BEYOND NATURE TOURISM

Building High-Integrity Ecotourism to Support Nature-based Solutions

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HONG KONG 2050 IS NOW

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Designer: DESIGNORM

About Civic Exchange: Civic Exchange is an independent Hong Kong public-policy think tank established in 2000. We use in-depth research and dialogue to inform policy and engage stakeholders on addressing environmental and development challenges in Hong Kong. Our research covers four areas that make up a liveable city: environmental, economic, social, and governance. Civic Exchange has been ranked among the top 50 environmental think tanks in the world by the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania since 2011. For more information, please visit: civic-exchange.org

About Hong Kong 2050 is Now: Hong Kong 2050 is Now is a flagship programme under Civic Exchange, and was established jointly with the World Resources Institute, ADM Capital Foundation, and RS Group in 2019, with the aim of mobilising action to transition Hong Kong towards long term carbon neutrality by mid-century. For more information, please visit: hk2050isnow.org

About The Nature Conservancy Hong Kong (TNC): TNC is a global conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We are tackling climate change, conserving lands, waters and oceans at an unprecedented scale, providing food and water sustainably and helping make cities more resilient. TNC is working to make a lasting difference around the world in 83 countries and territories (39 by direct conservation impact and 44 through partners) through a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. TNC has been in Asia Pacific for over 30 years with projects in Australia, mainland China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands. In 2019, TNC was awarded the Lui Che Woo Prize for Sustainable Development.

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Forewords

Professor
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Core Team Member, UNEP's Overshoot Report
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The facts are clear and unavoidable. At current rates, human-induced warming will reach 1.5°C around 2030. Every additional fraction of a degree of warming will intensify risks to communities, economies and ecosystems. Deep and sustained emissions reductions remain essential, but they must be accompanied by the removal of already emitted greenhouse gases as well as urgent efforts to protect biodiversity, restore ecosystems and strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity.

Tourism both affects and is affected by this changing climate. Poorly managed visitor growth can place further pressure on vulnerable landscapes, coastlines and communities. At the same time, extreme heat, stronger storms, flooding, sea-level rise and ecosystem degradation can damage the natural assets upon which ecotourism depends, disrupt access and operations, increase business costs and threaten local livelihoods. The necessary removal of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere may also have implications for tourism if poorly planned and executed by affecting biodiversity and undermining food and water security. Building resilience and establishing a duty of care is therefore both an ecological and an economic imperative.

High-integrity ecotourism can contribute to this response by directing visitor activity and revenue towards climate action, conservation, ecosystem restoration, environmental stewardship and community livelihoods. This requires more than promoting natural attractions. Ecological and climate risks must guide tourism decisions, benefits must be shared fairly, conservation revenue must be transparently reinvested, and outcomes must be monitored over time.

Hong Kong's exceptional biodiversity, wetlands, coastlines, country and marine parks, and traditional communities provide a strong foundation for demonstrating this approach. Beyond Nature Tourism proposes a practical pathway through three demonstration destinations, supported by ecological baselines, carrying-capacity management, community participation and adaptive governance.

Ecotourism cannot substitute for emissions reduction or wider climate action. Properly designed, however, it can help sustain the ecosystems, communities and businesses upon which long-term resilience depends—and demonstrate how tourism can become an active partner in bold climate action and nature's protection and recovery.

Professor
Wong Kam-sing, GBS, JP

Former Secretary for the Environment,
Hong Kong SAR Government (2012-2022)

During my ten years as Secretary for the Environment, Hong Kong laid important foundations for biodiversity conservation and countryside conservation stewardship, including the launch of its first Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (BSAP) in 2016 and the establishment of the Countryside Conservation Office in 2018. That experience reinforced a lesson: protecting nature and cultural heritage requires more than designating protected areas. Lasting progress depends on coordinated policy, management, community participation and long-term stewardship.

Hong Kong's country parks, wetlands, coastlines, marine environments and rural villages provide a foundation for nature- and culture-based experiences. Yet tourism does not become ecotourism simply because it takes place in nature or heritage sites. Without careful planning and management, visitation can place excessive pressure on ecosystems, infrastructure and local communities.

High-integrity ecotourism begins with the ecological and community conditions to be conserved, then designs visitor access around them. Managed well, it can strengthen environmental education, support local livelihoods and generate resources for conservation and restoration. It can also support Nature-based Solutions by connecting people with nature and reinforcing stewardship.

Hong Kong has strong and developing capabilities in architecture, building and planning, conservation and research, digital technology and engineering, finance, green infrastructure, and hospitality. The challenge is to connect these strengths, from destination assessment and community engagement to visitor management, monitoring and conservation reinvestment, with synergistic efforts, coordinated responsibilities, science-based decisions, and transparent accountability.

This report offers a pathway. Its five strategic priorities, three proposed demonstration destinations and shared readiness process provide a way to test what works in Hong Kong. Success should be judged by ecological integrity, community benefits and long-term management capacity, as well as visitor and economic outcomes.

As Hong Kong develops its first Five-Year Plan for 2026–2030 and implements the *Hong Kong BSAP 2035*, this report provides a reference for coordinated action. The task now is to demonstrate how ecotourism can support conservation, communities and long-term stewardship across Hong Kong.

Abbreviation

AFCD	Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
BSAP	Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CCO	Countryside Conservation Office
CEDD	Civil Engineering and Development Department
CPP	Coastal Protection Park
CSTB	Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau
ECR	Ecological Conservation Redline
EEB	Environment and Ecology Bureau
GBA	Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area
GSTC	Global Sustainable Tourism Council
HKNbSDG	Hong Kong Nature-based Solutions Design Guidelines
HKTB	Hong Kong Tourism Board
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KMGBF	Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
KPI	Key performance indicator
MA	Management Agreement
NbS	Nature-based Solutions
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NNCP	New Nature Conservation Policy
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
TIES	The International Ecotourism Society
UN	United Nations
WCP	Wetland Conservation Park
WCPA	World Commission on Protected Areas

Glossaries

Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (BSAP): A strategic blueprint for identifying priorities, setting strategies, as well as outlining actions for supporting biodiversity conservation. City-level BSAPs can also assist in translating national and international biodiversity goals, including those of the CBD, into implementable actions at the local level[1].

Carrying capacity: The level and type of visitor use that a site can accommodate without causing unacceptable ecological, social, physical, or managerial impacts. Rather than representing a fixed number of visitors, carrying capacity is a context-specific concept that depends on the characteristics of the site, management effectiveness, and the thresholds of acceptable change. In ecotourism, it is used to guide visitor management and ensure that tourism remains compatible with long-term conservation objectives[2].

Ecological Civilisation: A visionary ideology in which human systems such as economics, agriculture, education, production, and consumption are structured to promote the wellbeing of both people and the planet. It represents a shift towards a more sustainable, equitable, and harmonious society that works within ecological limits. Central to this philosophy is the principle that 'lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets' (綠水青山就是金山銀山), recognising that healthy ecosystems are not barriers to development but fundamental assets that underpin long-term economic prosperity, human wellbeing and sustainable development[3].

Ecological Conservation Redline (ECR): A national spatial planning and ecological conservation policy in China that identifies ecologically important and environmentally sensitive areas requiring strict protection to safeguard ecological security. ECRs encompass areas with critical ecosystem functions, such as water conservation, biodiversity conservation, soil and water retention, windbreak and sand fixation, and coastal ecological stability, as well as ecologically fragile areas that are highly vulnerable to degradation. They serve as the ecological bottom line for development by defining areas where ecological protection takes precedence over incompatible land use[4].

Ecological integrity: The condition of an ecosystem in which its biodiversity, ecological processes, and natural functions are maintained, allowing it to remain resilient and continue providing ecosystem services despite environmental change and human pressures. Protecting ecological integrity means ensuring that human activities remain within ecological limits so that ecosystems can continue to function and recover over the long term[5].

Ecotourism: Building on internationally accepted principles, Civic Exchange defines ecotourism, for the purposes of this report, as responsible, nature-based tourism that safeguards biodiversity and cultural heritage; meaningfully involves and benefits local communities; generates local economic value; promotes education and action for nature; and delivers measurable positive environmental and sociocultural outcomes.

Hong Kong Nature-based Solutions Design Guidelines (HKNbSDG): The HKNbSDG provides practical guidance for integrating NbS into the planning and design of Hong Kong's infrastructure works and development projects. Drawing on international, national and local guidance while reflecting Hong Kong's ecological and urban context, it seeks to balance development with ecological conservation and strengthen climate resilience and urban sustainability. Its three principles are promoting ecosystem diversity at multiple scales, enabling mutually beneficial human–nature coexistence, and improving resilience through NbS[6].

IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions: An internationally recognised framework for designing, implementing, assessing, adapting and improving NbS. Its 8 criteria and 27 indicators address societal challenges, intervention scale, biodiversity outcomes, economic feasibility, inclusive governance, trade-offs, adaptive management, and long-term sustainability and mainstreaming. Supported by a self-assessment tool, the Standard helps governments, businesses, practitioners and communities identify gaps, manage environmental and social risks, strengthen project credibility and support the responsible scaling of effective interventions[7].

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF): Adopted at COP15, the KMGBF sets out four goals and 23 targets to be achieved by 2030 to halt and reverse biodiversity loss. Its mission is to put nature on a path to recovery by conserving and sustainably using biodiversity, ensuring fair and equitable benefit-sharing, and mobilising the means of implementation[8].

Nature-based Solutions (NbS): Actions that protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural and modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously benefiting people and nature. They have the potential to make an essential contribution to reaching net-zero CO2 globally by around 2050, alongside other decarbonisation strategies[9].

Nature positive: A global societal goal defined as 'halt and reverse nature loss by 2030 on a 2020 baseline, and achieve full recovery by 2050,' in line with the mission of the KMGBF[10].

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Executive summary

Beyond nature tourism

Hong Kong has a timely opportunity to develop ecotourism as a high-value visitor economy that strengthens its natural and cultural assets without placing additional pressure on nature. The city has exceptional biodiversity for its size, including **more than 3,300 vascular plant species, over 580 bird species**[11] and 84 hard coral species . Its 25 country parks, 8 marine parks, internationally important wetlands, islands, coastlines and rural villages provide an unusually concentrated range of natural and cultural assets within a highly accessible city. Covering around 40% of Hong Kong's land territory, country parks received **around 11 million** visits in 2024, demonstrating sustained public demand for nature-based recreation[12].

This opportunity is especially timely. Hong Kong is formulating its **First Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (2026–2030)**, aligned with the National 15th Five-Year Plan. The policy directions under consultation bring tourism, biodiversity protection, green transition, community engagement, country and marine park management, and Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area co-operation into the same implementation window[13]. **Tourism Blueprint 2.0** also advances 'Ecology + Tourism,' quality over quantity and sustainable tourism[14]. While the **Hong Kong Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (BSAP)** 2035 explicitly promotes sustainable ecotourism alongside restoration, community participation, and biodiversity finance[15].

Three initiatives at different stages make this policy window practical: **Sharp Island** is an existing visitor hotspot and the site of a proposed marine park; **Sam Po Shue Wetland Conservation Park (WCP)** is planned but not yet operational; and the **Coastal Protection Park (CPP) at Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai** is proposed. Together, they offer an opportunity to test a coordinated approach across an existing high-pressure destination, a new conservation destination, and a complex land–sea corridor.

However, attracting more visitors to natural areas is not enough. **Visiting nature is not necessarily ecotourism**. Without careful planning and management, increased visitation can damage the ecosystems and communities that make destinations attractive. Habitat disturbance, erosion, waste, congestion, and pressure on local communities can all increase, particularly when social media rapidly transforms little-known places into visitor hotspots. Tourism may generate economic activity, but without clear **ecological objectives, active visitor management, and reinvestment in conservation**, it may deliver little lasting value for either nature or people.

The central task is therefore not simply to promote Hong Kong's natural landscapes. It is to **build a system in which conservation defines the conditions for tourism, communities participate meaningfully, financial responsibilities are visible, and evidence determines whether activities should proceed, adapt, remain limited or stop**.

Ecotourism to support Nature-based Solutions

Building on internationally accepted principles, Civic Exchange defines ecotourism, for the purposes of this report, as **responsible, nature-based tourism that safeguards biodiversity and cultural heritage; meaningfully involves and benefits local communities; generates local economic value; promotes education and action for nature; and delivers measurable positive environmental and sociocultural outcomes**.

Ecotourism is not an NbS in itself, but it can serve as a financing mechanism for NbS. The underlying intervention must protect, sustainably manage or restore a natural or modified ecosystem while addressing a societal challenge and delivering benefits for people and biodiversity[16]. The visitor model is then designed to support that intervention, for example, by generating resources for conservation and monitoring, creating livelihoods that strengthen stewardship, enabling professionally supervised research or citizen science, guiding visitor access and behaviour, and building public support for long-term protection.

This distinction matters at the three proposed demonstration destinations. At **Sharp Island**, the underlying NbS would be the protection and sustainable management of coral and coastal ecosystems. At the planned **Sam Po Shue WCP**, it would be wetland conservation and ecological enhancement alongside sustainable aquaculture. Across the **proposed CPP**, it would be the protection, restoration and sustainable management of a connected coastal landscape. **Visitor experiences should be designed around these outcomes, rather than treated as the intervention itself**.

The report's vision is **high-integrity ecotourism**: tourism that operates within carrying capacity, delivers measurable conservation outcomes, provides meaningful learning and enables local communities to participate in, and benefit from destination development. The **CLEAN tool** describes what this should deliver:

CLEAN is a communication tool, not an assessment framework. It provides a shared lens for designing and assessing high-integrity ecotourism: safeguarding cultural heritage, involving and benefiting local communities, generating lasting economic value, translating education into action, and delivering measurable nature-positive outcomes.

1. **Culture:** Protect and celebrate Hong Kong's cultural heritage, traditional villages and local identity alongside its natural landscapes.

2. **Local Communities:** Enable communities to participate as partners, decision-makers, storytellers, operators, and beneficiaries through stewardship, local enterprise, sustainable livelihoods, and shared prosperity.

3. **Economic Value**: Develop financially viable models that retain more value locally, support community-led and small-scale enterprises, and reinvest value in communities, conservation and restoration.

4. **Action through Education:** Strengthen environmental literacy through interpretation, citizen science, and immersive experiences.

5. **Nature-Positive:** Protect ecological integrity and deliver measurable contributions to biodiversity and ecosystem resilience.

Carrying capacity must guide tourism development

The report's first central finding is that **ecological planning must come before tourism planning**. Scenic appeal or visitor demand should not determine where tourism is promoted. Planning should begin with territory-wide mapping and structured assessment of ecological sensitivity, conservation value, existing visitor pressure, community, and cultural context, access, infrastructure, and management capacity. Locations can then be classified as unsuitable, requiring restoration or further study, appropriate only for restricted access, or potentially suitable for controlled ecotourism.

For potentially suitable destinations, **carrying capacity should determine the acceptable level, type, timing, and distribution of visitor use**. Carrying capacity is not a fixed daily quota. It is an adaptive management envelope reflecting the interaction between:

1. Ecological conditions
2. Physical infrastructure
3. Visitor experience and community tolerance
4. Management and enforcement capacity

The most constrained dimension, not an average of strong and weak performance, should set the acceptable level of use. Capacity may also change with breeding seasons, weather, habitat quality, visitor behaviour, and available management resources.

A shared assessment should then convert evidence into enforceable operating conditions. Before major visitor infrastructure, official promotion or commercial expansion proceeds, each destination should:

1. **Screen ecological suitability.** Assess conservation value, ecological sensitivity, vulnerability and existing pressures. The assessment should distinguish areas suitable for general access, controlled or guided access, and exclusion.

2. **Establish baselines and desired conditions**. Collect ecological, visitor-use, community, infrastructure and management data. Define the conservation or NbS intervention and measurable outcomes for people and nature.

3. **Assess carrying capacity**. Consider ecological, physical, social and managerial capacity together. The most constrained dimension—not an average of strong and weak performance—should determine the acceptable level and pattern of use.

4. **Translate evidence into managed access.** Establish site-specific zoning, routes, activity conditions, group sizes, booking or timed-entry requirements, permits, guide requirements, seasonal restrictions or closures. Controls should be proportionate to ecological risk and management capacity.

5. **Confirm legal and enforcement readiness.** Map the statutory, administrative and contractual mechanisms applying to the destination; identify the authority responsible for each control; and confirm that zoning, entry, movement, activities, commercial operations, temporary closures and consequences for non-compliance can be enforced before a controlled visitor activity, substantial commercial expansion or official promotion proceeds.

6. **Confirm delivery readiness**. Designate a lead body, establish community participation, operating rights and benefit-sharing arrangements, set operator requirements, secure a full-cost operating and reinvestment plan, develop a code of conduct, and assign responsibility for monitoring, maintenance, enforcement and reporting.

7. **Monitor and adjust.** Establish indicators, early-warning thresholds, mandatory-intervention thresholds, named data owners and agreed responses before launch. Results should be able to reduce, redirect, pause or stop activities, as well as support carefully phased expansion.

The recommended management sequence is:
Ecological sensitivity > carrying capacity > zoning > managed access > legal and enforcement > monitoring > adaptive adjustment

By following this sequence, Hong Kong can move from responding to ecological damage after it occurs to preventing unacceptable impacts before they arise. Readiness does not mean maximising visitor access. It means **maintaining the ecological, operational and institutional capacity to manage the access that is allowed**.

A high-value, low-impact economy

The report's second central finding is that **high-integrity ecotourism must be commercially viable without becoming volume-led**. Success should be measured by **the value created for nature, communities and visitors, not simply by visitor numbers**. A high-value, low-impact economy could combine several models:

1. **Premium nature experiences**, generating greater value through small-group tours, specialist guiding, and carefully managed accommodation.

2. **Community-based ecotourism,** enabling villages and local enterprises to benefit through guiding, accommodation, food, locally authored cultural interpretation, and other services.

3. **Conservation tourism**, where visitor spending supports habitat restoration, biodiversity monitoring, citizen science, and stewardship.

4. **Volunteer tourism**, providing professionally supervised opportunities to contribute to research, conservation, and environmental education without replacing professional conservation work or paid local employment.

These models are complementary. A destination may combine several approaches to diversify local income and create a richer visitor experience, provided each activity remains within site-specific ecological and managerial limits. Commercial success also depends on the **complete visitor journey**, from discovery and booking to transport, guiding, safety, hospitality, responsible conduct, and engagement after the visit.

Communities and responsible operators must be treated as delivery partners. Participation should begin before destination concepts and commercial arrangements are finalised, with clear decision-making, benefit-sharing, and concern-resolution mechanisms. Capacity building should connect to real opportunities such as operating rights, procurement, employment, leases, joint ventures, and service agreements. Site-specific competency and operating requirements should cover ecological knowledge, socially and environmentally responsible practices, group management, safety, interpretation, visitor conduct, and reporting. Community organisations and smaller operators may also require shared support for business planning, legal and procurement advice, guide development, interpretation, marketing, and booking systems.

Evidence from Hong Kong and international practice points to four wider lessons. **Management must keep pace with visitor demand; destinations need a named body able to coordinate the complete visitor journey; communities should shape both the story and the value created; and conservation finance must be designed into**

the operating model rather than left to goodwill. The cases in the technical report provide mechanisms to adapt, not complete models to copy.

Tourism revenue must therefore be deliberately connected to conservation. Each destination should prepare a full-cost plan covering preparation, infrastructure, operation, monitoring, maintenance, enforcement, and habitat management. The respective roles of public funding, commercial revenue, visitor and operator contributions, philanthropic finance, and other sources should be transparent. **Agreed shares of tourism value should be reinvested in conservation and local communities**, with annual public reporting on revenue, costs, conservation expenditure, community benefits, and remaining funding gaps.

From fragmented initiatives to a coordinated delivery system

Hong Kong already possesses many of the ingredients needed for high-integrity ecotourism: protected-area legislation, biodiversity policies, conservation organisations, community initiatives, academic expertise, infrastructure capability, digital services, finance, and a capable tourism sector. The principal gap is not a lack of natural attractions or individual projects. It is the **absence of a destination-level system connecting ecological authority, visitor management, community participation, commercial delivery, monitoring, and conservation finance**.

