, its pros and cons should be compared with those of commissioning NGOs to run the parks.

We are excited about the creation of an Ecological Habitat Network spanning the wetlands in Deep Bay and Mai Po in the west, to Long Valley Nature Park in the middle and then to the proposed Robin's Nest Country Park in the East. To link the new wetland conservation parks with Long Valley Nature Park, the active agricultural fields and ponds at Ho Sheung Heung/Tsung Yuen and the southwest of Sha Leng should be maintained. These would be prime candidates for the Agricultural Priority Areas mentioned in the New Agricultural Policy and should be seriously considered.

Proper design is essential in long-term sustainability of the wetland conservation parks. The concept of nature reserve zoning stipulated in the national Nature Reserve Regulation and in other countries including Core Zone, Buffer Zone, Experimental/Sustainable Use Zone and Aquaculture Zone should be adopted to achieve a balance among the multi-functions and to provide clarity in their management. For such a large and continuous wetland areas, the outer less sensitive areas can be visited by the people at their leisure.

Below are more detailed comments on the preparatory phase which we think are important to ensure that the planning and implementation of the Northern Metropolis will be on the right track and the multi-year journey will be smooth:

- The Deep Bay wetlands span a large area. How to conserve, manage and restore them for the benefits of biodiversity, society and climate will face many technical issues. There are also key stakeholders with diverse interests. An open and participatory process in which the experts and key stakeholders can work with the Government right from the start is crucial for formulating a strategy and plans that will be embraced by all.
- Gathering existing information on the present situation (biodiversity, hydrology, management, different uses and values, etc.), the historical changes, and future trends (including climate, regional land use, threatened species and habitats) should be carried out as soon as feasible. These should be shared and reviewed with the experts and key stakeholders so that everyone is on the same starting point. The information will form the basis for the planning of the future conservation parks and the entire Deep Bay.



- As there are more than 2000 land titles and 140 fish farmers involved, LandsD and AFCD should work closely together to fast track the lengthy land resumption process. AFCD should evaluate the current conditions of commercial fish ponds, gauge the interests of fish farmers/potential aquaculture operators committed to aquaculture and estimate the extent of aquaculture ponds to be retained. Due to the large areas of fish ponds involved, efforts of not only land resumption but also park design and implementation should be carried out in phases to allow build-up of knowledge and learning by the stakeholders. It would be logical to first focus on the designation and running of one park and then extend to the others.
- It is noted that about 70 ha of fish ponds and rural area in the vicinity of Lok Ma Chau Control Point which are “strategically located and conducive to optimising the spatial layout of I&T land” would be incorporated into the development portion of the San Tin Technopole”. Detailed assessment with mitigation measures should be conducted to address the loss of these fish ponds. The location of this development area should be carefully considered to avoid or minimise ecological impacts such as minimising loss of fish ponds with higher ecological values and fragmentation of the wetlands.

The 2000 ha. of wetlands start at the middle reach of Shenzhen River and extend downstream to the river mouth. The three future conservation parks and the extended Hong Kong Wetland Park each should have a different wetland theme that aligns with the ecology and showcases how the local people have been living in harmony with nature. We would like to share our conceptual ideas on the conservation theme of these parks:

(1) Hoo Hok Wai Wetland Conservation Park

There are extensive areas of freshwater marshes dominated by long vegetation. A limited number of Water buffaloes should be introduced into the marsh to exert appropriate level of grazing in order to diversify the vegetation and make it more attractive to wildlife. Similar habitats in Kam Tin have been destroyed and degraded and it would be exciting to restore such habitat. The water buffalo and freshwater wildlife will also be the attraction to visitors.

(2) Sam Po Shue Wetland Conservation Park

This area consists of extensive fish ponds. Fish pond culture should be the theme of this park, including traditional practices of pond fish culture and modernized



way of raising high value aquatic species. These aquaculture ponds would provide good opportunities for the visitors to gain hands-on educational experience and is an excellent way to build up the brand and markets for the local produce.

For active conservation in the core zone, floating vegetation could be planted in some ponds to create suitable habitat for Pheasant-tailed Jacana and Water Cock to return to breed. Other ponds could be periodically drained to provide feeding habitats for Black-faced Spoonbill, egrets and waders. These will become attractions for bird-watchers and nature lovers.

(3) Nam Sang Wai Wetland Conservation Park

The area has many abandoned ponds now overgrown with reeds and tall vegetation and with less water over the years. These ponds are sandwiched between Kam Tin River and Shan Pui River and can be made into tidal habitats, such as brackish reedbed and brackish ponds. They will be attractive to the migratory birds, bird-watchers and the public.

(4) Hong Kong Wetland Park Extended Area

This area has considerable number of ponds along Deep Bay. Some of these can be restored into tidal mangroves by simply breaking the seaward bund, while others can be turned into *gei wais*. These will diversify the habitats for wildlife, become nature-based solution in carbon removal, and provide biodiversity and cultural attractions to the visitors.

The proactive approach in resuming private land for conservation adopted in the Northern Metropolis development strategy provides a breakthrough in solving the gridlock of conservation versus development over private land of high ecological value. We think this approach should be seriously considered in other cases to achieve win-win for the society.