

The beginning of the end for Hoi Ha Marine Park? Press Release

For immediate release
27 January 2016

The corals in Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park are under attack. Over the past two months around $\frac{1}{4}$ of the reef areas have been wiped out - almost half a square kilometre of Grade-A coral area is no more. The age of the corals in this area was over 70 years old. If this continues then all the corals in the Marine Park could be gone before the end of the year.

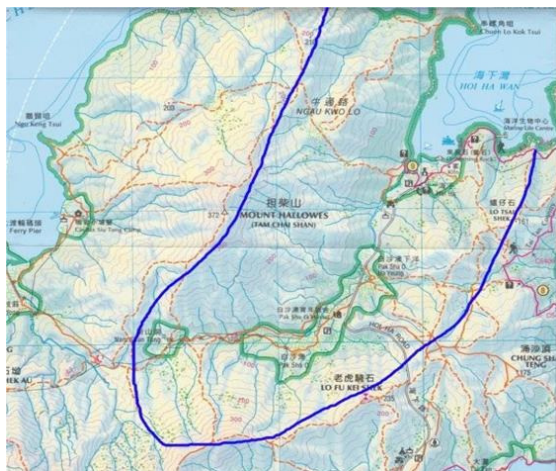


Figure 1: The Pak Sha O River Valley ecosystem. Map courtesy of Lands Department



Figure 2: Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park showing the coral areas
Map courtesy of AFCD

On 18th January survey dives conducted at the coral area of Moon Island and the corresponding coral location opposite, on Flat Island, reported the sad situation that areas that once had ~50% coral cover with 35 different species were totally bio eroded back to boulders. Even the coral skeleton was gone.



Figure 3a: November 2015



Figure 4a: January 2016



Figure 3b: November 2015



Figure 4b: January 2016



Figure 3c: November 2015



Figure 4c: January 2016

This bio erosion was the direct result of urchins grazing on the corals after having been attracted to the Hoi Ha Wan area by the increased algae levels resulting from increased amounts of nutrient. To make matters worse, the massive population of urchins responsible for this were moving further into the marine park towards the other coral areas contained within. The population was measured to be over double the maximum population ever measured in the area - this is not a regular occurrence.

Our 2014 study and subsequent objection to the Hoi Ha Outline Zoning Plan (OZP) produced some solid science that strongly suggested that the Pak Sha O River Valley (PSORV) should be protected. Professional Commons recommended that any village development, if justified, be allowed in an area to the south of Hoi Ha where the environment was less sensitive ecologically and well away from the Hoi Ha Marine Park. The recommendation also stated that the area should be zoned a Comprehensive Development Area (CDA) and the while of the river valley and estuary, the areas of most ecological sensitivity, be zoned Country Park.

Unfortunately, our proposal was not accepted by Town Planning Board (TPB) and parts of the sensitive valley were zoned Green Belt and Village zones in 2014. The comprehensive report from the Professional Commons was the most detailed and comprehensive document on the area, and criticised the TPB for not carrying out any Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) when zoning sensitive Country Park enclaves.

The PSORV is a wildlife corridor that terminates at the river estuary at Hoi Ha. There are many endangered animals using this area, including the critically endangered Chinese Pangolin. Interfering with this area has already disrupted the ecology of the corridor.



Figure 5: Clearance of secondary forest in the flood plain at Hoi Ha village

Figure 6: Clearance of wetland in Pak Sha O for agriculture

The recent clearing of parts of the valley zoned as GB and V zone, in accordance with the OZP and in preparation for significant house building by developers, has shifted a large population of rats, for example, into Hoi Ha Village, as well as allowing more nutrients in the river to flow into the Marine Park. Many of these nutrients come from upstream at Pak Sha O. The recent reintroduction of farming after 25 years absence at Pak Sha O has resulted in more nutrients being monitored at the river estuary. The draft OZP for Pak Sha O, now under representations, not only encourages more agriculture but also massively increases the amount of land available to developers to build up to 49 houses. As most of this zoning for Village and Green belt will occur on the wetlands feeding the Marine Park, we expect the level of nutrients and other pollutants to increase significantly.