This report proposes a coordinated **'Ecology + Tourism' initiative** within Hong Kong's wider NbS agenda. It would strengthen and connect existing institutions rather than create a parallel system. A cross-bureau mechanism and coordinating secretariat would provide policy direction and programme oversight. Ecological authorities would retain control over site suitability and acceptable conditions. **One lead body would coordinate delivery at each destination**, supported by a clear responsibility matrix and independent technical review. **Shared responsibility must not become blurred responsibility.**

The approach would be tested through **three complementary demonstration destinations**:

Table 1.
Proposed demonstration destinations: roles and core questions

Destination	Demonstration role	Core question
Sharp Island (existing site)	Strengthen an existing, high-pressure destination	Can ecological conditions, visitor flows, and operator practices be managed together in a popular open-access setting?
Planned Sam Po Shue WCP	Design the complete system before operation	Can conservation, aquaculture, education, community participation, visitor use, and finance be planned as one model?
Proposed CPP at Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai	Coordinate a landscape-scale land-sea corridor	Can zoning, traditional livelihoods, restoration, recreation, and multiple responsible bodies work through one coherent approach?

The demonstrations should not be promoted simply as three new attractions. Each should have a defined boundary, NbS intervention, intended outcomes, code of conduct, lead body, preparation budget, and decision question. Common principles and data definitions would enable learning across the portfolio, while baselines, thresholds, and operating arrangements remain site-specific. **A useful result may be expansion, redesign, continued limited access or a finding that an activity is unsuitable.** Each outcome would strengthen future decisions.

The proposed system is organised around **five mutually reinforcing priorities**.

1. Establish integrated governance and an enabling policy environment

Government should establish a dedicated **'Ecology + Tourism' initiative** through an appropriate cross-bureau mechanism, supported by a coordinating secretariat, consolidated budget and five-year work programme. A published **responsibility matrix** should distinguish policy coordination, ecological authority, destination delivery, technical review, monitoring and enforcement. **Each demonstration destination should have a lead body** with representation from the departments and organisations responsible for infrastructure planning and delivery, conservation, visitor management and day-to-day site operations. **CSTB and the Tourism Commission** should

coordinate visitor products, operator capacity building and marketing, while EEB and AFCD retain ecological authority. AFCD and other competent authorities should enforce applicable controls, destination leads should coordinate implementation and day-to-day compliance, and an independent technical panel comprising representatives from academia, civil society and local communities should provide advice and review evidence without replacing statutory decision-making.

2. Build a science-based and digitally enabled management system

Government should establish an assessment and management system that converts ecological, community and operational evidence into site-specific access conditions and adaptive action. An initial inventory should distinguish unsuitable or highly sensitive areas, restricted-access sites, locations suitable for controlled visitation and existing biodiversity hotspots requiring stronger management, while an ecotourism guideline should apply to new or substantially expanded initiatives receiving public support, statutory approval or official promotion. Every demonstration presented as an NbS should define measurable outcomes for people and nature, apply the HKNbSDG throughout planning and delivery, and complete the IUCN Global Standard for NbS self-assessment before approval and at subsequent review points. Ecological and community baselines, desired conditions and assessments of ecological, physical, social and managerial capacity should inform zoning, routes, group limits, operator conditions, bookings, permits and seasonal restrictions or closures. Digital tools should support monitoring and reporting, with trigger and mandatory-intervention thresholds, named data owners and agreed responses established before operations begin.

3. Develop a network of high-integrity demonstration destinations

Implementation should begin with a small portfolio of diverse destinations rather than territory-wide expansion. Sharp Island, the planned Sam Po Shue WCP and the proposed CPP provide three distinct settings in which to demonstrate and refine the high-integrity ecotourism model. Each destination should have a demonstration brief defining its boundary, NbS intervention, intended outcomes, code of conduct, lead body, preparation budget and priority decision question. The HKNbSDG should guide planning and delivery, while the IUCN Global Standard for NbS self-assessment should be completed before launch and at formal review points. Integrated plans should cover ecological safeguards, access, communities, operators, infrastructure, finance, monitoring, maintenance and enforcement. Controlled activities should begin only where readiness requirements are met, with demonstrations sequenced so that early lessons inform later designs. After at least one complete ecological and tourism cycle, each destination should publish an evidence-based decision to continue, modify, restrict, expand or stop, with wider application proceeding only where conditions support it.

4. Enable a high-value, low-impact ecotourism economy

Hong Kong should invest in people as well as places by engaging communities before destination concepts and commercial arrangements are finalised and establishing clear mechanisms for participation, benefit-sharing and resolving concerns. Training and incubation should connect to genuine operating rights, procurement, employment, leases, joint ventures and service agreements, while site-specific competency requirements should cover ecological knowledge, responsible practices, group management, safety, interpretation, visitor conduct and reporting. Community organisations and smaller operators should receive shared support in business planning, legal and procurement advice, guide development, interpretation, marketing and booking systems. CSTB and the Tourism Commission should support capability development, product innovation and market promotion; destination leads should manage operating conditions and compliance; and operators should deliver experiences in accordance with ecological safeguards, community expectations and reporting obligations. Premium, community-based and conservation-led experiences should proceed only where they are consistent with carrying capacity and destination readiness.

5. Create a transparent conservation finance and reinvestment system

Each destination should prepare a full-cost plan covering preparation, infrastructure, operations, ecological monitoring, habitat management, facility maintenance, visitor interpretation and enforcement. The plan should define the respective roles of public funding, philanthropic or catalytic finance, commercial revenue and visitor contributions, including how continuing funding gaps will be addressed. Transparent rules should govern concession payments, visitor contributions, community benefits and conservation reinvestment, supported by destination-based conservation funds, ring-fenced accounts or equivalent revenue-sharing mechanisms with appropriate governance and oversight. Annual reporting should disclose public support, revenue, costs, conservation expenditure, community payments and remaining funding gaps. Government should continue to fund statutory conservation and other long-term public responsibilities, while destination leads manage budgets and disclosure, operators make agreed contributions, communities review benefit-sharing arrangements and financial or philanthropic partners provide catalytic support where appropriate. Tourism-generated revenue should complement, not replace, core public investment.

A 2026-2030 delivery pathway

Implementation should align with the Five-Year Plan period while allowing destinations to move at different speeds. Progress should be governed by evidence and formal review points, not by a fixed launch timetable.

Table 2.
Proposed phased implementation pathway for high-integrity ecotourism, 2026-2030, and beyond

Period	Focus	Principal outputs
2026-2027	Establish the foundations	Initiative lead and work plan; three demonstration briefs; preparation budgets; shared assessment and readiness framework incorporating the HKNbSDG and IUCN Global Standard for NbS; ecological and community baselines initiated; destination-specific codes of conduct drafted.
2028-2029	Demonstrate and learn	Controlled activities where ready; HKNbSDG applied and IUCN self-assessments completed; codes of conduct implemented and refined; community and operator arrangements; financing pilots; monitoring; annual reporting and cross-site learning.
2030	Review and integrate	Evidence review for each destination, including performance against NbS requirements and codes of conduct; decisions to continue, adapt, defer, remain limited or expand; successful methods incorporated into relevant policy and practice.
After 2030	Evidence-led replication	Proven approaches applied elsewhere only where ecological, community, and management conditions support them.

Four actions can establish momentum within the first 12 months without waiting for a new ordinance or permanent institution:

1. **Confirm the programme and three demonstration briefs.** Define the purpose, boundary, carrying capacity, NbS intervention, code of conduct, intended outcomes, coordinating lead, preparation budget, applicable statutory controls and enforcement responsibilities for each destination.

2. **Adopt the shared readiness process.** Agree the minimum requirements, common definitions and review points, informed by the IUCN Global Standard for NbS and HKNbSDG.

3. **Fund preparation before promotion.** Begin ecological and community baselines, engagement, visitor planning, operating design, full-cost finance and monitoring.

4. **Create a common learning platform.** Bring destination teams, communities, researchers, operators, and funders together to compare methods and resolve shared delivery issues.

By 2030, the programme should aim to have **assessed all three destinations through one shared process**; established approved baselines, indicators, and review points; put community and operator arrangements into practice; approved full-cost financial plans with transparent conservation reinvestment; **published nature, community, visitor, management, and financial results; and made an objective decision on the next phase for each destination**.

The opportunity for Hong Kong

Hong Kong should not judge the success of ecotourism by visitor arrivals, footfall or the number of new attractions alone. A more meaningful test is whether ecological conditions are maintained or improved, communities gain genuine opportunities and influence, visitors receive high-quality experiences, operators meet clear standards, and tourism value contributes transparently to long-term stewardship.

The proposed demonstrations offer a practical starting point for **Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan**. Their most valuable result would be more than three better-managed destinations. It would be **a credible and repeatable way to decide where ecotourism is appropriate, what conditions it must meet, and when activities are ready to proceed, adapt, remain limited or stop**.

> High-integrity ecotourism is not defined by how many people visit nature, but by whether tourism helps sustain the ecosystems, communities, and experiences on which it depends.

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BEYOND NATURE TOURISM

Building High-Integrity Ecotourism through Nature-based Solutions

Section 1 | **Why this matters**

Hong Kong has a unique opportunity

- Rich biodiversity
- Growing demand for nature experiences
- Excellent Acessibility
- Protected landscape

Ecotourism can diversify Hong Kong's visitor economy while supporting conservation, education and livelihoods.

Section 2 | **The challenge**

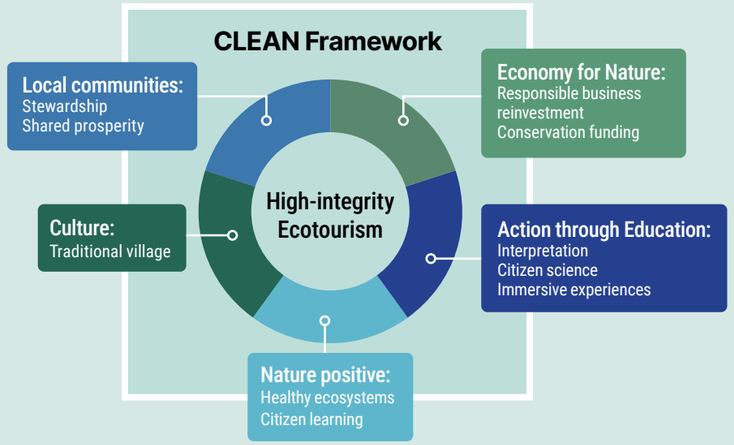
More visitors do not automatically create better outcomes

Nature tourism	High-integrity tourism
Sightseeing	Conservation
Viral destinations	Local communities
More visitors	Education
Habitat disturbance	Conservation finance
Overcrowding	
Erosion	
Waste	

The goal is to convert visitor demand into lasting ecological, community and economic value.

Section 3 | **The solution**

Ecotourism as a Nature-based Solution



The CLEAN Framework provides the foundation for high-integrity ecotourism.

Section 4 | **Ecology comes first**

Ecology planning must come before tourism planning

Ecological sensitivity → Carry capacity → Zoning → Managed access → Monitoring → Adaptive adjustment

Carrying capacity depends on:
- Ecosystem resilience
- Bottleneck limits
- Resource regeneration
- Community tolerance
- Management capacity

Section 5 | **High value, low impact economy**

- **Premium nature experiences**
- **Community-based ecotourism**
- **Conservation economy**
- **Volunteer tourism**

→ Better experiences, Longer stays, Higher value per visitor

Rather than maximising visitor numbers, Hong Kong should maximise conservation value, local benefit and visitor experience.

Section 6 | **From fragmentation to integration**

An integrated system is needed

Government, Communities, Finance, Research, Conservation → **High-integrity ecosystem**

Section 7 | **Five strategic priorities**

1. Integrated governance
2. Science-based management
3. Demostration destination network
4. High value ecotourism economy
5. Consevation finance

PHASE 1 Foundation: Integrated governance

Ecological management, Communities particpation, Commercial arrangement: Science-based management; Demostration destination network; High value ecotourism economy

PHASE 3 Scaling: Consevation finance

Section 8 | **Roadmap**

2026-2027	2028-2029	2030	After 2030
PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3	PHASE 4
Establish the foundation	**Demonstrate and learn**	**Review and integrate**	**Evidence-led demonstration**

Final Section | **Success should not be measured by visitor numbers alone**

Instead measures:

- **Habitat condition**
- **Visitor experience**
- **Community benefit**
- **Biodiversity outcomes**
- **Conservation reinvestment**

High-integrity ecotourism is defined not by how many people visit nature, but by whether every visit helps sustain the ecosystems, communities and experiences that make tourism possible.

1. Introduction

1.1 Why this report?

A timely opportunity for Hong Kong

Hong Kong has a timely opportunity to develop ecotourism as a **high-value visitor economy that strengthens its natural and cultural assets without placing additional pressure on nature**. The city has exceptional biodiversity for its size, including **more than 3,300 vascular plant species, over 580 bird species and 84 hard coral species**[17]. Its protected-area system includes 25 country parks, 8 marine parks, internationally important wetlands, and the Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark. Country parks received **around 11 million visits in 2024**, demonstrating sustained public demand for nature-based recreation[18].

Its countryside, wetlands, islands, coastlines, traditional villages, and agricultural landscapes are also located close to one of the world's most connected international cities. This concentration of ecological and cultural assets, professional services, and transport links creates distinctive opportunities for environmental learning, community-based experiences, conservation participation, and responsible rural development.

A 2026-2030 policy window for delivery

The opportunity is especially timely. Hong Kong is formulating its **First Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (2026-2030)**, aligned with the National 15th Five-Year Plan. The policy directions under consultation bring tourism, biodiversity protection, green transition, community engagement, country and marine park management, and Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area co-operation into the same implementation window[19]. National policy directions also emphasise **protection-first tourism, high-quality visitor experiences, dynamic assessment of environmental carrying capacity, ecological restoration, and monitoring**[20].

Hong Kong's **Tourism Blueprint 2.0** advances 'Ecology + Tourism,' quality over quantity, and sustainable tourism[21], while the **Hong Kong BSAP 2035** explicitly promotes sustainable ecotourism alongside restoration, community participation, and biodiversity finance[22].

Three initiatives at different stages make this policy window practical. **Sharp Island** is an existing visitor hotspot and the site of a proposed marine park; the **Sam Po Shue WCP** is planned but not yet operational; and the **CPP at Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai** is proposed. Together, they offer an opportunity to **test a coordinated approach across an existing high-pressure destination, a new conservation destination, and a complex land-sea corridor**.

Nature visitation alone is not ecotourism

Attracting more visitors to natural areas is not enough. **Visiting nature is not necessarily ecotourism**. Without appropriate planning and management, increased visitation can disturb habitats, accelerate erosion, generate waste, create congestion, and place pressure on local communities without producing meaningful conservation benefits.

Hong Kong also lacks a shared destination-level system for determining where ecotourism is appropriate, what conditions it must meet and how it should be planned, managed, and evaluated. The term risks being applied broadly to activities taking place in nature, **regardless of whether they operate within ecological limits or contribute to education, conservation, and community wellbeing**.

The missing link is a coordinated delivery system

Hong Kong already possesses many of the ingredients required for high-integrity ecotourism: protected-area legislation, biodiversity policies, conservation organisations, community initiatives, academic expertise, infrastructure capability, digital services, finance, and a capable tourism sector. **The principal gap is not a lack of natural attractions or individual projects. It is the absence of a destination-level system connecting ecological authority, visitor management, community participation, commercial delivery, monitoring, and conservation finance.**

Ecotourism can support NbS

Throughout Civic Exchange's work on advancing NbS in Hong Kong, ecotourism has emerged as **one potential mechanism for strengthening economic viability under Criterion 4 of the IUCN Global Standard for NbS**[23]. When embedded within a wider intervention for ecosystem protection, restoration or sustainable management, carefully designed ecotourism can generate resources for conservation, support livelihoods, and build public understanding of and support for nature.

Ecotourism should not, however, automatically be classified as an NbS. Whether an intervention qualifies must be assessed against the complete NbS definition and the 8 criteria of the IUCN Global Standard. Ecotourism may instead function as a **financing mechanism, livelihood component or enabling economic activity** within a broader NbS intervention.

What this report proposes

This report proposes **a coordinated system** through which government, communities, industry, academia, and civil society can align ecotourism with ecological integrity, visitor experience, community interests, economic viability, and measurable conservation outcomes. Its central proposition is that Hong Kong should **move beyond promoting visits to nature and establish a managed ecotourism system** in which:

1. **Ecological suitability** is assessed before major tourism infrastructure, official promotion or commercial expansion proceeds.
2. **Carrying capacity** determines the acceptable level, type, timing, and distribution of visitor use.
3. **Ecological evidence** is translated into enforceable zoning and managed-access conditions.
4. **Communities participate meaningfully** as decision-makers, delivery partners, and beneficiaries.
5. Operators work to **clear competency, conduct, safety, and reporting requirements.**
6. Tourism creates **measurable conservation, educational, and local economic value**.
7. **Full destination costs and conservation reinvestment** are transparent.
8. **Monitoring can reduce, redirect, pause or stop activities**, as well as support carefully phased expansion.

The objective is not to commercialise every natural landscape or maximise visitor numbers. It is to develop **the right tourism, in the right places, under the right management**.

1.2 Challenge and opportunity

Tourism demand is shifting towards meaningful experiences

Global tourism is undergoing a significant transition. Travellers increasingly seek **nature-based, experiential, and purpose-driven journeys**, reflecting growing interest in outdoor recreation, wellbeing, local culture, and more meaningful engagement with destinations[24]. These trends create opportunities for places capable of combining high-quality visitor experiences with credible environmental and community outcomes.

At the same time, Hong Kong's traditionally retail-oriented tourism model faces changing visitor preferences and growing regional competition[25]. Nature, culture, and rural experiences could help **diversify the visitor economy, encourage longer stays and distribute economic opportunities beyond established urban attractions**.

Hong Kong's distinctive urban–nature advantage

Country parks and special areas cover approximately 40% of Hong Kong's land area, complemented by marine parks, wetlands, geopark sites, coastlines, outlying islands, traditional villages, and rural landscapes[26]. Their proximity to the city makes possible **a distinctive model of urban ecotourism** combining accessibility, professional services, environmental education, and diverse natural and cultural experiences.

Potential experiences include specialist wildlife and geological tours, marine and coastal education, village-based tourism, agricultural experiences, citizen science, and structured participation in conservation. If appropriately designed, these activities could create opportunities for guides, community enterprises, responsible operators, and rural service providers while supporting conservation and destination management.

Promotion can outpace ecological and management readiness

Increased visitation does not automatically strengthen conservation. If destinations are promoted without ecological assessment, suitable infrastructure, community participation, and active visitor management, tourism may damage the very assets on which it depends.

Social media has intensified this challenge. Platforms can transform a previously little-known trail, beach or viewpoint into a popular destination within a short period. Sudden visitor surges may overwhelm transport, waste facilities, and management capacity while concentrating pressure on ecologically sensitive locations.

Hong Kong has experienced such pressures at destinations including the High Island Reservoir East Dam, Sharp Island, Long Ke Wan, Sai Wan, Ham Tin Wan and sections of the MacLehose Trail. Reported impacts have included crowding, waste, coral trampling, disturbance to marine organisms, and unsafe or inappropriate visitor behaviour[27].

Ecological limits may be exceeded before a site appears full

A destination does not need to appear physically full before ecological limits are exceeded. A site may still have space for additional visitors while particular habitats, species or management systems are already under unacceptable pressure. Conditions may also change according to weather, breeding seasons, habitat quality, visitor behaviour, and available management resources.

Carrying capacity should therefore not be treated as a fixed daily quota. It is an adaptive management envelope reflecting the interaction between ecological conditions, physical infrastructure, visitor experience and community tolerance, and management and enforcement capacity. The most constrained dimension, rather than an average of stronger and weaker performance, should determine the acceptable level and pattern of use.

