BEYOND NATURE TOURISM

Building High-Integrity Ecotourism to Support Nature-based Solutions

Summary Report for Policy and Practice

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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

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Forewords

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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.

About this summary

This publication forms part of a series of reports informed by the findings and discussions of the Hong Kong International Nature-based Solutions Action Week 2026. It distils the principal insights and proposed implementation pathway from the companion technical report. It is written for policymakers, destination managers, community partners, practitioners, operators, and funders. Detailed methods, stakeholder discussions, case profiles, legal analysis, and supporting evidence are presented in the full report.

Abbreviations

AFCD	Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
BSAP	Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
CEDD	Civil Engineering and Development Department
CPP	Coastal Protection Park
CSTB	Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau
EEB	Environment and Ecology Bureau
GBA	Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area
HKNbSDG	Hong Kong Nature-based Solutions Design Guidelines
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
KMGBF	Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework
KPI	Key performance indicator
NbS	Nature-based Solutions
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
WCP	Wetland Conservation Park

Glossaries

Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (BSAP)	A strategic blueprint for identifying priorities, setting strategies, as well as outlining actions for supporting biodiversity conservation[1].
Carrying capacity	The level and type of visitor use that a site can accommodate without causing unacceptable ecological, social, physical, or managerial impacts[2].
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[3].
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)	A practical guide for integrating Nature-based Solutions into Hong Kong's infrastructure works and development projects by promoting ecosystem diversity, mutually beneficial human–nature coexistence and improved resilience[4].
IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions	A framework comprising 8 criteria and 27 indicators that guides the design, assessment and improvement of Nature-based Solutions and helps stakeholders evaluate their effectiveness and potential for scale[5].
Nature-based Solutions	Actions that protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural and modified ecosystems that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously benefiting people and nature[6].
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[7].

Executive summary

Hong Kong has exceptional biodiversity for its size: more than 3,300 vascular plant species, over 580 bird species, around one-third of the bird species recorded across China, and 84 hard coral species[8]. Its country parks also received around 11 million visits in 2024[9]. Together, this ecological value and strong demand for nature-based recreation create a clear foundation for high-integrity ecotourism, provided tourism supports rather than undermines conservation.

Properly designed, ecotourism can support Nature-based Solutions (NbS) through conservation finance, community livelihoods, stewardship, education, and carefully managed public participation. A high-integrity model should also protect space for local communities to lead, operate, and benefit from ecotourism, including through small enterprises, community-guided experiences, local employment, procurement, locally authored interpretation, and benefit-sharing arrangements that support sustainable community development. Ecotourism is not an NbS in itself, but it can serve as a financing mechanism for NbS. The underlying intervention is the protection, sustainable management, or restoration of an ecosystem, while the visitor model is designed to support that intervention.

Building on work already under way, the next opportunity is to connect conservation, tourism, communities, science, operators, infrastructure, finance, and monitoring through a common destination-level approach.

Before substantial visitor activity begins, each destination should have clearly defined boundaries, management responsibilities and enforceable controls proportionate to its ecological sensitivity and expected level of use. Existing statutory and administrative mechanisms should be used where sufficient, with remaining gaps addressed through appropriate site-specific measures.

Why this matters now

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 directions under consultation bring integrated tourism, green transition, biodiversity protection, community engagement, and country and marine park management into the same policy window[10]. National plan also promotes tourism development within a broader national commitment to ecological priority, protected-area zoning and green development[11].

At the same time, the Government is advancing 'Ecology + Tourism' alongside three initiatives at different stages[12]: a proposed Sharp Island Marine Park[13], the planned Sam Po Shue Wetland Conservation Park (WCP)[14], and a proposed Coastal Protection Park (CPP)[15]. These initiatives provide a timely setting in which to connect policy ambitions with delivery.

A proposed pathway for implementation

This report proposes a coordinated **'Ecology + Tourism' initiative** within Hong Kong's wider NbS agenda. It would apply a shared quality and readiness framework, informed by the IUCN Global Standard for NbS and adapted locally, across three complementary demonstration destinations:

1. **Sharp Island:** Strengthen ecological and environmental protection, visitor management andoversight of tourism operators at an existing, high-pressure coastal destination.

2. **The planned Sam Po Shue WCP:** Establish an integrated framework embedding biodiversity conservation, sustainable aquaculture, environmental education, community participation, visitor management and long-term financing before the new destination is brought into operation.

3. **The proposed CPP at Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai:** Develop an integrated management model for a landscape-scale land-sea corridor supporting biodiversity conservation, sustainable oyster farming, rural community stewardship and low-impact recreation.

These destinations would not simply be promoted as three new attractions. Together, they would test a complete destination-management system across three contrasting settings.