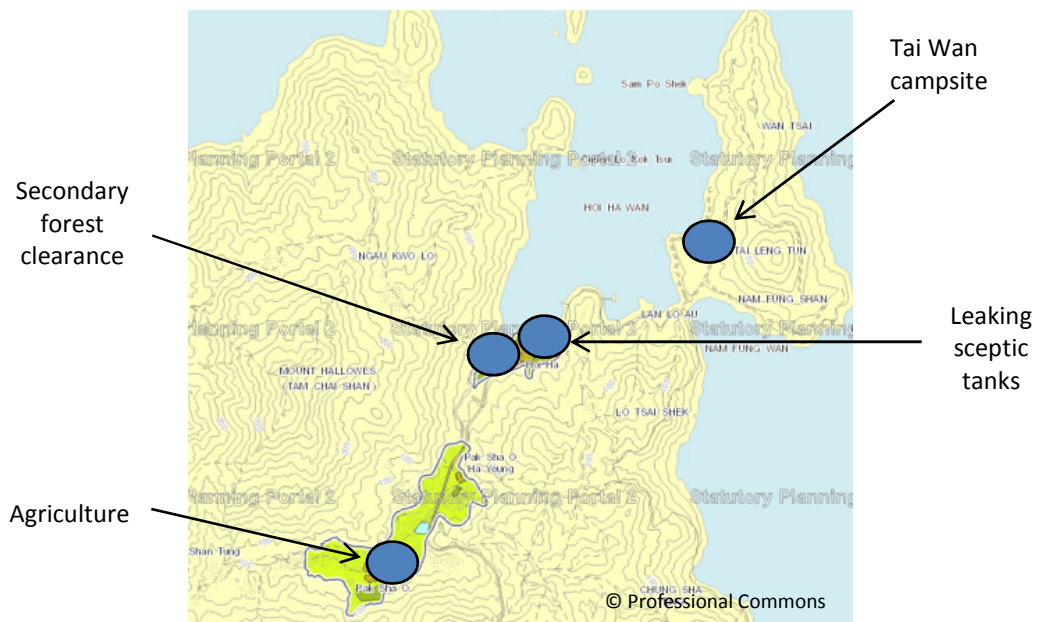


Figure 6: The sources of pollution in Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park. Map courtesy Planning Department

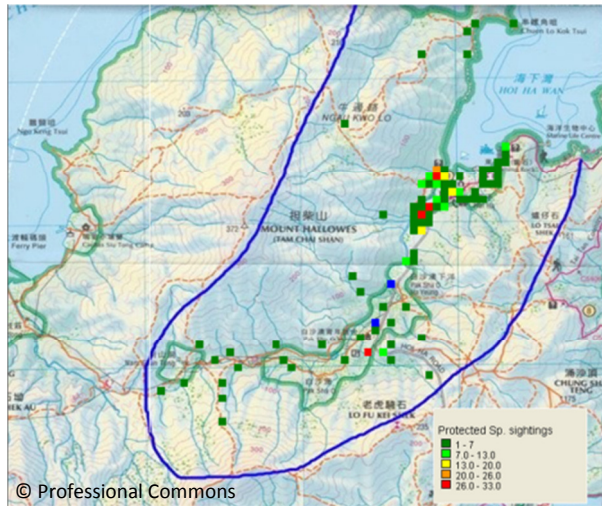


Figure 7: The distribution of endangered species in the Pak Shao O River Valley. Map courtesy Lands Department

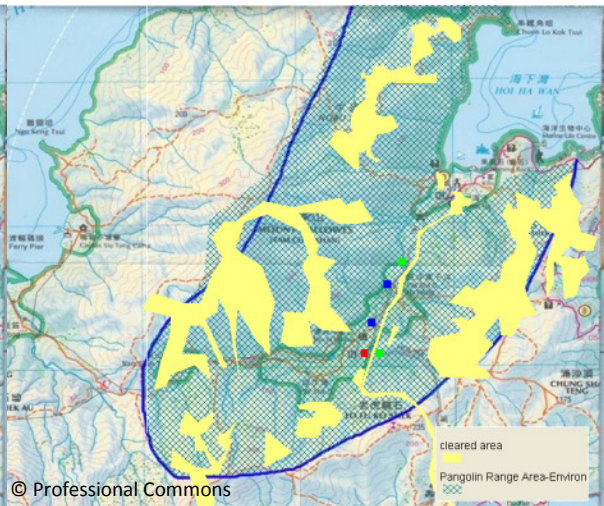


Figure 8: The distribution of critically endangered Chinese pangolin in the Pak Shao O River Valley showing their foraging range. Map courtesy Lands Department

The Professional Commons report also identified impacts on the existing ecology of the Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park. The sewage overflow from current inadequate facilities for the houses along the foreshore, and future New territories Exempted Houses (most of which will be luxurious small houses) allows human pollution to enter the Marine Park. The establishment of a Coastal Protection Area in Hoi Ha has allowed this issue to continue unabated. The building of more houses in the ecologically sensitive areas of Hoi Ha and Pak Sha O will spell doom for the corals and other creatures that are currently protected.

Too many nutrients entering the sea disrupts the ecological balance of bays and inlets. The Hong Kong University also highlighted the problem for the TPB at the Hoi Ha OZP hearings with a totally different set of data collected independently of the Professional Commons. Both the University and the Professional Commons clearly stated that this situation would degrade the Marine Park. As predicted, this is now happening.

Unless the Hong Kong Government gets serious about protecting the special sensitive areas we have as well as the surrounding region that impact those areas, HK will become a barren wilderness without biodiversity or a healthy natural ecosystem. At this time there needs to be a shift away from any form of development inside the country park boundaries. Any permitted development needs to follow a proper EIA that details the impacts to surrounding sensitive receivers and moves proposed building to areas that are not sensitive themselves or will impact sensitive areas.

For us to lose so much coral area in the short time of two months is totally unacceptable. It shows that planning decisions can have a huge impact on the surrounding ecology. It's about time the TPB paid more attention to the serious science and not to the entreaties of developers and landowners.

Professional Commons urges that the relevant government departments, including the Planning Department, and the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, be responsible in comprehensively monitoring and conserving the whole Pak Sha O River Valley and the and Hoi Ha area.