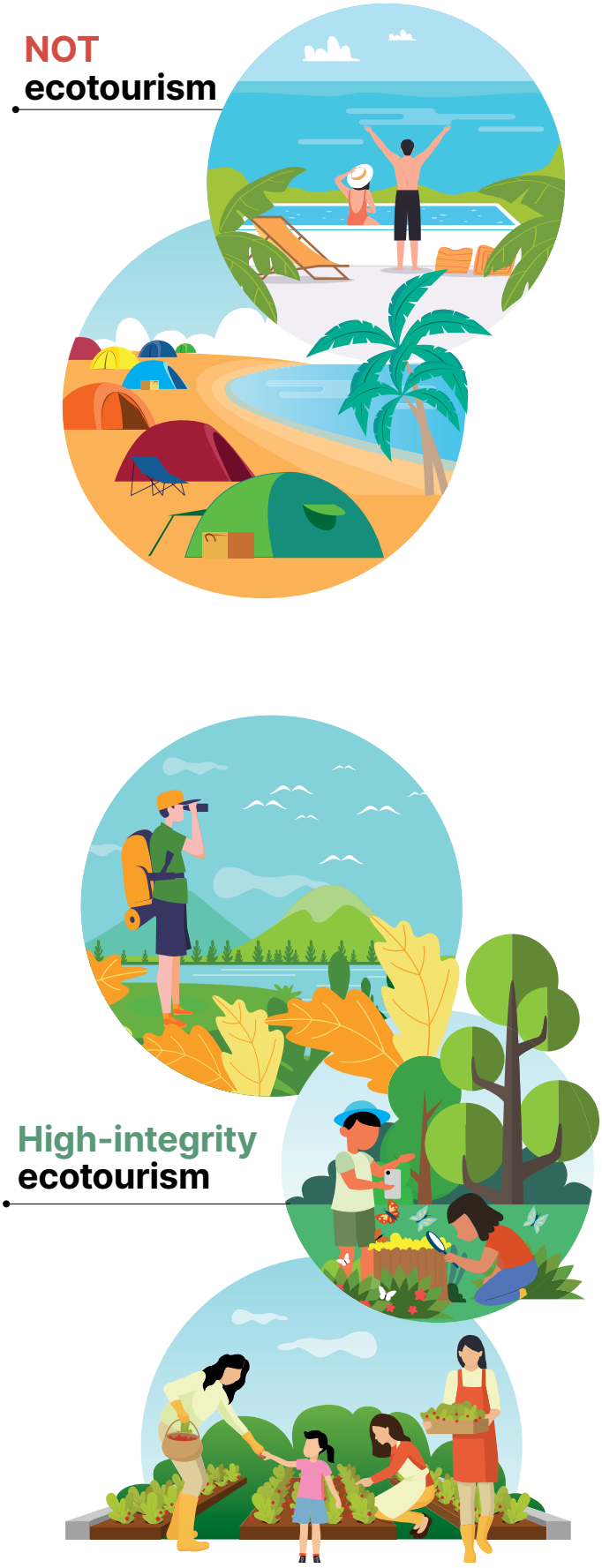
From reactive management to planned ecotourism

Hong Kong faces a strategic choice. It can continue promoting nature-based visitation and respond to impacts after they emerge, or it can **establish a system that determines where tourism is ecologically appropriate, what forms of access are acceptable and how tourism value should support conservation and communities.**

Planning should begin with territory-wide mapping and structured assessment of ecological sensitivity, conservation value, existing visitor pressure, community and cultural context, access, infrastructure, and management capacity. Locations can then be classified as unsuitable, requiring restoration or further study, appropriate only for restricted access, or potentially suitable for controlled ecotourism. For potentially suitable destinations, site-level baselines, carrying-capacity assessment, and readiness requirements should determine whether and when visitor infrastructure, promotion and commercial activity may proceed.

A high-value, low-impact economy

The report suggests a **high-value, low-impact model** that is commercially viable without becoming volume-led. Success should be measured through the value created for nature, communities, and visitors, not simply visitor arrivals, footfall, or the number of new attractions. Growth should come from better experiences, longer stays, stronger local supply chains, and greater value retained locally rather than unrestricted increases in volume at sensitive sites.



1.3 Ecotourism, Nature-based Solutions and report definitions

Nature-based tourism is not necessarily ecotourism

Tourism does not become ecotourism simply because it takes place in nature. Hiking, sightseeing, recreation, and accommodation in scenic settings may constitute nature-based tourism, but they do not necessarily contribute to conservation, education or local communities.

International definitions share common principles

Ecotourism has been defined by several international organisations and professional networks. Although the wording varies, these definitions consistently frame ecotourism as **more than visitation to natural areas**. They emphasise responsible travel, environmental education, and interpretation, the minimisation of ecological and social harm, tangible contributions to conservation, and benefits for local communities.

International definitions generally identify ecotourism as tourism that is:

1. Centred on nature
2. Educational and interpretive
3. Managed to minimise environmental and sociocultural harm
4. Beneficial to conservation
5. Supportive of local communities

These definitions establish a common international foundation but do not, by themselves, provide a complete operational approach for Hong Kong. In particular, they do not specify how ecological limits should be assessed, how access should be managed, how conservation contributions should be measured or how responsibilities should be assigned across government, communities, and operators. Appendix 1 compares the principal international definitions used in developing the report's approach.

Civic Exchange's definition of ecotourism

Building on internationally accepted principles, Civic Exchange defines ecotourism, for the purposes of this report, as **responsible, nature-based tourism that safeguards biodiversity and cultural heritage; meaningfully involves and benefits local communities; generates local economic value; promotes education and action for nature; and delivers measurable positive environmental and sociocultural outcomes**.

Ecotourism is more specific than sustainable tourism

Ecotourism is also distinct from sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism applies environmental, social and economic principles across all forms of tourism, including urban, cultural, and business travel. Ecotourism is a more specific form of tourism centred on natural environments in which education, conservation and community benefit are integral to the experience and operating model.

All ecotourism should therefore be sustainable, but not all sustainable tourism constitutes ecotourism. For example, an urban hotel may substantially reduce its energy use, water consumption and waste, but it would not qualify as ecotourism unless its activities were nature-based and directly connected to education, conservation and community benefit.

Similarly, mass visitation to a protected area should not be described as ecotourism if it results in unmanaged ecological damage. A resort does not qualify solely because it operates near nature or incorporates environmentally responsible building features. **A scenic location and environmental branding do not, by themselves, demonstrate conservation outcomes.**

Activities more closely aligned with ecotourism principles may include trained biodiversity guiding, community-based agricultural and cultural experiences, citizen-science programmes, conservation participation and carefully managed accommodation that reinvests part of its revenue in conservation and local stewardship.

A benchmark for high-integrity ecotourism

The report's vision is **high-integrity ecotourism: tourism that operates within carrying capacity, delivers measurable conservation outcomes, provides meaningful learning and enables local communities to participate in and benefit from destination development.**

High-integrity ecotourism should demonstrate:

1. Ecological suitability and operation within acceptable limits.
2. Avoidance and active management of environmental and sociocultural harm.
3. Measurable contributions to conservation, restoration or stewardship.
4. Meaningful education and action for nature.
5. Community participation, influence and equitable benefits.
6. Transparent contributions to conservation or destination management.
7. Monitoring and adaptive management.
8. Clear governance, responsibilities and accountability.

'High-integrity' is used as **a descriptive benchmark in this report**. It does not represent a formal certification, designation, or classification by IUCN or another external body.

Ecotourism and NbS are related but not interchangeable

NbS **protect, sustainably manage or restore** natural or modified ecosystems while addressing societal challenges and delivering benefits for people and biodiversity[28].

Under the IUCN Global Standard, the complete intervention must satisfy 8 criteria covering societal challenges, design at scale, biodiversity gain, economic feasibility, inclusive governance, trade-offs, adaptive management, and sustainability.

The underlying intervention is therefore the protection, sustainable management, or restoration of an ecosystem. The visitor model is then designed to support that intervention. Ecotourism can do so by:

1. Generate resources for conservation, restoration, maintenance and monitoring.
2. Create livelihoods and enterprises that strengthen community stewardship.
3. Enable professionally supervised research, citizen science and conservation participation.
4. Guide visitor access and behaviour to reduce ecological pressure and safeguard the resilience of ecosystem services.
5. Build public understanding and support for long-term protection.

This direction of support matters at the three proposed demonstration destinations. At **Sharp Island**, the underlying NbS would be the protection and sustainable management of coral and coastal ecosystems. At the planned **Sam Po Shue WCP**, it would be wetland conservation and ecological enhancement alongside sustainable aquaculture. Across the **proposed CPP,** it would be the protection, restoration and sustainable management of a connected coastal landscape. Visitor experiences should be designed around these outcomes, rather than treated as the intervention itself.

An ecotourism activity should therefore not be described as an NbS merely because it occurs in a natural environment or produces some environmental benefit. Demonstrations presented as NbS should define measurable outcomes for people and nature, apply the HKNbSDG during planning and delivery, and complete the IUCN NbS self-assessment at appropriate decision points.

CLEAN: what high-integrity ecotourism should deliver

Stakeholders approach ecotourism from different perspectives. Tourism authorities focus on destination quality and competitiveness; conservation agencies prioritise biodiversity; communities seek meaningful participation and sustainable livelihoods; operators require viable business models; and visitors value safe, accessible and memorable experiences. High-integrity ecotourism provides an opportunity for these priorities to reinforce one another.

The CLEAN tool describes what high-integrity ecotourism should deliver:

1. **Culture:** Protect and celebrate Hong Kong's cultural heritage, traditional villages and local identity alongside its natural landscapes.
2. **Local Communities:** Enable communities to participate as partners, decision-makers, storytellers, operators and beneficiaries through stewardship, local enterprise, sustainable livelihoods and shared prosperity.
3. **Economic Value:** Develop financially viable models that retain more value locally, support community-led and small-scale enterprises, and reinvest value in communities, conservation and restoration.
4. **Action through Education:** Strengthen environmental literacy through interpretation, citizen science and immersive experiences.
5. **Nature-Positive:** Protect ecological integrity and deliver measurable contributions to biodiversity and ecosystem resilience.

CLEAN is a communication tool, not the assessment process. It expresses the intended outcomes in accessible terms, while ecological suitability, carrying capacity, readiness and NbS requirements provide the evidence and decision process. Strength in one area cannot compensate for a critical weakness in another: good education, strong demand or commercial viability cannot make unacceptable ecological damage acceptable.

1.4 Methodology and limitations

This report draws on four complementary areas of research:

1. A review of international and Hong Kong literature on ecotourism, visitor management, carrying capacity, community participation, and conservation finance.
2. An analysis of relevant national, regional and Hong Kong tourism, biodiversity, conservation, planning and rural-development policies, and statutory arrangements.
3. Comparative case studies examining international, regional and Hong Kong approaches to destination management, commercial development, community participation, and conservation reinvestment.
4. Stakeholder engagement with representatives from government, academia, conservation organisations, communities, and the tourism and business sectors.

The findings were synthesised to identify the principal conditions required for high-integrity ecotourism in Hong Kong. Recommendations were assessed against five considerations:

1. Ecological integrity
2. Community participation and benefit
3. Visitor experience
4. Institutional and operational feasibility
5. Economic and financial sustainability

The comparative cases were selected for their relevance to particular aspects of Hong Kong's context rather than as complete models to be replicated. No overseas destination has the same ecological, institutional, land-use and tourism conditions as Hong Kong. The report therefore extracts mechanisms and transferable lessons while recognising that implementation must be adapted to local circumstances.

The report is strategic rather than site-specific. It does not determine the carrying capacity of individual destinations, grant ecological approval, designate sites for tourism development or provide detailed business plans for particular products. These tasks require site-level ecological and community baselines, legal and operational assessment, infrastructure planning, engagement with affected communities and market testing.

The three proposed demonstration destinations should therefore not be interpreted as predetermined approvals or as three attractions ready for promotion. Territory-wide mapping and structured assessment should inform and, where necessary, refine their selection, boundaries and scope. Each destination must still pass the relevant suitability and readiness requirements, and a valid result may be controlled expansion, redesign, continued limited access, deferral or a finding that a proposed activity is unsuitable.

The report also does not assume that every natural or rural area should be developed for tourism. Some locations may require restoration, further study, restricted or guided access, seasonal closure or exclusion because of their ecological sensitivity, community context or limited management capacity.

Several limitations should be recognised. Ecological and visitor data are uneven across destinations, and the effects of visitation may vary by season, habitat, activity and visitor behaviour. Information on tourism revenue, full destination costs and the distribution of community benefits is also limited. These constraints reinforce the need for baseline studies, consistent monitoring, transparent reporting and adaptive management before wider expansion.

1.5 Strategic questions and report structure

Hong Kong possesses valuable natural and cultural assets, emerging policy support and an established statutory foundation for protected-area management. These elements, however, have yet to be connected through a complete system governing where ecotourism should occur, how visitation should be managed, how communities and enterprises should participate, and how tourism-generated value should support conservation.

The report addresses two strategic questions:

1. **How should carrying capacity guide ecotourism planning and visitor management in Hong Kong?**
2. **How can Hong Kong develop a high-integrity ecotourism model that is financially viable and operates within carrying capacity?**

Chapter 2 examines Hong Kong's current system, including its policy and statutory foundations and the institutional and implementation gaps that must be addressed.

Chapter 3 considers ecological limits and managed access, including ecological-sensitivity assessment, acceptable conditions, carrying capacity, zoning, visitor controls, monitoring, and adaptive management.

Chapter 4 examines economic and governance models, including commercial pathways, community participation, conservation finance and lessons from comparative case studies.

Chapter 5 translates these findings into five strategic priorities, a phased implementation roadmap, indicative responsibilities, measurable outputs, performance indicators and formal decision gates.

Chapter 6 concludes by setting out the wider opportunity for Hong Kong to demonstrate how a high-density international city can bring people closer to nature while protecting biodiversity, strengthening communities, and building a more resilient visitor economy.

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2. Hong Kong's current system

Hong Kong is not starting from an absence of policy, legislation or institutional capacity. It already has a substantial protected-area system, established conservation authorities, tourism-development bodies, and mechanisms supporting countryside conservation and collaboration with non-governmental organisations, communities, and landowners.

The policy window is now favourable. **Hong Kong's First Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (2026–2030)**, aligned with the **National 15th Five-Year Plan**, brings tourism, biodiversity protection, green transition, community engagement, and country and marine park management into the same implementation period [29]. Alongside **Tourism Blueprint 2.0, BSAP 2035**, and the **Government's 'Ecology + Tourism' agenda**, it provides a timely opportunity to connect the existing building blocks.

The next step is to connect ecological authority, tourism development, community participation, operators, infrastructure, finance and monitoring at destination level. This chapter reviews the foundations already in place and identifies practical opportunities to make them work as an integrated system.

2.1 Policy and statutory foundations

An emerging policy mandate

The policy basis for ecotourism has strengthened considerably. The First Five-Year Plan, Tourism Blueprint 2.0, the 2025 Policy Address and BSAP 2035, together with the National 15th Five-Year Plan, provide a **clearer mandate for high-quality tourism** supported by carrying-capacity assessment, ecological restoration, monitoring and green finance.

First Five-Year Plan

Hong Kong is formulating its First Five-Year Plan, aligned with the National 15th Five-Year Plan. The directions under consultation bring integrated **tourism, biodiversity protection, green transition, community engagement, country and marine park management, and GBA cooperation** into one implementation window.

This convergence creates an opportunity to translate broad ambitions into coordinated destination-level action by clarifying suitable sites, acceptable use, ecological authority, delivery responsibility and finance.

Tourism Blueprint 2.0

Tourism Blueprint 2.0, published in December 2024, establishes **sustainable tourism as one of Hong Kong's four tourism-development positions**. It advances 'quality over quantity,' closer integration between tourism and ecology, and distinctive experiences based on Hong Kong's natural, cultural, and community assets[30].

These objectives align with a high-integrity ecotourism model. An emphasis on quality, experience, and value per visitor creates space for smaller-scale products based on specialist guiding, environmental interpretation, local culture, and conservation participation, providing an alternative to measuring success principally through footfall.

2025 Policy Address

The 2025 Policy Address gives this direction greater practical significance through its commitment to developing '**Ecology + Tourism**.' Proposed initiatives include the **Four Peaks tourism project, improvements to country-park facilities**, tree-top adventure activities, an outdoor historical museum, new camping facilities and walking and cycling routes connecting traditional villages, farmland, ancestral halls, study halls and rural cultural activities[31].

These measures could **diversify Hong Kong's visitor economy, create opportunities for rural destinations**, strengthen interpretation of natural and cultural heritage, and encourage visitors to explore beyond established urban attractions.

Public remarks by Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism Rosanna Law Shuk-pui reinforce this ecology-first direction. In response to a proposal to build a pier at Pak Lap Wan, she said she **did not support infrastructure that could harm the area's natural ecology and resources**[32]. Addressing overcrowding at the High Island Reservoir East Dam, she similarly stressed: '**We must consider the carrying capacity of these rural areas**[33].' These remarks indicate that ecological protection and carrying capacity are already recognised as important considerations in tourism planning and infrastructure decisions.

The policy agenda also coincides with three initiatives at different stages: the **proposed Sharp Island Marine Park**, the **planned Sam Po Shue WCP** and the **proposed CPP** at Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai. Together, they offer practical settings in which to test an integrated destination-management system.

Sequencing infrastructure and promotion after assessment of ecological suitability, visitor demand, community interests, and management capacity would help these investments deliver lasting value. This approach can **reduce environmental pressure, align facilities with carrying capacity**, and ensure that recurrent management needs are resourced from the outset.

BSAP 2035

BSAP 2035 provides the strongest direct connection between ecotourism and biodiversity policy. BSAP 2035 identifies nature conservation, deepening mainstreaming, capacity building, and collaborative partnering as four strategic areas. Its priority actions include **sustainable ecotourism, assessment of the carrying capacity of ecotourism hotspots, strengthened protected-area management, revitalisation of remote countryside areas**, community participation, biodiversity monitoring, and wider adoption of NbS[34].

BSAP 2035 also recognises the need to refine policies, regulations, and institutional frameworks; strengthen scientific and professional capacity; mobilise green and sustainable finance; and develop more cohesive collaboration across government, communities and other stakeholders. Its proposed interdepartmental coordination, indicators, annual reporting and mid-term review provide useful foundations for a more adaptive approach to ecotourism.

HKNbSDG and IUCN Global Standard for NbS

HKNbSDG and the IUCN Global Standard for NbS provide further quality-assurance foundations for initiatives presented as NbS[35,36]. Their application can help define the societal challenge, measurable outcomes for people and nature, inclusive governance requirements and adaptive-management arrangements. They do not replace statutory approval, site-specific ecological assessment or carrying-capacity management.

From policy direction to practical delivery

Taken together, these policies establish a clear strategic direction:

- Tourism development should prioritise quality and protection over volume.
- Infrastructure and promotion should follow ecological suitability and management readiness.
- Carrying capacity and visitor pressure should be assessed and actively managed.
- Community participation should extend to decision-making, enterprise, stewardship and benefit-sharing.
- Biodiversity conservation, restoration and NbS should be integrated into visitor models.
- Monitoring, cross-sector coordination and finance should support long-term stewardship.

The opportunity now is to connect these ambitions through a common operational approach that clarifies:

- Mapping, screening and classification of potential destinations.
- Evidence required before development or promotion, including ecological, community and management baselines.
- Site-specific carrying capacity and appropriate forms and levels of access.
- Ecological authority and destination-level accountability.
- Meaningful community and operator roles, operating opportunities and benefit-sharing.
- Application of the HKNbSDG and IUCN Global Standard to initiatives presented as NbS.
- Indicators, thresholds and review points for adaptive decisions.
- Full-cost finance and reinvestment of tourism value in conservation and communities.

Protected-area legislation

Hong Kong's core conservation legislation provides an important statutory foundation for addressing several of these questions.

Country Parks Ordinance

The Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208) provides the legal basis for the designation, development and management of country parks and special areas. It enables the Government to protect natural landscapes while **providing facilities for recreation, nature education, and public enjoyment**. AFCD is responsible for managing country parks, including conservation, fire prevention, cleansing, development control, visitor facilities, and educational activities[37]. The legislation therefore already recognises that nature protection and public access must be managed together.

