

The Burning Issue



MARIE WOLF
Highway to hell? South Lantau is an oasis, for now

Fury road

Allowing more private cars into South Lantau is angering local citizens and has worrying implications for one of Hong Kong's last green oases. Charles Seymour-Lyttelton takes the road less travelled to get the scoop

Imagine residing comfortably away from the hustle and bustle of the city along a quiet road surrounded by serene countryside. The local community coexists harmoniously with the animals that inhabit the area and the neighbourhood is endowed with fresh air, exciting hiking trails and moderate climate all year round. One would imagine it's the kind of place the Hong Kong government would protect as a park or preserve with legislation, but that's not the case. In fact, for South Lantau, they might just end up doing the opposite.

On December 4 last year, the Transport Department (TD) released a statement allowing the number of tour coaches given permits to enter South Lantau to increase from 30 to 40. That number is on top of the 25 private cars it already issues permits to allowing entrance into the area for leisure and recreational purposes on weekdays (public holidays aside). While this sounds innocent enough, it is

potentially the first step down a darker road. According to numbers posted by the TD in 2015, the goal is to eventually permit 50 coaches and private vehicles respectively. Everything hints that South Lantau will be completely opened to the public.

“Having a public consultation after you have a report does not mean much – it's putting on a show”

Though the matter of increasing the number of cars allowed in an area may seem a small one, it could have huge implications for accelerated development in one of Hong Kong's last peaceful rural areas. For starters, introducing more

traffic requires more parking spaces. Already, effects are being felt and tensions are rising.

Tom Yam Hin-ping, who has lived in Mui Wo for six years and is active in local affairs, tells us, “In Mui Wo alone, there are 150-plus cars parking on the streets illegally every day because we are that short of space. There have been so many that there really is nothing the local police can do about it. Both the previous and current district councillors know about the issue.”

Clearly, the matter is a persistent sore point. The Lantau Development Advisory Committee (LanDAC) has stated in *Time Out Hong Kong* that, “The TD [has] made their own expert assessment on the acceptable scale of relaxation in consideration of the current road conditions, traffic volume and parking facilities.”

The LanDAC First Term Work Report further elaborates that “the TD expected to provide more than 100 additional parking spaces in Tai

O, along South Lantau Road, and Mui Wo in 2016’.

The convener of Save Lantau Alliance (SLA), Eddie Tse Sai-kit, cites more than a few risks to the environment by allowing more cars into the area, chief among them road capacity strain issues. “The South Lantau Road is rather narrow because it was only laid to build the reservoir. Simply put, two cars cannot go past each other simultaneously in opposite directions because it is so narrow,” he explains. “If it is completely opened up, it would put even more strain on the existing traffic issue. There will be requests to expand the road, further destroying the environment and the country culture of Lantau.”

Tse goes on to discuss the potential trouble with existing permits, saying that applications for additional permits in February were all snapped up in less than an hour. “We suspect this might be organised by some form of agency, such as a taxi company. If quotas are dominated by a certain company, complaints about a monopoly could arise. To solve the problem, the government will introduce [a larger] quota. This phenomenon is basically creating illusionistic demand to legitimise an excuse to develop South Lantau Road.”



MARIE WOLF
The vanguard
Eddie Tse, convener of Save Lantau Alliance

LanDAC disputes the theory proffered by Tse. In an earlier statement to us they replied, “We consider that the current scale of relaxation of closed roads in South Lantau will not generate negative impacts on the environment and the natural habitats.” They further point out that these policies are perfectly in line with the Chief Executive's policy address from January last year.

Tse is scathing in his criticism of the peculiarities influencing development in Lantau. “It is rarely the case that the development of a region employs having an advisory committee give suggestions and advice. Other projects such as North East New Territories and Hung Shui Kiu New Development Areas have not been like this.” He goes on, “Only the development of Lantau has employed such a format. I think this has bypassed all of the existing consultation mechanisms. I mean, they are not particularly useful anyway, but to completely bypass them takes the issue to an entirely new level.”

Yam reckons that LanDAC is merely a cheering team for the Chief Executive's decisions, blindly supporting him. After all, in

LanDAC's own words the institution was established to, “Advise the government on the social and economic development opportunities on Lantau with a view to capitalising on the benefits brought by major infrastructure projects in the area and the synergy between Hong Kong and the PRD [Pearl River Delta] so as to meet the long-term development needs of Hong Kong.”

One cannot help but feel the frustration of local residents and those who are trying to protect the island's natural environment. Tse recalls, “This is not the first time that the suggestion of relaxing traffic control has been raised. The Transport Department and Planning Department have been firm in the past that South Lantau Road should not be opened up.” The change in attitude of the relevant departments is as mystifying as it is worrying.

Both Tse and Yam highlight that this is very different to what the government suggested in 2007, when conservation appeared the prime concern regarding development in Lantau. Yam remembers, “In 2007, the Lantau Development Task Force held 22 meetings with different groups and stakeholders.

We actually had discussions, nine press conferences and more than 540 reports before finalising the Lantau Development Concept Plan.”

To put this into perspective, there has been no public consultation by LanDAC before their first and only report to date. “Having a public consultation after you have a report does not mean much – it's putting on a show,” scoffs Yam. “In these ‘public consultations’, there are maybe several hundred people in the hall. [The government] present their ideas with a PowerPoint, then they randomly pick someone by drawing lots to express what they think for one or two minutes. There may be 40 to 50 people who could speak, but it is never a conversation, and you can hardly achieve anything with this sort of consultation.”

“To protect Lantau has been very difficult, as there are no victims like during an eviction to create noise,” sighs Tse. To open up South Lantau Road could be a slippery slope. Introducing more traffic on to a road that can't sustain it invites development of the road, encouraging higher levels of traffic and further expansion, thus creating a damaging cycle of continuous development.

Perhaps we in Hong Kong are in some way to blame. As urban blocks become ever more stifling, Lantau has increasingly become a place for Hongkongers to escape the bustle of city life and spend some quiet time closer to nature. But even if the public consultation turns out to be a stunt, local residents are determined to use their voices to make a difference and maintain Lantau for the future.

If you'd like to speak up on the development of Lantau, visit **LanDAC's Public Engagement Exercise** at landac.hk.

Do you have an opinion? Get in touch with us at letters@timeout.com.hk



Creative learning
LanDAC's Strategic Traffic and Transport Infrastructure Concept linking Lantau to the rest of HK

Road rage



0
public consultations before announcing the increase in cars allowed in South Lantau



1,773
Of the 1,929 replies to the survey Save Lantau organised, this many believe that South Lantau Road has no capacity to put up with extra vehicles



86.11%
of replies to the same survey are against the Government's plan to open up South Lantau Road



0
members of LanDAC are elected by the public



0
There are this many permanent barriers to check vehicle permits



265
At least this many cattle and buffaloes live on South Lantau Road