Five strategic priorities

Priority	Intended result
1. Establish integrated governance and an enabling policy environment	Strong coordination across bureaux and agencies, with clear policy leadership and well-defined destination-level roles and responsibilities.
2. Build a science-based and digitally enabled management system	A consistent, evidence-based approach to assess ecological suitability, visitor capacity, community needs and management readiness.
3. Develop a network of high-integrity demonstration destinations	Showcased practical examples of ecotourism's contributions to ecosystem conservation, sustainable management, and ecological restoration.
4. Enable a high-value, low-impact ecotourism economy	Capable delivery partners and sustainable economic models tailored to the needs of each destination.
5. Create a transparent conservation finance and reinvestment system	Full destination costs are transparently financed, with agreed shares of tourism revenue reinvested in conservation and local communities.

A practical first-year pathway

Within the first year, the Government could kickstart territory-wide mapping and structured assessment of existing and potential ecotourism destinations. This should consider ecological sensitivity and conservation value, existing visitor pressures, community and cultural context, access and infrastructure, management capacity, and opportunities to support NbS. Using agreed criteria, destinations could be classified as unsuitable, requiring restoration or further study, appropriate only for restricted access, or potentially suitable for controlled ecotourism. The findings should inform and, where necessary, refine the selection and scope of the three proposed demonstration destinations.

For the selected destinations, the Government could then clarify the NbS objectives and measurable outcomes; confirm demonstration briefs, lead agencies and preparation funding; and support the baseline studies, community engagement, destination planning and monitoring needed to determine whether and when promotion and commercial activity should proceed.

The objective is not only to improve three destinations. It is to establish a repeatable process from mapping and screening to assessment, selection, preparation and review for deciding where ecotourism is appropriate, what conditions it must meet, and when activities should proceed, adapt, remain limited or stop.

1. Why now? Biodiversity and the 2026-2030 policy window

Hong Kong's countryside, coast, wetlands, islands and rural landscapes are part of the city's identity and visitor appeal. The protected-area system includes 25 country parks, 8 marine parks, the Mai Po Inner Deep Bay Ramsar Site and the Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark. These assets support conservation, recreation and education, while the 11 million country-park visits recorded in 2024 demonstrate sustained public interest[16].

The policy environment is increasingly supportive. Tourism Blueprint 2.0 emphasises quality over quantity, sustainable tourism and closer integration between tourism and ecology[17]. The Working Group on Developing Tourist Hotspots already provides a high-level platform for cross-departmental coordination[18].

Three current initiatives make the timing especially favourable:

1. **Sharp Island:** The proposed marine park covers approximately 63 hectares and is intended to strengthen protection of significant coral communities while supporting sustainable recreational use. Statutory designation is targeted for completion by mid-2027[19].

2. **The planned Sam Po Shue WCP:** Public and stakeholder consultation on Phase One is taking place from March to October 2026. Detailed design for Phase One, covering approximately 150 hectares, commenced in September 2025 and remains under way. The entire park will cover approximately 338 hectares, increasing to about 348 hectares when nearby wetland compensation areas are incorporated. It will combine ecological and fisheries enhancement, sustainable aquaculture, and eco-education and ecotourism facilities[20].

3. **Proposed CPP at Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai:** The initial concept covers approximately 2,370 hectares of land and sea and proposes biodiversity conservation, oyster-culture heritage and eco-learning zones[21].

Policy alignment: one initiative, multiple outcomes

National, regional and Hong Kong frameworks now converge around biodiversity restoration, community participation, green finance and evidence-based management.

The proposed initiative would not create a parallel agenda. It would translate these existing national, regional, and Hong Kong directions into coordinated action at Sharp Island, the planned Sam Po Shue WCP, and the proposed CPP.

Policy framework and relevant direction	Delivery through high-integrity ecotourism
National 15th Five-Year Plan policy suite (2026-2030): High-quality green development, carrying-capacity assessment, ecological restoration and greener operations[22].	Test ecological thresholds, monitoring and adaptive management at real coastal and wetland destinations.
Hong Kong's First Five-Year Plan (consultation document): Aligns tourism, biodiversity, country and marine park management, 'Beautiful Bays', green transition and GBA co-operation[23].	Connect these priorities through three demonstrations with measurable outcomes by 2030.
China's NBSAP (2023-2030): Prioritises mainstreaming, ecosystem protection and restoration, ecological-product value, participation, monitoring and diversified finance[24].	Tie visitor activity and revenue to ecosystem outcomes, local livelihoods, stewardship and transparent reinvestment.
Hong Kong's Climate Action Plan 2050: Sets carbon-neutrality, adaptation and resilience objectives[25].	Demonstrate how visitor revenue, stewardship and education can support coastal and wetland NbS, delivering measurable resilience, biodiversity and, where relevant, carbon benefits.
Hong Kong's BSAP 2035 : Explicitly promotes sustainable ecotourism, alongside NbS, wetland conservation, restoration, community participation and biodiversity finance[26].	Operationalise Priority Action 2.10 through a shared readiness process and three live destinations.
Hong Kong Tourism Blueprint 2.0: Advances 'Ecology + Tourism', quality over quantity and Hong Kong's sustainable-tourism demonstration role[27].	Translate strategy into destination governance, visitor and operator standards, community benefit and conservation finance.
Culture and Tourism Development Plan for the GBA: Connect ecological corridors and coastal and wetland protection with coastal and island tourism and regional collaboration[28].	Test and share a credible model for coastal and wetland destinations across the GBA.