Marine Parks Ordinance

The Marine Parks Ordinance (Cap. 476) similarly provides a framework for designating, monitoring, and managing marine parks and marine reserves. It **enables activities to be controlled through regulations and permit arrangements**. Certain events, commercial activities, vessel movements, and anchoring outside designated areas may already require permission. AFCD also conducts ecological monitoring, enforcement, education, and visitor-management activities within marine parks[38].

Together, these ordinances provide legal powers for conservation, zoning, visitor regulation, education, and managed recreational use. **Demonstration destinations could use these powers to test managed access, guided activities, codes of conduct, permits, and temporary restrictions**.

These powers can be complemented by arrangements for tourism products, commercial operators, community enterprises, conservation finance, and cross-departmental accountability, which extend beyond the ordinances' original protected-area purpose.

Because ecotourism destinations may cross country parks, villages, private land, coastal waters, and transport nodes, **a mapped pathway across planning, land, licensing, environmental, heritage, and enforcement requirements** would help project teams navigate the relevant authorities. Appendix 2 provides verbatim excerpts from the ordinances that are relevant to ecotourism.

From statutory protection to enforceable destination management

Country and marine parks demonstrate the importance of aligning clearly defined boundaries, management responsibility and enforceable controls. As arrangements for the planned Sam Po Shue WCP and proposed CPP are developed, their names and management zones should not be assumed, by themselves, to confer a uniform site-wide regulatory regime.

Existing legislation may already regulate particular matters, including planning, waste disposal, land occupation and wildlife protection. However, the relevant powers may be distributed among different authorities and may not collectively provide every control required for destination management, including visitor entry and movement, prohibited activities, commercial operations, domestic animals, temporary closures and consequences for non-compliance.

Each demonstration should therefore undergo a **legal and enforcement-readiness review**. This should map the applicable boundaries, legislation, responsible authorities, enforcement powers, staffing and operating procedures, and identify any remaining gaps. The review should not presume that a new ecotourism ordinance is required. It should first consider the least burdensome effective mechanism, including existing protected-area designations, permits and licences, land or concession conditions, subsidiary legislation and targeted site-specific measures. New primary legislation should be considered only where existing mechanisms cannot provide adequate and enforceable protection.

The resulting arrangements should be confirmed before a new destination opens, a controlled visitor pilot begins, or substantial expansion or official promotion proceeds.

Management Agreements and public–private partnerships

Hong Kong also has mechanisms for conservation collaboration outside conventional direct government management.

Under the New Nature Conservation Policy (NNCP), the Management Agreement (MA) scheme enables non-governmental organisations to work with landowners to conserve priority sites[39]. Its coverage includes country-park enclaves and private land within country parks, while the Countryside Conservation Funding Scheme (CCFS) supports conservation and revitalisation projects involving non-profit organisations and villagers in remote countryside areas[40].

MAs demonstrate that **conservation can be delivered through collaboration among government, landowners, communities, and civil society**. They also provide experience in habitat management, community engagement, environmental education, and the development of nature-compatible livelihoods.

The PPP scheme takes a different approach. It allows development of an agreed scale on the less ecologically sensitive portion of an eligible site, subject to a financial contribution sufficient to support long-term conservation of the more sensitive portion . It therefore provides a precedent for linking development rights with recurrent conservation funding.

Together, these mechanisms provide complementary lessons: MAs offer site-based conservation partnerships, while the PPP Scheme shows how development can support recurrent conservation finance. **A destination model can build on these precedents by adding visitor management, tourism concessions, and transparent community benefit-sharing**.

Table 3.
Assessment of the existing foundations

Existing foundation	What it provides	What remains unresolved
Tourism Blueprint 2.0	Sustainable-tourism direction, 'quality over quantity' and integration of ecology and tourism.	Translate strategic direction into ecological and destination-management requirements.
2025 Policy Address	Political momentum and proposed 'Ecology + Tourism' facilities and routes.	Sequence proposed development with ecological baselines, carrying capacity and management readiness.
BSAP 2035	Biodiversity objectives, carrying-capacity assessment, sustainable ecotourism, monitoring and cross-sector collaboration.	Convert priority actions into destination-level delivery arrangements.
Country Parks Ordinance	Protected-area management, conservation, recreation and visitor facilities.	Connect protected-area management with operator, community and finance arrangements.
Marine Parks Ordinance	Marine protection, zoning, monitoring, permits and regulation of activities.	Integrate area- and activity-specific controls into a wider destination plan.
MAs and CCFS	Collaboration with NGOs, landowners and communities.	Extend project-based collaboration towards durable destination stewardship.
PPP Scheme	Precedent for linking development with long-term conservation funding.	Adapt conservation-finance lessons to appropriate ecotourism contexts.

Hong Kong can begin assessment, planning and institutional preparation under existing legislation without waiting for a territory-wide ecotourism ordinance. However, **controlled visitor activities should proceed only after the applicable powers, responsible authorities and enforcement capacity have been confirmed for the relevant area**. Mapping existing powers and gaps will show whether administrative coordination, permits or licences, protected-area designation, subsidiary legislation or other targeted statutory measures are required.

Key opportunity:
Hong Kong already has a supportive policy mandate and many of the legal and institutional building blocks required for high-integrity ecotourism. The next step is to connect them through a coherent destination-management system.

2.2 Opportunities for coordinated delivery

Strengthen destination-level coordination and accountability

High-integrity ecotourism draws on the work of multiple institutions.

CSTB and the Tourism Commission lead tourism policy and cross-government coordination. The **Tourism Board** develops destination promotion and visitor experience, while the **Travel Industry Authority** regulates travel agents, tour escorts, and tourist guides. **EEB and AFCD** retain ecological and protected-area responsibilities. **CEDD and relevant works departments** contribute planning, design, construction, and monitoring expertise, alongside bodies responsible for land use, transport, rural development, heritage, environmental protection and district matters.

Existing coordination mechanisms are important. The **Working Group on Developing Tourist Hotspots** provides a high-level cross-departmental platform, while the **Tourism Commission** has a wider cross-government coordination function. The **Tourism Strategy Committee** provides strategic advice; BSAP 2035 is supported by a dedicated interdepartmental working group; and the **Countryside Conservation Office (CCO)** supports conservation and revitalisation in remote rural areas.

The opportunity is to **connect these sectoral roles through a clear chain of destination-level accountability**. Effective coordination should clarify decision rights, resources and accountability as well as provide a forum for discussion.

At the destination level, a lead arrangement should connect responsibility for:

- Ecological condition and acceptable levels of use.
- Visitor access and behaviour.
- Transport and supporting infrastructure.
- Commercial and guided activities.
- Community participation and benefit-sharing.
- Monitoring and publication of results.
- Enforcement across different land and marine jurisdictions.
- Reinvestment of tourism-generated value.

A named lead arrangement can align promotion, infrastructure, and ecological management around shared timelines and performance measures, while participating bodies retain their statutory roles.

Convert policy commitments into a shared readiness process

Hong Kong's policies already support sustainable tourism, 'Ecology + Tourism' integration, rural revitalisation, and biodiversity conservation. A shared readiness process could help determine where high-integrity ecotourism is appropriate, what conditions it should meet, and when it is ready to proceed, should remain limited, or requires adjustment.

Implementation opportunity: A shared destination-readiness process

- Screen ecological suitability and classify appropriate forms of access.
- Establish ecological, visitor-use, community, infrastructure and management baselines, desired conditions, and measurable NbS outcomes.
- Assess ecological, physical, social, and managerial carrying capacity, then translate evidence into zoning, access, and operating conditions.
- Confirm the lead body, community and operator arrangements, code of conduct, full-cost finance, reinvestment, and operational responsibilities.
- Set indicators, thresholds, data owners, and review points, applying the HKNbSDG and IUCN Global Standard at approval and later reviews.

This process would **distinguish high-integrity ecotourism from nature-based visitation** by defining conservation, education, and community outcomes. It would also give destination managers practical rules for proposals, operating conditions, and later adjustment.

Move towards anticipatory and adaptive visitor management

Existing protected-area powers to regulate activities, issue permits, and conduct enforcement provide a strong starting point. Linking these tools to ecological indicators, visitor thresholds and integrated destination plans would make management more anticipatory.

Upfront assessment and continuing adaptive management can complement transport arrangements, public messaging, on-site enforcement, and crowd controls, enabling action before congestion or ecological impacts become significant.

The opportunity is to ensure that responsible authorities have the information, staff, monitoring capacity, and operational authority needed to intervene early.

Permits for commercial activities and events could be linked to destination-wide conditions such as total use, ecological reporting, guide-to-visitor ratios, community benefits, and contributions to site management.

Connect data and monitoring for adaptive management

BSAP 2035's commitment to indicators, reporting, and adaptive review provides a valuable foundation[42]. A **common destination-level performance system** could link ecological conditions with visitor activity, community outcomes, and economic performance.

Relevant data are already held across authorities, research institutions, operators, and community organisations. Shared protocols, named data owners, and agreed decision uses can bring together visitor counters, booking and e-ticketing data, transport data, AI-enabled wildlife cameras, and other digital tools.

With agreed baselines, indicators, and thresholds, **carrying capacity can operate as an adaptive management envelope across ecological, physical, social, and managerial dimensions**, with the most constrained dimension determining acceptable use. The same evidence can demonstrate and, where credible, value the wider ecological, social, economic, and resilience benefits of ecotourism.

Monitoring opportunity: A common performance framework

- Ecological, visitor-use, community, infrastructure, and management baselines.
- Visitor numbers, movements, behaviour, bookings, and transport pressure.
- Integrated ecological, land, marine, and visitor-use data.
- Local employment, enterprise participation, and community benefits.
- Full management costs, operating revenue, conservation expenditure, and reinvestment.
- Wider ecological, social, economic, and resilience benefits, linked to decisions on access, promotion, and investment.

Create clearer pathways for operators and communities

General tourism licensing provides an important regulatory base. Site-specific competency requirements could add biodiversity knowledge, environmental interpretation, visitor-management procedures, and measurable conservation contributions for activities in sensitive destinations.

A consistent pathway could allow responsible operators to obtain rights to deliver activities in return for meeting defined standards. Permits, concessions, partnerships, guide recognition, training, and performance monitoring could be linked more clearly to operating rights, procurement, employment, leases, joint ventures, and service agreements.

Existing MAs, countryside-conservation projects, and rural initiatives show that communities can contribute to conservation, cultural interpretation, guiding, agriculture, hospitality, and stewardship. A common approach could **bring community knowledge into planning** and connect participation to enterprise, procurement, employment, operating rights, and transparent benefit-sharing.

Clearer pathways would encourage responsible investment, widen community participation, protect local interests, and retain more value within destinations.

Connect tourism-generated value with long-term stewardship

Hong Kong already invests considerable public resources in protected-area management, visitor facilities, transport, and rural infrastructure. A **destination-level finance plan** could assemble the full costs of preparation, operations, monitoring, habitat management, maintenance, interpretation, and enforcement, and clarify how public and tourism-derived funding support them.

Potential sources include permits, guided experiences, concessions, accommodation, transport services, events, and visitor contributions. With transparent governance, these activities can generate additional resources for habitat management, monitoring, enforcement, interpretation and community enterprise.

MAs, CCFS and the PPP Scheme demonstrate that **Hong Kong can link funding with conservation obligation**s. A destination system can build on them by reporting tourism revenue, expenditure and ecological, financial and community results together.

The opportunity is to **establish a credible and traceable connection** between tourism value and the long-term costs of protecting the natural and cultural assets on which tourism depends, while making conservation expenditure and community benefits visible.

Build on existing collaborative mechanisms

MAs and broader public-private collaboration offer practical experience that can inform a wider destination model.

MAs show how eligible sites, landowners, delivery organisations, and funding can be brought together for conservation and community outcomes[43]. A **destination model** could complement them with arrangements for total access, transport, independent operators, and promotion.

The PPP Scheme demonstrates a **long-term conservation-financing obligation** linked to development[44]. Its lessons can inform ecotourism approaches suited to different land-use and conservation contexts.

Broader PPP can help finance or maintain facilities, public spaces, and visitor services. Case-by-case assessment, clear public objectives, ecological safeguards, transparent procurement, and performance requirements can ensure that private participation supports continuing public accountability.

From strong foundations to coordinated delivery

The opportunities identified above point to the following practical shifts:

Table 4.
From existing foundations to opportunities for coordinated ecotourism delivery

Existing starting point	Opportunity for coordinated delivery
Responsibilities distributed across institutions	Coordinated governance and clear accountability
Infrastructure and promotion planned through separate processes	Ecology-led screening, preparation and managed access
Ecology-led screening, preparation and managed access	Monitoring, thresholds and adaptive intervention
Conservation delivered through individual projects	Long-term landscape stewardship
Participation often through consultation or employment	Community participation, enterprise and benefit-sharing
General tourism licensing	Site-specific operator competency and operating conditions
Funding drawn largely from public or project sources	Full-cost finance and transparent conservation reinvestment
Performance often expressed through visitor numbers	Measuring ecological, community, visitor and financial outcomes
Nature as a foundation for tourism activity	Tourism supporting stewardship and NbS

The core opportunity is to **connect policy coordination, ecological authority, destination delivery, operational resources, independent technical review, and public accountability** through an integrated mechanism.

This need not require a new organisation for every destination. At **programme level**, clear cross-bureau decision rights and a responsibility matrix can align policy and delivery. At **destination level**, an existing authority, formal coordination mechanism, or accountable destination-management entity could combine infrastructure and operational expertise, supported by independent technical review. The chosen arrangement should clearly connect ecological management, visitor access, operator oversight, community participation, monitoring, enforcement and financial reinvestment.

The next chapter turns to the ecological component of this system: how sensitivity assessment, acceptable conditions, zoning, access controls, and adaptive management can determine where and under what conditions ecotourism should proceed.

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3. Ecological limits and managed access

High-integrity ecotourism must begin with ecological suitability rather than visitor demand, infrastructure opportunities, or destination promotion. The first question is whether tourism is appropriate and, if so, under what conditions it can occur without undermining biodiversity, ecosystem function, or community wellbeing.

This matters because **ecological limits can be exceeded before a destination looks crowded**. A site may have physical space for more visitors while sensitive habitats, species, or management systems are already under pressure. Risk can also change by season, tide, weather, activity, and location.

Hong Kong's commitment to assess the carrying capacity of ecotourism hotspots creates an opportunity to establish a shared, repeatable process that:

1. Screens ecological sensitivity and determines whether tourism is suitable.
2. Establishes ecological, visitor-use and community baselines, and the conditions to be maintained.
3. Assesses ecological, physical, social, and managerial capacity.
4. Translates evidence into zoning, access, and operating conditions.
5. Confirms delivery readiness, including leadership, community and operator arrangements, finance, and enforcement.
6. Monitors agreed indicators and adjusts activities when conditions change.

Core principle:
The objective is not to maximise how much pressure a destination can absorb. It is to maintain agreed ecological and community conditions while enabling carefully managed visitor experiences.

3.1 Sensitivity assessment

Assess suitability before development

Ecological-sensitivity assessment should take place before major visitor infrastructure, official promotion or commercial expansion. This allows ecological risks and management requirements to shape the visitor model from the outset.

Hong Kong's country parks, marine environments, wetlands, beaches, islands, and rural landscapes vary considerably in ecological value, vulnerability, accessibility, and management capacity. The assessment should therefore **consider the destination as a connected ecological and social system**, including indirect pressures from transport, parking, piers, paths, accommodation, waste, and changing visitor flows.

A two-stage process

Strategic screening should first determine whether a location is unsuitable, requires restoration, or further study, is appropriate only for restricted access, or may proceed to detailed assessment for controlled ecotourism. This provides a **proportionate way to focus resources before projects and expectations become established**.

Sites proceeding to detailed assessment should establish ecological, visitor, community, infrastructure, and management baselines; define conservation objectives and, where relevant, the NbS intervention and measurable outcomes; identify likely impact pathways; and determine which activities, seasons, locations, and forms of access may be appropriate.

Protection-first spatial planning: A lesson from China's Ecological Conservation Redline

China's Ecological Conservation Redline (ECR) offers a useful ecology-first planning lesson. The 2017 delineation guidelines identify areas with especially important ecosystem functions or high ecological sensitivity through quantitative assessment, spatial mapping, expert judgement, and field verification, then translate the results into clear boundaries and management requirements[45].

Table 5.
Key dimensions for assessing destination suitability and management requirements

Assessment dimension	Core questions	Decision use
Ecological value and sensitivity	Which habitats, species, ecological processes, and conservation features are present, and how vulnerable are they to disturbance?	Determines protection needs and whether activities should be excluded, restricted, or closely supervised.
Recovery, seasonality, and cumulative pressure	Could impacts become irreversible? How do breeding, migration, tides, weather, and existing pressures change risk?	Supports precautionary limits, seasonal conditions, restoration, or temporary closure.
Visitor behaviour and activity	What disturbance could arise from different activities, group sizes, routes, and behaviours?	Allows controls to be designed by activity and pattern of use, not only total numbers.
Access and infrastructure	How will visitors arrive, move through the destination, and use transport, sanitation, waste, and emergency facilities?	Identifies physical and service bottlenecks at routes, landing points, and surrounding settlements.
Community and cultural context	How could visitation affect residents, local access, livelihoods, cultural assets, and everyday life?	Informs acceptable hours, routes, group sizes, participation, and benefit arrangements.
Management capacity	Are leadership, staffing, monitoring, interpretation, maintenance, enforcement, and emergency arrangements adequate?	Determines the level and type of use that can be managed reliably.

For Hong Kong, the main opportunity is to **apply this protection-first principle through existing statutory planning and protected-area arrangements**. The ECR itself is a spatial-planning mechanism rather than a day-to-day visitor-management tool; local zoning, carrying-capacity limits, access conditions, and monitoring are therefore needed to convert ecological suitability into visitor management[46]. Appendix 3 provides a fuller analysis on China's Ecological Conservation Redline and its implications for Hong Kong.

From assessment to a clear decision

A scoring framework can support comparison and transparency, but sensitivity should not be reduced to one composite score. A destination may contain a resilient visitor area alongside a habitat requiring exclusion, or it may be suitable for guided interpretation in one season but not unrestricted access throughout the year.

The assessment should produce a baseline, a map of potential zones, suitable and unsuitable activities, initial indicators and thresholds, infrastructure and management requirements, assigned monitoring responsibilities, and a recommendation to proceed, redesign, defer, or reject. Where evidence is incomplete or impacts could be serious and irreversible, further study, or a conservative pilot provides a practical pathway for learning without assuming that wider access is acceptable.

Key finding:
Ecotourism suitability should be determined through ecological and community assessment before infrastructure investment, commercial approval, or destination promotion. The assessment creates clearer conditions for appropriate tourism while identifying places where access should remain limited.

3.2 Acceptable conditions and carrying capacity

More than a visitor number

Carrying capacity is often understood as the maximum number of people who can visit without unacceptable impact. Visitor numbers matter, but the effect of the same number can differ greatly depending on **where and when people visit, what they do, their group size and behaviour, whether access is guided, habitat condition, weather and tides, and the staffing and infrastructure available**[47].

Carrying capacity should therefore be treated as an **adaptive management** envelope: the acceptable level and pattern of use under defined ecological, physical, social, and managerial conditions. A small number entering a sensitive habitat may cause more harm than a larger number remaining on a resilient, well-managed route.

How to determine carrying capacity

Each of the four dimensions should be assessed separately using the best available data. Some produce a numerical estimate; others are more reliably expressed as a threshold or operating scenario. The calculation should be repeated by management zone, activity, and season where conditions differ[48].

Table 6.
Four dimensions used to determine carrying capacity[49]

Dimension	Factors and simple estimation approach	Typical limiting factors
Ecological	Use baselines, monitoring, and pilot data to identify the level, location, timing, or type of use at which the first agreed ecological threshold would be reached. Indicators may cover habitat and species condition, disturbance, erosion, water quality, and waste.	The most sensitive habitat or species; breeding or migration periods; slow recovery; cumulative or climate-related stress.
Physical	For routes or visitor areas: usable length or area divided by the space required per visitor, multiplied by daily turnover (opening hours divided by visit duration). Compare this with the capacity of transport, landing points, toilets, waste and emergency systems.	A narrow route or viewpoint; landing or transport capacity; sanitation, waste, or safety constraints.
Social	Use resident and visitor surveys, observations, and complaints to identify the level and pattern of use at which crowding, local access, cultural character, or visitor experience falls outside agreed conditions.	Community tolerance and access; crowding, noise, perceived safety, or declining visitor satisfaction.
Managerial	Convert available staff and services into manageable groups per day, for example, trained guides multiplied by groups per shift and number of shifts, and multiply by the approved group size where a visitor estimate is needed. Then test monitoring, enforcement, maintenance, emergency response, and budget capacity.	The most constrained staff, guide, patrol, maintenance, data, emergency-response, or financial resource.

Limiting-factor rule:
Effective capacity = minimum (ecological capacity, physical capacity, social capacity, managerial capacity). The smallest capacity sets the operating limit; stronger performance elsewhere should not be averaged against the bottleneck. Where a dimension cannot be converted robustly into people per day, proposed operating scenarios should be tested against its thresholds. Ecological acceptability remains mandatory[50].

From an estimate to operating conditions

A practical carrying-capacity process should:

1. **Define desired conditions and establish a baseline.** State the ecological, community, and visitor conditions to be maintained before new infrastructure, promotion or activity begins.
2. **Estimate each dimension.** Apply the relevant spatial, ecological, social, and operational measures by zone, activity, and season.
3. **Set indicators and triggers**. Distinguish early-warning thresholds from mandatory-intervention thresholds and agree the response to each.
4. **Begin conservatively.** Where data are incomplete, start with a low-volume pilot that tests ecological effects, visitor behaviour, community impacts, operator performance, and full management costs.

5. **Monitor and adjust.** Compare results with thresholds and change routes, group sizes, activity conditions, promotion, or access as evidence develops.

The result may include a daily quota, but **capacity should not be reduced to one destination-wide number**. Limits may differ by habitat, route, time of day, season, activity, group size, guide requirement, transport mode, or weather condition. **Peak-period management** is especially important because annual averages can conceal short periods of unacceptable pressure.

Practice insight: Value before volume at Lai Chi Wo

Its remote, car-inaccessible setting, permit-controlled visitation and small accommodation base, 11 houses with an estimated 22-26 guests, create natural limits on overnight use[51]. Encouraging two-night stays illustrates how a destination can seek deeper engagement and greater value per visitor rather than rapid turnover.

Key finding:
Carrying capacity is not a target number to be filled. It is a management envelope defined by ecological conditions, community tolerance, visitor experience, physical constraints and the resources available to manage impacts.

3.3 Zoning, access and adaptive Management

Convert evidence into spatial rules

Zoning converts sensitivity assessment and carrying capacity into practical rules governing where different activities may occur. It allows visitor experiences to be concentrated in places capable of accommodating them while sensitive habitats receive stronger protection. Zone designations should follow ecological evidence, local knowledge, and consultation with affected communities and responsible bodies.

Table 7.
Illustrative destination-level zones and access approaches

Zone	Primary purpose	Indicative access approach
Strict conservation zone	Protect highly sensitive habitats, species, or ecological processes.	No public access, or access limited to research and essential management.
Restricted-access zone	Permit carefully controlled activity where sensitivity remains high.	Seasonal, permit-based, guided, or low-volume access.
Managed visitor zone	Provide interpretation and structured nature experiences.	Designated routes, group limits, codes of conduct, and active monitoring.
Gateway or community-service zone	Concentrate transport, orientation, food, accommodation, and other services.	Higher-intensity use subject to planning, traffic, waste, and community safeguards.

Each zoning plan should include an activity matrix specifying what is permitted, restricted or prohibited. Hiking, wildlife observation, swimming, diving, boating, camping, events and commercial guiding create different impact pathways and may require different conditions.

Manage the complete visitor journey

Access management should cover how visitors learn about and book the experience; how and when they travel; where they enter, leave and move; how they are briefed and supervised; how sanitation, waste and emergencies, are handled; and how visitor flows affect nearby communities. Promotion and transport expansion should follow ecological and management readiness so that access grows only where the destination can manage it well.

Proportionate controls may combine:

1. **Demand and timing measures**, including advance booking, quotas, timed entry and seasonal closure.
2. **Movement and behaviour measures**, including designated routes, group limits, codes of conduct and mandatory briefings.

3. Higher-risk controls, including guided-only access, operator permits and restrictions on activities, vehicles, vessels, anchoring or landing.
4. Temporary restrictions or closures when agreed ecological, safety or service thresholds are crossed.

These controls should be understandable, enforceable, and designed as part of a high-quality visitor experience. Clear interpretation, trained guides, and designated viewing areas can explain why restrictions matter and strengthen environmental learning.

Education, interpretation and voluntary codes of conduct remain important, but they should complement rather than substitute for enforceable controls where non-compliance could cause significant or irreversible harm. Each zoning or access condition should identify its statutory, permit, licence or contractual basis; the authority responsible for implementation and enforcement; the evidence required to establish non-compliance; and the proportionate response available.

Where a condition essential to ecological approval cannot yet be enforced, the relevant activity should not begin or should remain limited to a tightly supervised research or management pilot.

Guard against impact creep and recreational succession

Small-scale, low-impact ecotourism does not necessarily remain small or low impact. It may create a 'Trojan Horse' effect, in which initial ecotourism activities create a pathway for progressively greater visitor volumes, infrastructure and higher-impact uses[52]. In parks and recreation literature, this process is described as recreational succession. In tourism literature, the related term 'Disneyfication' describes the gradual hardening and artificialisation of natural attractions[53].

Evidence remains insufficient to establish how widespread or severe these effects are. Nevertheless, the risk is greater where conservation rules, management authority and enforcement are weak. Approval of a pilot should therefore create no presumption of later expansion. Any material increase in visitor capacity, infrastructure or activity intensity should be reassessed against ecological baselines, cumulative pressure, carrying-capacity thresholds and management readiness.

Connect monitoring to adaptive decisions

Initial assessments cannot predict every impact. Ecological conditions, tourism demand, visitor behaviour, and community circumstances will change, so monitoring must be linked to predetermined management responses rather than operate as a stand-alone data exercise.

Table 8.
Examples of monitoring triggers and management responses

Observed change	Potential management response
Trail erosion, habitat trampling, coral damage, or wildlife disturbance	Reduce group sizes; reinforce, reroute or restrict access; introduce guided supervision; or close the affected area for recovery.
Pressure during breeding, migration, or adverse environmental conditions	Apply seasonal or temporary closures, guided-only access, or revised activity conditions.
Waste, crowding, or facilities exceeding service capacity	Use reservations or time slots, reduce numbers or operating hours, disperse use, or strengthen operator obligations.
Transport pressure or community disturbance	Adjust service frequency, arrival times, routes, group sizes, or daily limits.
Repeated operator non-compliance	Require corrective action or training, impose conditions, suspend permits, or remove operating rights.
Stable conditions through a complete controlled pilot	Continue at the current level or consider carefully phased expansion with continued monitoring

Clarify responsibility, enforcement and decision gates

Each demonstration destination should have a designated lead body or formally accountable management arrangement connecting authority, resources, and accountability. Its responsibilities should include maintaining baselines and indicators; coordinating visitor and transport data; administering access conditions; overseeing operators and guides; engaging communities; coordinating maintenance and enforcement; publishing results; and recommending whether activity should expand, remain limited, change, or cease.

Operators should provide relevant data, comply with site conditions, and report incidents. **Communities** should have an ongoing role in identifying impacts and reviewing arrangements. Permit or concession conditions should define proportionate consequences for non-compliance, supported by visible enforcement and periodic independent review where commercial growth could create pressure to expand access.

Ecological approval should remain mandatory at every gate, ensuring that strong demand and commercial viability support, but do not override acceptable ecological outcomes. Progression is not automatic: a pilot may appropriately remain small, while scaling can mean improving quality and conservation outcomes or replicating the model elsewhere rather than increasing visitor numbers at the original site.

Table 9.
Formal decision gates from suitability to replication

Decision gate	Evidence required	Possible decision
Strategic suitability	Ecological screening, existing pressures, community context, and management feasibility.	Reject; defer for restoration or study; allow restricted preparation; or proceed to detailed assessment.
Pilot readiness	Baselines, zoning, thresholds, lead body, community and operator arrangements, full budget, monitoring, and enforcement capacity.	Approve a controlled pilot; approve with conditions; redesign; defer; or reject.
Pilot performance	Results from at least one complete ecological and tourism cycle.	Stop; reduce; modify; continue at the current level; or permit limited expansion.
Institutionalisation or replication	Independent evaluation, stable results, durable governance and finance, and demonstrated transferability.	Make permanent; replicate; retain as a small model; conduct further testing; or discontinue.

Key finding:
Managed access is an ongoing process through which zoning, activities and commercial operations are adjusted to maintain ecological and community conditions. It provides a clear, evidence-based pathway for responsible use rather than a one-time restriction.

The ecological envelope established in this chapter should guide the commercial and governance models considered next. Financial viability is essential for long-term management, but commercial models should be designed to operate within ecological limits.

45. China, Ministry of Environmental Protection, and National Development and Reform Commission. *Guidelines for Delineation of Ecological Protection Red Lines* (生态保护红线划定指南). May 2017, www.mee.gov.cn/gkml/hbb/bgt/201707/W020170728397753220005.pdf.

46. China, Ministry of Environmental Protection, and National Development and Reform Commission. *Guidelines for Delineation of Ecological Protection Red Lines* (生态保护红线划定指南). May 2017, www.mee.gov.cn/gkml/hbb/bgt/201707/W020170728397753220005.pdf.

47. Xiao, Huang. 'Study on Ecotourism Environmental Carrying Capacity in Wuyishan National Park.' *International Journal of Geoheritage and Parks*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2024, pp. 649–59, doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgeop.2024.11.006.

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49. Xiao, Huang. 'Study on Ecotourism Environmental Carrying Capacity in Wuyishan National Park.' *International Journal of Geoheritage and Parks*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2024, pp. 649–59, doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgeop.2024.11.006.

50. Xiao, Huang. 'Study on Ecotourism Environmental Carrying Capacity in Wuyishan National Park.' *International Journal of Geoheritage and Parks*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2024, pp. 649–59, doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgeop.2024.11.006.

51. '客家村屋復修,' *Lai Chi Wo Hakka Life*, https://lcwhakkalife.wixsite.com/hakkalifeprogram/zh/hakka-houses.

52. Buckley, R. (2009). Evaluating the net effects of ecotourism on the environment: a framework, first assessment and future research. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 17(6), 643–672. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580902999188.

53. Buckley, R. (2009). Evaluating the net effects of ecotourism on the environment: a framework, first assessment and future research. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 17(6), 643–672. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580902999188.

4. Economic and governance models

The ecological envelope established in Chapter 3 defines where tourism may occur, what activities are appropriate and what conditions must be maintained. This chapter considers how **economic and governance models** can operate viably within that envelope while supporting communities and long-term stewardship.

Commercial viability matters because destinations require capable operators, dependable services, and resources for continuing management. It is not, however, the primary test of success. A tourism product may be profitable while public agencies absorb unreported infrastructure, monitoring or conservation costs, or while little value reaches local communities.

Hong Kong therefore needs a portfolio of **destination-specific models** under common high-integrity principles. Protected areas, marine environments, traditional villages, and mixed rural landscapes differ in ecological sensitivity, ownership, communities, visitor markets, and statutory requirements. No single operating model should be applied to all of them.

Sequencing principle:
Ecological suitability and acceptable conditions should be determined first, followed by community and governance arrangements. The visitor product, operator model, and financing package should then be designed within those conditions - not the other way around.

4.1 Commercial pathways

Create value without relying on volume

Hong Kong's wider tourism objective of quality over quantity is especially relevant to ecologically sensitive destinations. Commercial value can be generated through the quality, distinctiveness, and depth of an experience rather than unrestricted visitor growth.

Depending on the destination, suitable pathways may include:

1. Specialist guiding, wildlife observation, and environmental interpretation.
2. Longer stays, small-group cultural experiences ,and community-based accommodation.
3. Local food, agricultural, aquaculture, craft, and transport services.
4. Educational programmes, field courses, citizen science, and professionally supervised conservation participation.
5. Carefully managed marine, rural, and nature experiences linked to demonstrable conservation outcomes.

These activities can spread visitor spending across guiding, food, transport, accommodation, learning, and local products. 'High-value' should not be treated as synonymous with expensive or exclusive: **value may also arise from stronger learning outcomes, longer stays, greater local retention, and meaningful support for stewardship.** Public access, affordability, and inclusion remain relevant when products and prices are designed.

Use a portfolio of operating models

The operating model should reflect the destination's ecological risk, community context, statutory setting, and service needs. Several models may operate together, provided responsibilities and financial relationships are clear before activities begin.

A destination may combine public ecological management, a community enterprise, specialist operators, and a concessionaire for a defined facility. The key question is not which label is selected, but **whether every necessary function is assigned and enforceable**.

Make commercial rights conditional

General compliance with tourism and business regulation does not demonstrate that an operator can work responsibly in an ecologically sensitive destination. Permits, licences, service agreements, leases, or concessions should therefore include site-specific requirements covering:

1. **Competence and safety.** Ecological knowledge, guiding ability, emergency procedures, insurance, and financial capacity.
2. **Access and visitor management.** Compliance with routes, group sizes, booking arrangements, seasonal limits, briefings, and codes of conduct.
3. **Environmental responsibilities.** Waste, transport, resource use, incident reporting, and the collection of agreed visitor and ecological data.
4. **Community responsibilities.** Local employment, procurement, partnerships, and agreed benefit-sharing arrangements.
5. **Conservation contribution.** Defined payments or services supporting monitoring, habitat management, or destination stewardship.
6. **Accountability.** Accurate marketing claims, complaints procedures, performance review, and suspension or termination for non-compliance.

Table 10.
Illustrative operating models and essential safeguards

Operating model	Potential application	Essential safeguard
Publicly managed visitor service	Sensitive protected areas requiring close conservation control.	Adequate operating resources and separation between ecological decisions and tourism promotion.
Community enterprise or cooperative	Villages and rural landscapes offering guiding, food, farming, accommodation, or cultural experiences.	Representative governance, transparent benefit-sharing, and continuing business support.
NGO or social-enterprise operation	Destinations requiring conservation expertise, facilitation, or environmental education.	A clear mandate and finance extending beyond short project grants.
Licensed specialist operators	Guided activities requiring technical, ecological, or safety expertise.	Site-specific competence, training, monitoring, and enforceable conditions.
Concession or lease	Defined services such as accommodation, transport, or visitor facilities.	Transparent, time-limited rights tied to ecological and community performance.
Public-private-community partnership	Locations requiring restoration, infrastructure, and long-term management.	Clear allocation of risk, costs, access, benefits, and conservation responsibilities.
Destination network or portfolio	Several small destinations unable to support complete systems independently.	Shared services and standards combined with site-specific ecological controls.

Where concessions or leases are used, selection should not be based solely on the highest financial offer. Proposals should be assessed against ecological, community, visitor-experience, operational, and financial criteria. A larger payment should not compensate for visitor volumes or activities that conflict with approved conditions.

Assess viability across the complete destination system

A business plan may account for guides, equipment, and direct visitor services while omitting the wider costs of trails, piers, sanitation, booking systems, community engagement, monitoring, enforcement, habitat management, maintenance, and independent review. If those costs remain with public authorities or short-term grants, commercial activity may appear viable only because its true costs have been externalised.

Assessment should therefore distinguish between:

1. The viability of each operator or service provider.
2. The cost of managing infrastructure, visitor flows and safety across the destination.
3. The cost of maintaining ecological and community conditions.
4. The value retained locally through ownership, employment, procurement, leases or shared revenue.

Revenue may be diversified through guiding, accommodation, food, education, transport, training, institutional visits, local products, and suitable conservation experiences. **Diversification should strengthen resilience to seasonality and disruption**, but should not become a reason to add activities that create cumulative impacts or dilute the destination's conservation purpose.

Key finding:
Commercial viability should be assessed at the level of the complete destination system, not only the individual tourism product. The model must account for management, conservation, community participation and long-term stewardship.

4.2 Community participation

Treat communities as partnerships from the outset

High-integrity ecotourism should not treat communities only as part of the attraction, a source of labour, or passive recipients of benefits. **Affected communities should help determine whether and how tourism develops before destination concepts, infrastructure, or operator arrangements are finalised**.

Local knowledge can improve decisions on ecological conditions, land and water use, cultural assets, visitor pressure, seasonal patterns, transport and daily life. **Early participation** can identify risks such as disrupted access, pressure on facilities, privacy concerns, cultural commodification, unequal commercial opportunity, or conflict with traditional livelihoods.

Maintain participation through the destination cycle

Table 11.
Community roles across the destination cycle

Stage	Community role
Assessment	Identify local priorities, knowledge, rights, concerns, and existing visitor impacts.
Destination design	Shape the vision, activities, routes, access conditions, and appropriate scale.
Governance	Participate in the body or arrangement overseeing the destination.
Delivery	Develop enterprises, employment, procurement, stewardship, and locally authored visitor experiences.
Monitoring and adaptation	Report impacts and help review whether access, activities, or operating arrangements should change.
Benefit review	Assess whether agreed community, livelihood, and cultural outcomes are being delivered.

One consultation exercise at the beginning is not continuing participation. Communities need accessible channels for information, concerns, and review after tourism begins, including a clear grievance and resolution process.

Recognise different interests and prevent capture

'The community' is rarely a single group. Residents, indigenous villagers, landowners, tenants, farmers, fishers, aquaculture operators, returnees, local businesses, and organisations may have different rights, preferences, and influence. Participation arrangements should identify who is affected, how representatives are selected, how minority interests will be heard, how conflicts of interest will be managed and how decisions will be communicated.

The aim is not to eliminate disagreement. It is to **establish a process that is representative, transparent and credible**, and to prevent benefits or decisions from being captured by a small number of individuals or property interests.

Create real pathways to local value

Depending on local interest and capacity, participation may include:

1. Community-owned or jointly owned enterprises, leases, and service agreements.
2. Guiding, locally authored interpretation, accommodation, food, farming, aquaculture, and cultural experiences.
3. Transport, maintenance, visitor services, habitat management, and monitoring.
4. Local procurement, employment, and partnerships with external operators.
5. Representation in destination governance and benefit review.

Not every community will wish to operate tourism businesses. Some may prefer conservation employment, procurement, lease income, service agreements, or shared decision-making without becoming entrepreneurs. **The model should follow local preferences** rather than impose a standard form of community tourism.

Connect capacity building to operating opportunities

Community organisations and smaller enterprises may need support with business planning, product design, pricing, licensing, insurance, digital booking, safety, financial management, and partnership negotiation. Training should be connected to actual operating rights, customers, procurement pathways, employment or enterprise opportunities; otherwise it is unlikely to create durable livelihoods.

External operators can contribute specialist knowledge, market access, and delivery capacity, but their relationship with communities should be formalised through employment, procurement, joint ventures, leases, service agreements, or revenue sharing rather than informal promises.

Define benefits and safeguards before expansion

Benefit-sharing arrangements should specify which revenues or activities are covered; the form and distribution of benefits; who administers collective funds; what operators must disclose; and how results will be reviewed. Benefits may include local

ownership, employment, procurement, lease income, public-space improvements, heritage maintenance, restoration, and support for traditional livelihoods as well as direct payments.

Monitoring should extend beyond the number of jobs created. Relevant indicators include employment quality and continuity, local procurement, enterprise ownership, distribution of benefits, community satisfaction, access and privacy, cultural objectives, livelihood continuity, grievances, and unpaid labour. Economic benefits cannot justify ecological damage or make an unsuitable project acceptable.

Key finding:
Meaningful participation requires an ongoing role in decisions, delivery, local value creation, and adaptive management. Community benefits should be agreed, measured, and reviewed rather than assumed to follow from increased visitation.

4.3 Conservation finance

Use tourism revenue as one part of a mixed system

High-integrity ecotourism can generate resources for conservation, but low-volume destinations may have substantial monitoring, maintenance, and enforcement costs. Tourism revenue should therefore complement, not replace, public funding for statutory conservation and public-interest infrastructure.

Most destinations will require a transparent combination of public finance, philanthropic or catalytic funding, commercial revenue, community and social-enterprise activity, suitable private investment, and defined contributions from visitors or operators. The mix will change across the project cycle.

Use tourism-generated value selectively

Potential contributions include permit or booking charges, guided-experience fees, concession or lease payments, operator licence charges, accommodation and transport income, organised-activity fees, voluntary contributions, local products, and agreed partner payments. The appropriate mechanism depends on the destination and legal framework.

Table 12.
Financing needs across the destination cycle

Stage	Principal financing need	Potential source
Assessment and preparation	Baselines, community engagement, feasibility, legal design, and business planning.	Government, conservation funds, or philanthropy.
Restoration and infrastructure	Habitat work, buildings, trails, sanitation, transport nodes, and visitor facilities.	Public capital, philanthropy, and carefully structured partnerships.
Pilot operation	Staff, training, booking, monitoring, and market testing.	Grants, public support, and initial operating revenue.
Continuing operation	Guiding, accommodation, maintenance, transport, and visitor services.	Commercial and service revenue, with disclosed public support where needed.
Long-term conservation	Habitat management, monitoring, enforcement, and adaptive management.	Core public funding plus ring-fenced tourism contributions.
Replication	Shared systems, operator development, and preparation at other suitable sites.	Mixed public, philanthropic, and private finance, subject to demonstrated results.

Not every destination should introduce an entrance fee. Country parks and other public natural assets have important access and recreational functions, and charging may raise policy, legal and affordability concerns. The more useful question is **whether particular managed services, commercial rights, or high-cost experiences can make a fair contribution towards the costs they create and the conservation value on which they depend**.

Define conservation and community reinvestment in advance

Revenue generation does not automatically support nature. Where feasible, **a defined share of destination-generated value** should be directed to agreed conservation and community purposes through a destination account, conservation fund, contractual requirement, or another lawful and transparent mechanism.

The arrangement should identify the revenues covered; whether contributions are fixed, percentage-based or performance-linked; eligible expenditure; administration and decision-making; reporting requirements; and how shortfalls will be addressed. Contributions should be agreed before commercial activity expands, not treated as whatever remains after other expenses are paid.

Use blended and catalytic finance transparently

Different sources can finance different risks and functions. **Government or philanthropy** may support ecological assessment, community engagement, and initial restoration; **public finance** may provide statutory management and essential infrastructure; **operators** may finance equipment and visitor services; and **agreed tourism contributions** may support monitoring and habitat management.

Catalytic funding is most valuable when it builds systems and capacity, such as feasibility work, community-enterprise incubation, operator development, shared booking, standards, or monitoring, rather than creating permanent dependence. Each demonstration should disclose which costs are publicly funded, grant-supported, revenue-funded or unfunded so that blended finance does not conceal continuing subsidy or overstated commercial viability.

Structure partnerships around public purpose

Public-private-community collaboration may help deliver restoration, accommodation, transport, visitor facilities, or maintenance. Agreements should define the public and conservation objectives, permitted scale, capital and operating responsibilities, asset ownership, maintenance, public access, community benefits, ecological and financial standards, revenue contributions, review and termination.

The purpose is not to transfer an ecologically or financially difficult site to the private sector. Risks should be assigned to parties capable of managing them, while government retains regulatory authority, ecological standards and responsibility for the public interest. The broad partnerships discussed here should not be confused with the formal PPP Scheme.

Report the complete financial picture

Destination-level reporting should connect finance with ecological and community performance. It should show total public, philanthropic and commercial income; operating, management and maintenance costs; conservation expenditure; locally retained payments and procurement; ecological and visitor-management results; and any continuing funding gap.

Key finding:
Conservation finance requires a transparent connection between tourism-generated value and conservation expenditure. Commercial revenue can strengthen stewardship, but it should not replace the public funding required to protect Hong Kong's natural assets.

4.4 Ecotourism models in practice: International and Hong Kong experiences

International cases show mature ways to connect visitor spending with conservation and community value. Hong Kong initiatives provide locally grounded building blocks in restoration, interpretation, operator practice and visitor stewardship. The cases illustrate mechanisms to adapt, not complete models to copy. Table 13 provides an at-a-glance comparison before the fuller profiles that follow. Please see Appendix 4 for a more detailed analysis of the international cases.

Table 13.
Summary of international and Hong Kong case studies

Case study	Model or mechanism	Main lesson for Hong Kong
International		
Six senses Resorts Global chain	Eco-luxury with a defined sustainability fund	A fixed share of revenue and guest donations supports environmental and community programmes.
Misool Resort and Foundation Indonesia	Resort-linked marine conservation	Visitor revenue helps fund a marine reserve, locally staffed patrols, restoration, and community programmes.
Mandai Rainforest Resort Singapore	Integrated urban-edge destination	One operating institution connects hospitality, education, conservation, and sustainable operations.
Wajaana Yaam Australia	Indigenous-led cultural tourism	Local people author and deliver experiences, linking income with culture, language, and community development.
Sunakhari Community Homestay Nepal	Community homestay	Household income is combined with training, sustainable agriculture, habitat management, and conservation education.
Crees Manu Peru	Research and learning ecotourism	Visitors support professionally supervised monitoring, research, habitat management, and local employment.
Local		
Lai Chi Wo	Village revitalisation and stewardship	Tourism complements long-term partnerships for farming, heritage, habitat, and Hakka cultural renewal.
Kat O	Emerging community-led destination	Local leadership must be matched by controls for waste, infrastructure, visitor capacity, and residents' needs.
Pak Nai	Restoration-first stewardship	Ecological recovery and carrying-capacity controls should precede any expansion in visitor use.
Tai O Chinese white dolphin programme	Operator training and code of conduct	Higher-quality tours can combine cultural and dolphin interpretation without relying on greater volume.
Shui Hau clam gauge	Visitor behaviour and harvesting tool	A code and species-specific gauges support responsible collection, backed by monitoring and stronger controls where needed.
Leave No Trace	Cross-destination stewardship standard	Education, volunteering, and trail maintenance can inform guides, booking platforms, signage, and operator accreditation.

Premium nature experiences and eco-luxury

Six Senses Resorts: Embedding conservation in hospitality

Six Senses demonstrates how sustainability can become a **core part of the commercial proposition rather than an operational add-on**. Each property contributes 0.5% of its revenue to a Sustainability Fund, supplemented by guest donations, to support conservation and community projects .

By combining premium hospitality with local sourcing, community partnerships and curated nature experiences, **Six Senses illustrates how higher visitor spending can generate resources for destination stewardship**[55]. Its significance lies not only in luxury accommodation, but in embedding measurable environmental and social commitments within the business model.

Photos: Six Senses

Misool Resort and Foundation: Tourism financing marine protection

Misool Resort in Indonesia illustrates how a private tourism operator can directly support marine conservation[56]. **Revenue from accommodation and marine experiences helps finance ranger patrols, coral restoration, sea turtle conservation and community programmes**.

The model directly links the commercial value of an intact marine environment with its long-term protection. **Conservation is not separate from the tourism product; it sustains the ecological assets upon which the business depends**[57].

Photo: Shawn Heinrichs for Misool Resort

Mandai Rainforest Resort: Eco-luxury beside a global city

Located within Singapore's Mandai Wildlife Reserve, Mandai Rainforest Resort demonstrates how premium nature tourism can be successfully integrated into an urban destination[58]. **The wider Mandai model combines hospitality and wildlife experiences with conservation education, research and habitat enhancement**[59].

Unlike remote eco-lodges, Mandai benefits from established transport connections and an international visitor market. It demonstrates **that conservation-focused tourism can operate alongside a major city when accessibility, interpretation and environmental management are carefully integrated**[60].

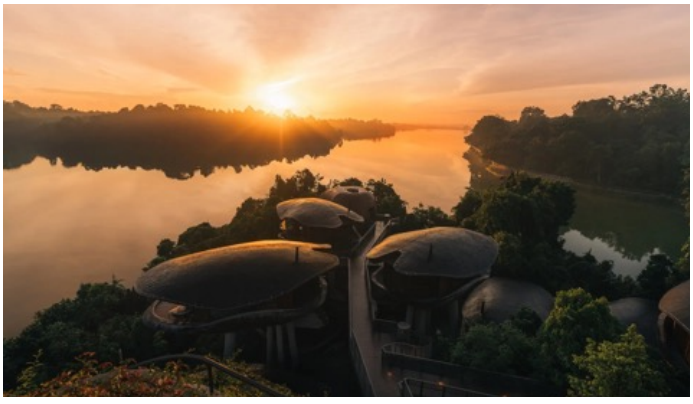

Photo: Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts

Transferable lesson:
Premium pricing can reduce dependence on volume, but it does not by itself create high-integrity ecotourism. Any Hong Kong model, including restored village accommodation, small-scale cabins or specialist tours **would still require development controls, measurable conservation contributions, and transparent community benefits.**

Community-based ecotourism

Wajaana Yaam: Indigenous-led tourism and cultural revitalisation

Wajaana Yaam Adventure Tours on Australia's Coffs Coast demonstrates how community-based tourism can support Indigenous culture and livelihoods. **Gumbaynggirr guides lead stand-up paddleboard and cultural tours that connect visitors with Country, language and traditional knowledge**.

A portion of the wider social enterprise's revenue supports Indigenous education, language revitalisation and community development. **The model shows how locally led interpretation can create employment while strengthening cultural identity and community capacity**[61,62].

Photos: Wajaana Yaam Gumbaynggirr Adventure Tours

Sunakhari Homestay: Linking livelihoods with conservation

Located beside Parsa National Park in Nepal, the Sunakhari Buffer Zone Community Homestay offers Tamang cultural experiences, village walks and birdwatching. **Participating households earn additional income by providing accommodation and locally rooted visitor experiences**.

The programme also supports community training, sustainable agriculture, habitat management and conservation education. **By improving rural livelihoods, it reinforces local stewardship while reducing pressure on surrounding natural resources**[63].

Photo: Sunakhari Community Homestay

Lai Chi Wo: Restoring a living cultural landscape

Lai Chi Wo is one of Hong Kong's strongest examples of community-led rural revitalisation. **Villagers, farmers, universities, NGOs and government partners have worked together to restore farmland, irrigation systems, habitats, historic buildings and Hakka traditions**.

Tourism complements this broader landscape-management process through guided walks, cultural interpretation, agricultural products and the adaptive reuse of village houses. **Visitors experience the relationship between farming, culture and biodiversity while supporting local economic activity**[64].

Lai Chi Wo demonstrates that community-based ecotourism should not be developed as an isolated attraction. **Its value lies in sustaining a living cultural landscape and enabling visitors to engage with it responsibly**.

Photo: Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark

Kat O: Building a distinctive island tourism identity

Kat O has strong potential to become a community-based ecotourism destination, drawing on its **fishing heritage, island landscape, local cuisine and close relationship with the surrounding marine environment**. Its existing popularity as a day-trip destination provides a strong visitor base from which more immersive and higher-value experiences can be developed.

Community-led heritage walks, seafood experiences, cultural events, island trails and marine interpretation could enrich the visitor experience. Together, these activities could **encourage longer stays, strengthen Kat O's destination identity and retain more tourism spending within the local community**[65].

Kat O therefore represents a promising opportunity to develop ecotourism around its existing cultural and natural assets. **With community leadership**, appropriate **infrastructure and proactive management of waste, visitor capacity and residents' needs, it could become an important community tourism node within Hong Kong's wider ecotourism network**.

Photo: Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark

Transferable lesson:
Communities should shape the story and the value. Durable models give local people formal roles in decisions, enterprise, and benefit review, while recognising that long-term stewardship may still require public or philanthropic support.

Conservation and volunteer ecotourism

Crees Manu: Visitors as conservation participants

Crees Manu in the Peruvian Amazon offers field-based research and conservation programmes in which visitors pay to participate. **Participants support biodiversity surveys, ecological monitoring and habitat management under professional supervision**[66].

Programme revenue contributes to rainforest conservation, scientific research and local employment. **Rather than only observing nature, visitors generate financial value while contributing labour and data to conservation**.

Photos: Civic Exchange

Pak Nai: Restoration before tourism

The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) work at Pak Nai demonstrates how ecological restoration and community stewardship can establish the foundations for future conservation tourism. **Activities have included seagrass and oyster-reef restoration, invasive-species and marine-litter removal, biodiversity monitoring and volunteer engagement**[67].

These efforts could support future experiences focused on wetland restoration, horseshoe crab conservation, citizen science and coastal interpretation. However, **Pak Nai should not yet be regarded as a mature tourism model. Its central lesson is that ecological recovery should precede tourism development**.

Any future visitor programme should therefore be built around conservation objectives and carrying capacity. Tourism should support the restoration process rather than turn a recovering habitat into a new mass destination.

Photo: Civic Exchange

Tai O Chinese white dolphin programme: Improving wildlife tourism

WWF-Hong Kong's work with Tai O boat operators demonstrates how an existing wildlife tourism activity can be strengthened through training, interpretation and conservation standards. **A dolphin-friendly Code of Conduct was developed to address disturbance risks such as high-speed approaches and inappropriate vessel behaviour**.

The programme also trained university students as interpreters and introduced longer paid tours combining Tai O's cultural heritage with Chinese white dolphin education. **This shifted the experience from basic sightseeing towards more responsible, higher-value wildlife tourism**[68].

The initiative provides a potential pathway for strengthening local operator capacity while improving visitor experience. **Partnerships with hotels and specialist tour operators could help trained boat operators reach higher-value markets without increasing overall visitor pressure.**

Photo: Stephen Chan, Cetacean Ecology Lab, SWIMS, HKU

Shui Hau clam gauge: Stewardship through recreation

The WWF Sustainable Shui Hau Project demonstrates how conservation can be incorporated into an existing recreational activity. **In response to the impacts of clam digging, WWF worked with researchers and local residents to introduce a Code of Conduct and species-specific clam gauges**.

The gauges help visitors identify undersized clams that should be released, while the Code promotes less damaging equipment and responsible digging[69]. **Local rental stalls reinforce stewardship by explaining and distributing these tools as part of the visitor experience**.

This approach encourages behaviour change without immediately prohibiting the activity. However, **education should be complemented by monitoring, zoning, visitor limits or stronger management measures if voluntary approaches prove insufficient**.

Photo: WWF Hong Kong

Leave No Trace: Establishing responsible visitor behaviour

The Green Earth's Leave No Trace programme promotes responsible nature recreation through education, exhibitions, volunteering and trail maintenance. **It encourages visitors to reduce waste, avoid habitat damage and recognise the effort required to maintain natural areas**[70].

Leave No Trace is not itself a tourism business model. Instead, it provides **an enabling framework** for establishing **consistent standards of visitor behaviour across Hong Kong's ecotourism destinations**. Its principles could be incorporated into guided tours, booking platforms, signage and operator accreditation.

4.5 Four lessons from evidence and practice

The international and Hong Kong cases do not provide one model to copy. They show mechanisms that can be adapted to local conditions.

1. Management must keep pace with visitor demand

Hong Kong's experience shows that **ecological knowledge must be converted into timely visitor management before demand exceeds a site's ecological and managerial capacity**. The Shui Hau clam gauge provides a simple tool for responsible harvesting; Tai O dolphin initiatives link operator training with conservation guidance; and Leave No Trace programmes promote consistent behaviour on trails. Pak Nai adds a sequencing lesson: **restoration and local stewardship should develop before additional tourism pressure.** These approaches are most effective when education is reinforced by suitable access conditions, staffing and enforcement.

2. Destinations need clear coordination

Mandai Wildlife Reserve in Singapore demonstrates the value of an operating institution that connects visitor experiences, environmental education, conservation support, and sustainable operations across a destination. The transferable lesson is not its scale or business model, but the ability to **coordinate functions that visitors experience as one journey and institutions often manage separately**.

3. Communities should shape both the story and the value

Lai Chi Wo shows how village revitalisation, farming, heritage, research, and visitor learning can be sustained through long-term partnerships. Wajaana Yaam and Sunakhari show why locally authored interpretation and community-linked enterprise matter: local people participate not only as service providers, but as decision-makers, storytellers and beneficiaries. **Training has greater value when it connects to real operating, employment, procurement, or enterprise opportunities**.

4. Conservation finance must be explicit

Crees Manu connects a research and education ecolodge with long-term biodiversity monitoring, restoration, learning, and community collaboration. Misool links resort activity with a locally staffed marine reserve and conservation foundation, while Six Senses uses a defined funding mechanism to connect operating revenue with environmental programmes. The precise mechanism will vary, but conservation contributions, responsibilities, and reporting should be designed into the model rather than left to goodwill.

Across the cases, credible approaches tend to combine clear ecological rules, a named coordinating body, meaningful community participation, capable operators, mixed finance, explicit conservation reinvestment, and monitoring that can change operations.

4.6 Implications for Hong Kong

Hong Kong already has the main building blocks: protected-area management, tourism authorities, Management Agreements, countryside-conservation programmes, community-revitalisation experience, private operators, philanthropic finance and public-private collaboration. **The opportunity is to connect these elements through accountable arrangements at each destination**.

Establish common requirements, not identical models

Each demonstration should confirm:

1. A defined ecological and geographic management area, with conservation or NbS objectives and measurable outcomes where relevant.
2. A designated lead body or accountable partnership with authority, resources, and reporting responsibilities.
3. Representative community participation, concern-resolution, and benefit-sharing arrangements.
4. Approved commercial pathways, site-specific operator conditions, and a code of conduct.
5. A full-cost budget covering preparation, infrastructure, operations, conservation, monitoring, maintenance, and enforcement.
6. A transparent mechanism for conservation and community reinvestment.
7. Common ecological, community, visitor, management, and financial indicators linked to formal decision points.

The objective should not be to make every destination financially self-sufficient. Some locations may generate substantial ecological, educational and public value while continuing to require public support. The more important requirement is financial clarity: knowing which activities generate income, which responsibilities require subsidy, who receives benefits, and whether adequate resources reach conservation and stewardship.

Overall implication:
Overall implication: Economic development and ecological protection are not separate workstreams. Destination governance must keep ecological authority, community participation, commercial rights, finance, and monitoring connected throughout planning and operation.

4.7 Three demonstration destinations

The three proposed demonstrations considered in this report provide distinct settings in which to test this approach. The pathways below are indicative and should be confirmed only after ecological assessment, community engagement, institutional mapping and commercial feasibility work.

Table 14.
Indicative economic and governance pathways for the demonstrations

Destination	Indicative pathway	Priority design question
Sharp Island (existing site)	Publicly led active visitor management with conditional operating rights for kaito, guides, and activity providers.	Can agreed ecological conditions be maintained while visitor behaviour, operator quality and management coordination improve?
Planned Sam Po Shue WCP	Integrated public-led partnership connecting conservation, sustainable aquaculture, communities, education, and suitable visitor services before operation.	Can the planned park provide meaningful education and local value while protecting the ecological functions it is intended to support?
Proposed CPP at Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai	Landscape-scale partnership coordinating zoning, restoration, traditional livelihoods, villages, transport, and marine access across a connected corridor.	Can biodiversity, traditional livelihoods and carefully managed recreation reinforce one another across a complex coastal corridor?

Sharp Island: Strengthen an existing visitor hotspot

Sharp Island combines high marine ecological value with concentrated recreational use. The proposed marine park and management plan would **strengthen conservation through zoning, managed snorkelling areas**, visitor briefings, land and sea patrols, and powers to close areas if ecological conditions require recovery[71].

The demonstration could build on this work by connecting the complete visitor journey: kaito and vessel movements, landing points, beaches, trails, snorkelling and kayaking routes, operator practices, waste management, safety, visitor education about the site's ecology and responsible behaviour, and monitoring.

Priority outputs would include:

1. A combined land-and-sea baseline and map of visitor pressure.
2. Desired ecological conditions and indicators for sensitive coral and intertidal areas.
3. Mechanisms for regular biodiversity surveys, including opportunities for visitors to participate as citizen scientists following brief training and under professional supervision.
4. Shared service and operating standards for kaito ferry services, guides and activity operators.
5. Partnerships between NGOs, local communities and responsible operators for capacity building, community-led interpretation, local guiding, small-enterprise participation and the co-development and delivery of low-impact activities.
6. Peak-period visitor-flow measures and site-specific briefings.
7. A transparent protocol for responding to incidents or ecological change.
8. An integrated land-and-sea statutory coverage and enforcement plan distinguishing existing controls from those that would become available following marine-park designation, and identifying any remaining gaps affecting landing points, beaches, intertidal areas, vessels, and commercial activities

Priority design question:
Can agreed ecological conditions be maintained while visitor behaviour, operator quality and management coordination improve?

Planned Sam Po Shue WCP: Design conservation and visitation together

The planned Sam Po Shue WCP offers a strong opportunity to **design the model from the outset**. Its intended functions bring together biodiversity enhancement, sustainable aquaculture and eco-education, while its scale and relationship with the Northern Metropolis make community, access and long-term management arrangements especially important[72].

The park's performance framework should also account for the wider benefits of wetland conservation, particularly climate resilience. Illustrative modelling by TNC and HKUST indicates that restoring 1,071 hectares of *gei wai* could reduce flood losses under an extreme flood scenario by 7.1%, equivalent to approximately HK$40.3 million in avoided damages[73]. Although these results are not a site-specific prediction for Sam Po Shue, they highlight the potential for restored *gei wai* to function as nature-based flood storage systems, delivering measurable climate adaptation benefits alongside biodiversity, fisheries, community, and visitor outcomes.

The demonstration could establish distinct conservation, guided-learning and gateway zones; define seasonal conditions for birds and wetlands; and create formal roles for fishpond operators, aquaculture interests and neighbouring communities. Community and aquaculture participation should extend beyond engagement and consultation, creating practical opportunities for local operators and small enterprises to provide guided learning, interpretation, local products, cultural experiences, aquaculture-related education and stewardship services, where compatible with ecological objectives and visitor-capacity limits. Drawing on Crees Manu in the Peruvian Amazon rainforest, the demonstration could also test small-group, professionally supervised monitoring or habitat activities that supplement, rather than replace, professional conservation work and paid local employment.

Priority outputs would include:

1. Ecological and visitor zones linked to habitat sensitivity.
2. A community and aquaculture participation arrangement.
3. Interpretation and visitor activities derived from conservation objectives.
4. An operating, maintenance, conservation and monitoring budget.
5. Before operation, an enforceable site-management plan covering boundaries and designated entrances; visitor routes and exclusion zones; opening hours; permitted and prohibited activities; commercial operators; companion and free-roaming domestic animals; temporary closures; consequences for non-compliance; and responsible enforcement bodies.
6. Physical access arrangements that support the management plan by directing visitors through appropriate entrances and routes and preventing uncontrolled access to sensitive areas.

Priority design question:
Can the planned park provide meaningful education and local value while protecting the ecological functions it is intended to support?

Proposed CPP: Govern a connected land-sea landscape

The proposed CPP is not a single tourism site. It is a connected mosaic of mudflats, coastal habitats, oyster farms, fishponds, villages, trails, transport links and marine access points, with varying levels of ecological sensitivity. Its proposed zones provide a **useful starting point for matching visitor use to ecological conditions and local context**[74].

Given the area's oyster-farming, fishpond and village heritage, the demonstration should explicitly test a community-led ecotourism model. Local residents, oyster farmers, fishpond operators and small enterprises could play direct roles in visitor experiences, guiding, locally authored interpretation, stewardship and benefit-sharing. The demonstration could also test landscape-scale zoning, restoration-first sequencing, integrated land and marine access, and long-term stewardship across multiple communities and responsible bodies, with ecological sensitivity remaining the primary determinant of where and how tourism activities occur.

Priority outputs would include:

1. Desired conditions and activity rules for each management zone.
2. A clear matrix of prohibited, restricted, guided and generally accessible activities.
3. Participation arrangements for oyster farmers, fishpond operators and villages.
4. Assessment of proposed trails and facilities against ecological sensitivity.
5. An integrated finance, monitoring and management plan.
6. A boundary-by-boundary legal coverage and responsibility map across its land and marine zones, including any overlap with existing protected-area designations and any gaps requiring targeted measures.
7. A requirement that early visitor pilots take place only in zones where ecological conditions, management authority and enforceable controls have been confirmed.

Priority design question:
Can biodiversity, traditional livelihoods and carefully managed recreation reinforce one another across a complex coastal corridor?

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5. Implementation roadmap

5.1 Five strategic priorities

The priorities describe what Government and partners would need to build around the demonstrations. They are intended to strengthen and connect existing initiatives rather than create an entirely new institutional system.

1. Establish integrated governance and an enabling policy environment

Objective

Establish a cross-bureau governance framework with clear accountability encompassing policy coordination, ecological authority, destination delivery and independent technical review.

Why this matters

Existing authorities and initiatives provide a strong foundation, but responsibilities can remain fragmented at the destination level. Coordination must therefore allocate decision rights, resources and accountability, not simply convene discussion.

Priority actions

1. Establish a dedicated 'Ecology + Tourism' initiative through an appropriate cross-bureau mechanism, supported by a coordinating secretariat, consolidated budget and five-year work programme.
2. Publish a responsibility matrix distinguishing policy coordination, ecological authority, destination delivery, technical review, monitoring and enforcement.
3. Designate a lead body for each demonstration destination, with representation from the departments and organisations responsible for infrastructure planning and delivery, conservation, visitor management, and day-to-day site operations.
4. Establish an independent technical panel comprising representatives from academia, civil society and local communities to provide technical advice throughout implementation.

Roles

CSTB and the Tourism Commission coordinate visitor products, operator capacity building and marketing strategy. **EEB and AFCD** retain authority over ecological and environmental conditions and protected-area management. **AFCD and other competent authorities** should ensure that site-specific ecological safeguards and visitor rules are supported by enforceable statutory, administrative or contractual controls. **Destination leads** coordinate implementation and day-to-day compliance, while the **independent panel reviews** evidence without replacing statutory decision-making.

What success looks like

Year 1	Initiative mandate, budget and responsibility matrix confirmed; destination leads and technical panel members appointed.
Year 3	The mechanism oversees implementation, applies formal programme review across the demonstrations.
Year 5	Coordination is strengthened and embedded in relevant planning, funding, approval and promotion processes, with stable destination-level leadership.

2. Build a science-based and digitally enabled management system

Objective

Establish an assessment and management system that converts ecological, community and operational evidence into site-specific access conditions and adaptive action, while ensuring that demonstrations presented as NbS that meet recognised international and Hong Kong requirements.

Why this matters

Clear baselines, carrying capacity assessments and site-specific management measures enable ecotourism activities to be planned and managed sustainably. Applying recognised NbS principles ensures that demonstrations deliver genuine environmental and social benefits. Supported by digital tools, effective monitoring and adaptive management can help maintain ecological integrity while enhancing visitor experiences and community outcomes.

Priority actions

1. Develop an initial inventory that distinguishes unsuitable or highly sensitive areas, restricted-access sites, locations suitable for controlled visitation and existing hotspots requiring stronger management.
2. Adopt an ecotourism guideline for new or substantially expanded initiatives receiving public support, statutory approval or official promotion.
3. Require every demonstration presented as an NbS to define its societal challenge and measurable outcomes for people and nature; apply the HKNbSDG throughout planning and delivery; and complete the self-assessment under the IUCN Global Standard for NbS before approval and at subsequent review points.
4. Require ecological and community baselines, desired conditions and assessment of ecological, physical, social and managerial capacity.

5. Translate assessment results into zoning, routes, group limits, operator conditions, bookings, permits, seasonal restrictions or closures, supported by digital monitoring and reporting tools such as AI-enabled wildlife cameras, visitor counters and booking data.
6. Establish trigger and mandatory-intervention thresholds, named data owners and agreed responses before operations begin.

Roles

EEB and AFCD lead ecological assessments and determine site suitability. **AFCD and CEDD** steward the application of the HKNbSDG. **CEDD and relevant works departments** integrate NbS requirements across planning, design, construction, operations and monitoring. **Destination leads** coordinate IUCN self-assessments, maintain monitoring and reporting systems, and implement adaptive management measures based on agreed decision triggers and performance indicators. **Government** should fund or commission universities, research institutions and qualified technical experts to support baseline studies, assessments and monitoring. **Relevant public tourism and transport bodies** should coordinate visitor information and operational systems. **Private operators, SMEs and digital-service providers** may support service delivery through clearly defined contracts or partnerships, with their responsibilities, incentives and expected benefits agreed from the outset.

What success looks like

Year 1	Common requirements and data protocols agreed; HKNbSDG and the IUCN self-assessment embedded in requirements; site screening and baselines initiated.
Year 3	All demonstrations have managed-access arrangements and monitoring systems. NbS demonstrations have completed the IUCN self-assessment and applied the HKNbSDG. Ecotourism guideline published. The mechanism oversees implementation, applies formal programme review across the demonstrations.
Year 5	The framework routinely informs public investment, infrastructure, approvals and promotion, supporting adaptive management and NbS integrity.

3. Develop a network of high-integrity demonstration destinations

Objective

Validate the high-integrity ecotourism model across a small portfolio of diverse destinations, applying the HKNbSDG to guide planning, implementation and evaluation prior to wider application.

Why this matters

Building on government initiatives already in progress, Sharp Island, the planned Sam Po Shue WCP and the proposed CPP provide three distinct contexts in which to demonstrate and refine the model. Applying the HKNbSDG from the outset will help ensure that NbS interventions deliver measurable ecological and social benefits while generating lessons for wider adoption.

Priority actions

1. Confirm a demonstration brief for each destination, defining its boundary, NbS intervention, intended outcomes, code of conduct, lead body, preparation budget and decision question.
2. Apply the HKNbSDG throughout planning and delivery, and complete the IUCN Global Standard for NbS self-assessment before launch and at formal review points.
3. Prepare integrated plans covering ecological safeguards, access, communities, operators, infrastructure, finance, monitoring, maintenance and enforcement.
4. Launch controlled activities only where requirements are met, sequencing demonstrations so that early lessons inform later designs.
5. Evaluate each destination after at least one complete ecological and tourism cycle and publish a decision to continue, modify, restrict, expand or stop.

Roles

The cross-bureau initiative provides programme oversight and approves demonstration briefs and key decision points. **Destination leads** coordinate the application of the HKNbSDG and the preparation, implementation and monitoring of demonstrations. **EEB and AFCD** define site-suitability criteria and acceptable operating conditions. **AFCD and other competent authorities** enforce applicable controls, while destination leads coordinate day-to-day compliance, monitoring and adaptive management. **Communities, tourism operators, NGOs and researchers** contribute to the co-design, delivery, monitoring and adaptive improvement of interventions.

What success looks like

Year 1	Demonstration briefs, code of conduct, leads and budgets confirmed; HKNbSDG and IUCN Global Standard for NbS embedded in baseline and planning work.
Year 3	Demonstration briefs, code of conduct, leads and budgets confirmed; HKNbSDG and IUCN Global Standard for NbS embedded in baseline and planning work.
Year 5	Each demonstration has produced an evidence-based decision, and validated NbS and management approaches inform policy or other suitable destinations.

4. Enable a high-value, low-impact ecotourism economy

Objective

Support a high-integrity ecotourism economy that delivers meaningful visitor experiences, local livelihoods and conservation benefits within the carrying capacity of each destination.

Why this matters

Communities and responsible tourism operators are essential partners in destination management. For ecotourism to support sustainable development, local communities need more than consultation, training or occasional employment. They need meaningful opportunities to influence decisions, operate enterprises, provide services and participate in the visitor economy. High-integrity ecotourism should therefore protect space for community-led and small-scale enterprises that contribute to conservation, stewardship, cultural heritage and visitor experiences within the ecological carrying capacity of each destination.

Priority actions

1. Engage communities before destination concepts and commercial arrangements are finalised, with clear participation, benefit-sharing and concern-resolution mechanisms.
2. Connect training and incubation to operating rights, procurement, employment, leases, joint ventures and service agreements.
3. Establish site-specific competency and operating requirements covering ecological knowledge, socially and environmentally responsible practices, group management, safety, interpretation, visitor conduct and reporting.
4. Provide shared support for community organisations and smaller operators, including business planning, legal and procurement advice, guide development, interpretation, marketing support and booking systems.
5. Develop premium, community-based and conservation-led experiences only where they are consistent with carrying capacity and destination readiness.

Roles

Communities contribute to governance, interpretation and economic arrangements, participating in ways that align with local needs and preferences. CSTB and Tourism Commission support capability development, product innovation and market promotion. Destination leads manage operational conditions and compliance arrangements. Tourism operators deliver visitor experiences in accordance with ecological safeguards, community expectations and reporting obligations, supported by NGOs, professional bodies and training institutions such as Travel Industry Authority.

What success looks like

Year 1	Community participation arrangements, operator requirements and the shared support function are established; viable opportunities are identified.
Year 3	Capable community and commercial partners operate under site-specific conditions, with local employment, procurement and visitor outcomes tracked.
Year 5	A diverse high-value, low-impact economy retains more value locally and supports quality experiences without exceeding ecological or managerial capacity.

5. Create a transparent conservation finance and reinvestment system

Objective

Establish a diversified and transparent financing system that sustains destination stewardship and directs a defined share of tourism value towards the needs of biodiversity conservation and local communities.

Why this matters

Long-term destination stewardship requires reliable funding for ecological monitoring, habitat management facility maintenance, visitor interpretation and law enforcement . Transparent financing arrangements help ensure that the full costs of destination management are understood and that tourism-generated value contributes to conservation and community outcomes. Tourism revenues can complement core public investment, strengthening the long-term sustainability of conservation efforts.

Priority actions

1. Require each destination to prepare a full-cost plan covering preparation, infrastructure, operations, monitoring, maintenance, enforcement and habitat management.
2. Define the respective roles of public funding, philanthropic or catalytic finance, commercial revenue and visitor contributions, including how continuing funding gaps will be addressed.
3. Establish transparent rules for concession payments, visitor contributions, community benefits and conservation reinvestment.
4. Pilot destination-based conservation funds, ring-fenced accounts or equivalent revenue-sharing mechanisms with appropriate governance and oversight.
5. Publish annual financial, ecological and community results, including public support, revenue, costs, conservation expenditure, community payments and remaining funding gaps.

Roles

Government funds statutory conservation and other long-term public responsibilities while establishing financial and reporting requirements. **Destination leads** manage budgets and disclose financial and reporting requirements. **Tourism operators** make agreed contributions and report conservation benefits **Communities** participate in reviewing benefit-sharing arrangements, while **philanthropic and financial partners** provide catalytic funding and project-preparation support where appropriate.

What success looks like

Year 1	Common finance and reinvestment principles agreed; full-cost plans completed for the demonstrations; funding responsibilities disclosed.
Year 3	Financing and revenue-sharing mechanisms operate at demonstration destinations, with traceable conservation expenditure and community benefits.
Year 5	A durable conservation-finance platform or equivalent mechanism is sustainably resourced, independently reviewed and applicable to other suitable destinations.

5.2 A 2026-2030 delivery pathway

The roadmap aligns the demonstrations with the Five-Year Plan period while allowing different destinations to move at different speeds.

The first 12 months

Four actions would establish momentum while the adequacy of existing statutory controls, and the need for any additional powers is assessed:

1. **Confirm the programme and three briefs**. Define the purpose, boundary, carrying capacity, NbS intervention, code of conduct, intended outcomes, coordinating lead, preparation budget, applicable statutory controls and enforcement responsibilities for each destination.
2. **Adopt the shared readiness process.** Agree the minimum requirements, common definitions and review points, informed by the IUCN Global Standard for NbS and HKNbSDG.
3. **Fund preparation before promotion.** Begin ecological and community baselines, engagement, visitor planning, operating design, full-cost finance and monitoring.
4. **Create a common learning platform**. Bring destination teams, communities, researchers, operators and funders together to compare methods and resolve shared delivery issues.

Table 15.
Implementation pathway for advancing high-integrity ecotourism in Hong Kong

Period	Focus	Principal outputs
2026-2027	Establish the foundations	Initiative lead and work plan; three demonstration briefs; preparation budgets; shared assessment and readiness framework incorporating the HKNbSDG and IUCN Global Standard for NbS; ecological and community baselines initiated; destination-specific codes of conduct drafted.
2028-2029	Demonstrate and learn	Controlled activities where ready; HKNbSDG applied and IUCN self-assessments completed; codes of conduct implemented and refined; community and operator arrangements; financing pilots; monitoring; annual reporting and cross-site learning.
2030	Review and integrate	Evidence review for each destination, including performance against NbS requirements and codes of conduct; decisions to continue, adapt, defer, remain limited or expand; successful methods incorporated into relevant policy and practice.
After 2030	Evidence-led replication	Proven approaches applied elsewhere only where ecological, community and management conditions support them.

Core outcomes by 2030

By the end of the planning period, the programme should aim to deliver six core outcomes:

1. Assess three destinations through one shared readiness process. Apply consistent requirements while retaining site-specific ecological and management conditions.
2. Establish approved baselines and review points. Define ecological and community baselines, indicators and review points for each destination.
3. Put community and operator arrangements into practice. Connect participation and capacity building to genuine employment, enterprise and stewardship opportunities.
4. Approve full-cost financial plans. Identify all funding responsibilities and establish transparent arrangements for conservation reinvestment.
5. Report results regularly. Publish nature, community, visitor, management and financial outcomes for each destination.
6. Decide the next phase for each destination. Use evidence to determine whether activities should continue, adapt, remain limited, expand, be deferred or stop.

6. Conclusion

A new balance between conservation and tourism

Hong Kong does not need to choose between conserving nature and building a stronger visitor economy. The practical task is to create a system in which **conservation defines the conditions for tourism**, communities participate meaningfully, financial responsibilities are transparent, and evidence determines what happens next. Under this model, **tourism is not merely permitted to take place in natural areas; it is designed to reinforce the ecological, cultural, and community assets on which it depends**.

A strong but sensitive natural foundation

Hong Kong has a strong foundation on which to build. Its country parks, wetlands, marine environments, islands, traditional villages, and agricultural landscapes are located unusually close to a dense urban centre and supported by an efficient transport network. These characteristics could underpin distinctive, high-value experiences that broaden Hong Kong's visitor economy while strengthening public understanding of nature and supporting rural and coastal livelihoods.

However, natural assets and convenient access do not automatically produce high-integrity ecotourism. Without clear ecological objectives and active management, growing visitation can intensify habitat disturbance, erosion, congestion, waste, and pressure on local communities. Popularity cannot therefore be treated as the principal measure of success. The more important question is **whether tourism remains within ecological, physical, social, and managerial limits while generating lasting benefits for conservation and communities**.

Ecotourism as a managed system

This report consequently presents ecotourism as a system rather than a tourism product or marketing label. That system requires clear leadership, cross-departmental coordination, science-based carrying-capacity assessment, managed access, meaningful community participation, and a visitor economy that rewards quality rather than volume. It also requires transparent mechanisms through which tourism revenue supports conservation, site management, and local livelihoods, alongside monitoring that allows decisions to be reviewed and adjusted over time. The **CLEAN Tool**—Culture, Local Communities, Economic Value, Action through Education, and Nature-Positive outcomes—provides a shared basis for keeping these objectives connected.

The opportunity of the 2026–2030 Five-Year Plan

The preparation of Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan for 2026–2030 offers a timely opportunity to establish this system. The Plan can convert broader ambitions for ecological conservation, high-value tourism, green infrastructure, resilience, and green finance into a coordinated implementation pathway. This will require more than a collection of individual projects. It will require common standards, clearly assigned responsibilities, adequate preparation and management budgets, ecological and community baselines, and formal decision points at which initiatives can proceed, be modified, remain limited, be deferred, or stop.

Demonstration destinations as system tests

The three proposed demonstration destinations provide a practical way to begin. **Sharp Island** can test how an established visitor hotspot can be strengthened through improved management and conservation-oriented experiences. The **planned Sam Po Shue WCP** creates an opportunity to integrate conservation, community participation, and visitor management before full operation. The **proposed CPP** can explore how a connected land–sea landscape can be governed across ecological, community, and administrative boundaries.

These demonstrations are not the entirety of Hong Kong's ecotourism pathway. Their purpose is to provide **different environments in which the wider system can be tested, compared, and improved**. Together, they can generate practical evidence on carrying capacity, zoning, codes of conduct, community and operator arrangements, conservation finance, monitoring, and enforcement. Their progress should be assessed through formal decision gates, with ecological approval remaining mandatory at every stage. Visitor demand or commercial potential should never compensate for an unacceptable ecological outcome.

Building a replicable model by 2030

By 2030, the most valuable result would therefore be more than three better-managed destinations. It would be **a credible and repeatable approach to high-integrity ecotourism**: one supported by functioning institutions, shared assessment methods, transparent financing, trusted partnerships, and evidence-based decisions.

Proven approaches could then be adapted elsewhere, but only where ecological, community, and management conditions support them. Replication should be earned through demonstrated performance, not assumed from the outset.

Toward a network of distinctive destinations

Over time, this approach could support **a connected network of distinctive destinations across Hong Kong**. Each would reflect its own ecological character, cultural history, and community priorities, rather than follow a standard tourism formula. **Communities** would participate as partners and knowledge holders; operators would compete through quality and stewardship; and **visitors** would be encouraged to understand and contribute to the places they experience. **Tourism revenue** would become one of several tools supporting long-term conservation, restoration, and local development.

Reframing nature and prosperity

The wider opportunity is to change how Hong Kong understands the relationship between nature and prosperity. Nature should not be treated as a scenic backdrop or a free input into the visitor economy. It is essential infrastructure that supports biodiversity, climate resilience, health, identity, and quality of life. Protecting it is therefore not a limit on development, but the foundation for development that can endure.

A stewardship-led future

With sustained leadership and disciplined implementation, Hong Kong can demonstrate how a compact global city can offer exceptional visitor experiences while strengthening the natural and cultural systems on which its future depends. The goal is not simply to bring more people into nature. It is **to build a model in which every decision about access, investment, and growth contributes to stewardship, and in which tourism leaves Hong Kong's nature and communities stronger than it found them**.

Appendices

Appendix 1.
Definitions of ecotourism adopted by international organisations

Organisation	Definition
UN Tourism[75]	• All nature-based forms of tourism in which the main motivation of the tourists is the observation and appreciation of nature as well as the traditional cultures prevailing in natural areas. • It contains educational and interpretation features. • It is generally, but not exclusively organised by specialised tour operators for small groups. Service provider partners at the destinations tend to be small, locally owned businesses. • It minimises negative impacts upon the natural and socio-cultural environment. • It supports the maintenance of natural areas which are used as ecotourism attractions by: – Generating economic benefits for host communities, organisations and authorities managing natural areas with conservation purposes – Providing alternative employment and income opportunities for local communities – Increasing awareness towards the conservation of natural and cultural assets, both among locals and tourists.
Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC)[76]	• Ecotourism is a niche segment of tourism in natural areas. • Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally-oriented. It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas
International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)[77]	• Ecotourism respects the resources of protected Areas and the prosperity of locals
The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)[78]	• Ecotourism is now defined as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education.' Education is meant to be inclusive of both staff and guests

Appendix 2.
Extracts from the Country Parks Ordinance and Marine Parks Ordinance

Country Parks Ordinance (Cap. 208)[79]

Section 4(c)

- (i): to encourage their use and development for the purposes of recreation and tourism
- (ii): to protect the vegetation and wild life inside country parks and special areas
- (iii): to preserve and maintain buildings and sites of historic or cultural significance within country parks and special areas
- (iv): to provide facilities and services for the public enjoyment of country parks and special areas

Section 26(1)

- (a): the proper management and control, including closure or partial closure, of country parks and special areas
- (b): prohibiting or restricting the entry into, or movement within, country parks and special areas of persons, vehicles, boats and animals

Section 26

- (i): the issue by the Authority on such terms and subject to such conditions as the Authority may personally determine, of permits authorising the entry into a country park or special area or the doing of anything therein which would otherwise be unlawful

Section 26

- (e): prohibiting or restricting the killing, hunting, trapping, molesting or disturbance of any form of wild life within a country park or special area, the taking of, destruction of or interference with vegetation within a country park or special area or the doing of anything therein which will interfere with the soil

Section 26

- (g): prohibiting or controlling the use of a country park or special area for—
  - (ii) barbecuing;
  - (iii) camping;
  - (iv) swimming;
  - (v) hawking;
  - (vi) advertising;
  - (vii) fishing; and
  - (viii) any other similar activities;

Section 3

- (1): Subject to this Ordinance, the control and management of country parks and special areas are vested in the Country and Marine Parks Authority

Section 5

- (1) There is hereby established a Country and Marine Parks Board which shall—
  - (a) act as a consultative body to advise the Authority upon any matter referred to it by the Authority;
  - (b) consider and to advise the Authority on, the policy and programmes prepared by the Authority in respect of country parks and special areas, including proposed country parks and special areas

Marine Parks Ordinance (Cap. 476)[80]

Section 4(b)

- (i) protecting, restoring and, where the Authority considers necessary, enhancing the marine life in and marine environment of any marine park or marine reserve;
- (ii) managing the uses of resources in marine parks to meet the needs and aspirations of present and future generations of mankind;
- (iii) facilitating recreational activities in marine parks; and
- (iv) providing opportunities for educational and scientific studies in the marine life in and marine environment of marine parks and marine reserves

Section 20

- (1) The Secretary for Environment and Ecology may make regulations to provide for—
  - (a) the proper management and control of (including the specification of zones within and the closure or partial closure of) marine parks and marine reserves

Section 20

- (b) prohibiting or controlling the following activities within a marine park or marine reserve—
  - (i) fishing and spear-fishing;
  - (ii) mariculture;
  - (iii) swimming and diving;
  - (iv) collection of marine life and resources;
  - (v) boating, including surfing, wind-surfing and water-skiing;
  - (vi) barbecuing and camping on beaches;
  - (vii) mooring;
  - (viii) hawking;
  - (ix) dumping and littering;
  - (x) advertising; and
  - (xi) any other activities incompatible with the carrying into effect of the provisions of this Ordinance or any regulation made under this section

Section 20(1)

- (g) prohibiting or restricting the entry into, or movement within, marine parks and marine reserves of persons, vehicles, vessels and animals;

Section 20(1), 22(1)

- 20(1)(h) the application for, and the grant and renewal of licences and permits, and the fees payable in respect thereof
- (22)(1) the Authority may grant to any person a licence or permit in writing upon such terms and conditions as he thinks fit to do anything which is controlled under this Ordinance

Section 20(1)

- (d) prohibiting or restricting the killing, hunting, trapping, molesting or disturbance of any form of marine life within a marine park or marine reserve, the possession of equipment or implements used for hunting or fishing, the taking of, destruction of or interference with the marine life within a marine park or marine reserve

Section 9(3)

- (ii) where appropriate, remedial and restoration work to be carried out at that person's expense within such time as may be specified in the order

Section 4(b)

- (iv) providing opportunities for educational and scientific studies in the marine life in and marine environment of marine parks and marine reserves

Appendix 3.
China's Ecological Conservation Redline and its implications for Hong Kong

What is Ecological Conservation Redline?

Since the mid-2010s, the Chinese government has developed the ECR under its wider vision of ecological civilisation. Rather than being governed by a single national law, the ECR system has evolved through a series of central policy documents, technical guidelines and local measures.

ECR is a national spatial-planning mechanism that identifies areas with critical ecological functions or high ecological sensitivity. These include protected areas, important wetlands and water catchments, as well as areas vulnerable to soil erosion, desertification and other forms of ecological degradation.

Within ECR areas, development and production activities that could damage ecological functions are strictly controlled. However, ECR does not prohibit every form of human activity: limited activities that do not impair ecological functions, including appropriately managed tourism, may be permitted outside the core zones of protected areas.

Table 16.
Key policy documents supporting China's ECR

Policy document	Title in English	Year	Authority	Relevance for ECR
中共中央國務院關於加快推進生態文明建設的意見[81]	Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Accelerating the Promotion of Ecological Civilisation Development	2015	CPC Central Committee, State Council	Mentions delineation of and compliance with ECR, areas to be included, and guiding principles
生態文明體制改革總體方案[82]	Overall Plan for Reforming the System for Promoting Ecological Civilisation	2015	CPC Central Committee, State Council	Mentions delineation of and compliance with ECR
於劃定並嚴守生態保護紅線的若干意見[83]	Several Opinions on Delimiting and Strictly Observing Ecological Protection Red Lines	2017	General Office of the CPC Central Committee, General Office of the State Council	Provides detailed definition, scope, guiding principles for ECR, identifying implementation measures
生態保護紅線劃定指南[84]	Guidelines for Delineating Ecological Protection Red Lines	2017	MEP, NDRC	Detailed technical guidance for ECR delineation
中共中央辦公廳國務院辦公廳關於在國土空間規劃中統籌劃定落實三條控制線的指導意見[85]	Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on Coordinated Delineation and Implementation of the Three Control Lines in Territorial Spatial Planning	2019	General Office of the CPC Central Committee, General Office of the State Council	Coordination of the delineation of three control lines including the ECR for spatial planning
海南省生態保護紅線管理規定[86]	Hainan Provincial Regulations on the Administration of Ecological Protection Red Lines	2018	Hainan Province People's Congress Standing Committee	First local legislation about the ECR
海南省生態保護紅線准入管理目錄（修訂）[87]	Hainan Province Access Management Catalogue for Ecological Protection Red Lines (Amended)	2023	General Office of the People's Government of Hainan Province	Identifies activities allowed within ECR areas in the province

How the ECR operates

Once delineated, **ECR becomes a binding control boundary within territorial spatial planning**. Its central requirements are that ecological functions must not decline, the protected area must not shrink and its ecological character must not change.

Implementation relies largely on existing land-use and protected-area management systems. **Where ECR overlaps with a legally protected area, the relevant protected-area rules and authorities continue to govern enforcement.**

Provinces may supplement national requirements through local rules and access catalogues. **Hainan demonstrates how local authorities can clarify which activities are allowed,** including the conditions under which tourism facilities or other limited activities may be considered.

Insight: ECR is a spatial safeguard, not a visitor-management system

Its primary function is to control land use and protect ecological space. It does not replace site-level tools such as carrying-capacity limits, visitor zoning, permits or temporary closures.

What the ECR does not do

While ECR provides a national platform for ecological spatial planning, it:

1. **Does not create an entirely separate enforcement system** beyond existing land-use and protected-area management channels
2. **Focuses primarily on land use and developmen**t, rather than the day-to-day behaviour of visitors
3. **Does not itself establish carrying capacities or visitor limits** for individual destinations
4. **Relies mainly on national policy and administrative measures**, supported by relevant sectoral and local legislation

These limitations are important for Hong Kong. **Mapping sensitive areas is only the starting point; separate visitor-management measures are still needed to regulate access and behaviour.**

Implications for Hong Kong's Ecotourism Management

1. Map ecological sensitivity before planning tourism

China's ECR was delineated using geographical data and ecological-evaluation models, cross-checked against existing protected areas. **Hong Kong could adopt a comparable evidence-based process to identify where ecotourism is appropriate, where access requires strict management and where areas should remain closed.**

This assessment should cover country parks, marine parks, special areas and other ecologically important landscapes. **Tourism planning should follow ecological assessment—not determine its outcome.**

2. Adapt the principle rather than copy the system

Hong Kong already has its own statutory planning, land-management and protected-area systems. **Directly adding an ECR-style designation could duplicate existing mechanisms and increase administrative complexity.**

The more relevant lesson is the underlying principle: **ecologically important areas should be identified first and treated as firm constraints on tourism planning**. Existing Hong Kong mechanisms can then be strengthened through sensitivity-based zoning and managed access.

3. Build a phased ecotourism management system

Hong Kong could translate this principle into four connected stages:

1. **Map ecological sensitivity** using habitat, species and spatial data
2. **Establish sensitivity-based zoning**, including no-entry zones for the most vulnerable areas
3. **Assess carrying capacity** in areas where visitation is appropriate
4. **Monitor conditions and adjust access**, visitor limits and management measures over time

Key lesson for Hong Kong

A redline identifies where ecological protection must take priority, but carrying capacity determines how suitable areas can be visited. Hong Kong therefore needs both spatial safeguards and adaptive visitor management.

Together, these measures would provide **a science-based pathway for balancing nature conservation, visitor experience, community benefits and financial viability**, without directly transplanting the mainland ECR system into Hong Kong.

Appendix 4.
International case studies

Premium nature experiences/ eco-luxury

Six Senses Resorts, global chain

Six Senses represents a global chain that has embedded sustainability and regeneration into its brand identity since its inception in 1995. In 2025, it renamed its Sustainability Fund to the Regenerative Impact Fund to better reflect its ambition of creating a net positive impact on wildlife and animal welfare, habitat, culture, and communities.[88] Each property allocates 0.5 per cent of monthly revenue to the fund, supplemented by sales of mascot toys and guest donations, collectively supporting over 135 projects across 27 properties. At Six Senses Con Dao in Vietnam, for example, the fund has financed clean water systems benefiting over 3,194 people, free English classes for over 150 local children, and waste diversion programmes that have removed 441 kilograms of waste from the environment.[89]

Environmentally, the group's properties have protected over 50 million square metres of habitat since 2021, supported the establishment of six Marine Protected Areas in the Maldives, and facilitated the hatching of nearly 9,500 sea turtles across five properties. Six Senses demonstrates that if sustainability is embedded as a core business principle rather than an add-on, a luxury hospitality chain can achieve commercial viability while generating measurable conservation and community benefits.

Misool Resort and Foundation, Indonesia

Misool Resort, located in the Raja Ampat archipelago of Indonesia, offers a more locally grounded model of conservation-led ecotourism. Founded in 2005 by Marit and Andrew Miners, the resort operates in partnership with local landowners and communities to manage a 1,220 square kilometre marine reserve with its charitable arm, the Misool Foundation.[90] The reserve is divided into two No-Take Zones linked by a blue water corridor and is a rare example of a marine protected area managed not by government but by a private tourism operator. The resort's business model is designed to use ecotourism revenue to fund conservation, as profits support ranger patrols, a manta ray sanctuary, a turtle nursery, and community development initiatives.[91]

The conservation outcomes have been remarkable. The Misool Ranger Patrol conducted 1,079 patrols in 2025, intercepting 166 fishing boats within the reserve. Turtle protection efforts recorded 2,740 hawksbill and green turtle eggs, achieving a 93 per cent hatch rate with 2,539 hatchlings successfully released. The Reef Restoration Project exceeded its annual target to restore 1,504 square metres of coral in 2025 with an average coral survival rate of 94 per cent. Since 2018, the project has restored a cumulative 6,645 square metres of coral across 15 sites. Long-term monitoring further shows that shark abundance inside the marine reserve has increased by 98 per cent since 2012.[92] The resort employs over 200 local staff and supports local schools, health clinics, scholarships, and alternative livelihoods such as seaweed farming. Overall, Misool exemplifies how a single ecotourism operation, when aligned with a clear conservation mission and strong community partnerships, can generate both commercial viability and transformative ecological outcomes.

Mandai Rainforest Resort, Singapore

The Mandai Rainforest Resort by Banyan Tree, which opened in November 2025, represents an urban-adjacent model of regenerative tourism that integrates luxury accommodation within a world-class wildlife destination. It is located within Singapore's Mandai Wildlife Reserve, a 126-hectare precinct home to the Singapore Zoo, Night Safari, River Wonders, Bird Paradise, and Rainforest Wild Asia.[93] Developed in partnership with Mandai Wildlife Group, the property is designed to encourage longer stays and deeper engagement with biodiversity and is Singapore's first to receive the Green Mark Platinum Super Low Energy award, achieving a 40 per cent reduction in energy consumption compared to typical benchmarks through passive design, mixed-mode ventilation, and solar energy integration.[94]

Beyond its sustainable operations, the resort is part of a broader conservation ecosystem. Mandai Nature, the conservation arm of Mandai Wildlife Group, manages the Singapore Conservation Impact Grant, a flagship local grant programme that provides annual funding of up to S$50,000 for Singapore-based projects focused on biodiversity conservation, ecological connectivity, and biophilic initiatives.[95] This grant supports projects that maintain or enhance biodiversity, improve habitat quality and connectivity, and increase appreciation for wildlife, directly contributing to conservation outcomes in Singapore. Mandai demonstrates that even within a dense urban setting, ecotourism can be commercially viable at scale by integrating high-quality accommodation with conservation education, protected area management, and direct funding for local conservation projects.

Community-based ecotourism

Wajaana Yaam Adventure Tours, Australia[96,97]

Wajaana Yaam Adventure Tours offers a model of community-based ecotourism where adventure activities directly fund cultural revitalisation. The business runs stand-up paddleboard and cultural tours across three locations on the Coffs Coast of New South Wales, Australia, on the homelands of the Gumbaynggirr tribal nation. All guides are Gumbaynggirr people or Aboriginal people with strong familial ties to Gumbaynggirr country.

The business was established as a social enterprise to address a critical challenge as by the early 2000s, the Gumbaynggirr language was critically endangered, with only 30 to 50 speakers remaining, none of whom were children. A portion of tour profits is invested in the Bularri Muurlay Nyanggan Aboriginal Corporation (BMNAC), which runs New South Wales' first Indigenous bilingual school, opened in 2022, alongside weekly after-school learning centres, cultural camps, and extensive language revitalisation initiatives. The school now enrols more than 100 students aged five to 15, with 20 students considered highly proficient in the language. The business also offers employment pathways for school graduates, creating a circular economy that sustains both cultural knowledge and local livelihoods.

Wajaana Yaam is ECO Certified by Ecotourism Australia and holds Respecting Our Culture (ROC) certification, demonstrating its commitment to culturally and environmentally sustainable practices. The tours attract approximately 4,000 visitors annually and offer immersive experiences including language lessons, bush tucker tastings, and visits to significant cultural sites. As the founder, Webb, explains, "That's where tourism fits in—it's about educating people from all walks of life about why language and culture is so important to our communities". Wajaana Yaam demonstrates how even a small-scale ecotourism operation can serve as a powerful vehicle for cultural preservation, community employment, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Sunakhari Buffer Zone Community Homestay, Nepal[98]

The Sunakhari Buffer Zone Community Homestay in Suwarnapur, Nepal, offers a model of community-based ecotourism designed to address both conservation and livelihood challenges. Located adjacent to Parsa National Park and near the Indian border, the area historically suffered from serious poaching issues. While strengthened wildlife protection measures largely eliminated poaching, the recovery of wildlife populations, including tigers, elephants, and rhinos, created a new challenge of human-wildlife conflict, with wild animals raiding crops, destroying property, and occasionally causing casualties.

To address this, WWF Nepal, in partnership with the Government of Nepal and the German Cooperation via the IUCN Tiger Programme, established a community-based ecotourism homestay initiative in 2016. It has attracted approximately 4,000 visitors annually and guests are able to experience Tamang culture through traditional dress, authentic local cuisine, and activities such as village walks, jungle walks, and bird watching.

The homestay initiative has provided participating households an additional income, and the project overall has established a revolving fund, provided cooperative management training for 425 beneficiaries, and supported bio-gas installations, safe drinking water, and organic farming to reduce forest dependency. Conservation efforts include developing 15 hectares of grassland, maintaining a 5-kilometre fire-line in the community forest, and engaging 107 young adults in conservation education and anti-poaching activities.

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Hong Kong can show how a compact global city moves beyond nature tourism, using high-integrity ecotourism to support Nature-based Solutions that protect ecosystems, strengthen communities and build resilience.

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