2. What high-integrity ecotourism means

Nature-based tourism becomes high-integrity ecotourism only when it is deliberately managed to protect ecological conditions, provide meaningful learning, include affected communities and direct value towards long-term stewardship.

Ecotourism to support NbS

NbS protect, sustainably manage or restore natural or modified ecosystems while addressing societal challenges and delivering benefits for people and biodiversity[29]. The IUCN Global Standard uses eight criteria to test whether an intervention is environmentally sound, socially inclusive, economically viable and adaptively managed[30].

Ecotourism can support an NbS in five practical ways:

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.

The direction of support matters. At Sharp Island, the NbS would be the protection and sustainable management of coral and coastal ecosystems. For 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 would be designed around these outcomes, not treated as the intervention itself.

CLEAN: What high-integrity ecotourism should deliver

The report's CLEAN lens describes what good ecotourism is expected to 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 literary through interpretation, citizen science and immersive experiences.

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

A shared assessment framework

All demonstration destinations should follow a common assessment process, while retaining site-specific operating arrangements. Before major visitor infrastructure, official promotion or commercial expansion proceeds, the framework should determine whether tourism is suitable, what forms of access are acceptable and whether the destination is ready to manage them.

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.

The process 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.

Carrying capacity should therefore be treated as an adaptive management envelope, not a permanent daily quota. It may change with ecological seasons, weather, infrastructure, visitor behaviour and available management resources. Where evidence remains incomplete, initial access should remain conservative while monitoring improves.

Measuring performance and wider value

Performance measurement should:

1. Combine the IUCN Global Standard for NbS self-assessment with site-specific KPIs. The Standard provides a consistent structure for assessing NbS integrity but does not replace destination-level monitoring.

2. Define baselines, targets, measurement methods, reporting intervals and responsible data owners before operations begin.

3. Track a focused set of ecological, social, economic, visitor and resilience indicators, including habitat and species conditions, local employment and enterprise participation, visitor pressure and compliance, operating revenue and conservation reinvestment.

4. Recognise ecological, social and resilience benefits that are not captured by visitor numbers or direct revenue.

5. Value and, where appropriate, monetise these wider benefits where credible and proportionate methods are available.

6. Use monetary estimates to complement, not replace, ecological thresholds and non-monetary indicators, with assumptions and limitations reported transparently.

Key principle:
Readiness does not mean maximising visitor access. It means translating ecological evidence into enforceable operating conditions and maintaining the capacity to manage them over time.

3. Four lessons from evidence and practice

The international and Hong Kong cases in the technical report 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 allows visitors to measure collected clams and return undersized ones to the mudflat, providing a simple tool for responsible harvesting[31], Tai O dolphin initiatives link operator training with conservation guidance[32], and Leave No Trace programmes promote consistent behaviour on trails[33]. Pak Nai adds an important sequencing lesson: restoration and local stewardship should develop before additional tourism pressure[34]. 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[35]. The transferable lesson is not its scale or business model. It is the ability to coordinate functions that visitors experience as one journey but 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[36]. Wajaana Yaam in Australia and Sunakhari in Nepal 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[37,38]. Training has greater value when it connects to real operating rights, employment, procurement or enterprise opportunities.

4. Conservation finance must be explicit

Crees Foundation for Manu in the Peruvian Amazon rainforest connects a research and education ecolodge with long-term biodiversity monitoring, restoration, learning and community collaboration[39]. Misool in Raja Ampat, Indonesia links resort activity with a locally staffed marine reserve and conservation foundation[40]. Six Senses illustrates how a defined funding mechanism can connect operating revenue with environmental programmes[41]. The precise mechanism will vary, but the common lesson is that conservation contributions, responsibilities and reporting are 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.

Each case contributes one mechanism, one limitation and one practical question for Hong Kong. The value lies in adaptation, not replication.

4. Three demonstration destinations

The portfolio spans three stages: Sharp Island is an existing visitor hotspot, although its marine park is proposed; Sam Po Shue WCP is planned and not yet operational; and the Coastal Protection Park at Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai is proposed. Common principles and data definitions would support comparison, while ecological baselines, thresholds and operating arrangements would remain site-specific.

Destination	Demonstration role	Core question
Sharp Island (existing site)	Strengthen an existing, high-pressure destination	Can agreed ecological conditions be maintained while visitor behaviour, operator quality and management coordination improve?
Planned Sam Po Shue WCP	Design the complete system 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	Coordinate a landscape-scale land-sea corridor	Can biodiversity, traditional livelihoods and carefully managed recreation reinforce one another across a complex coastal corridor?

Together, the three demonstrations would generate practical methods that could later be adapted for other suitable locations. A useful result may be expansion, redesign, continued limited access or a finding that a proposed activity is unsuitable. Each outcome strengthens future decisions.

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[42].

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.

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[43].

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[44]. 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 industry participation arrangement.
3. Interpretation and visitor activities derived from conservation objectives.
4. An operating, maintenance, conservation and monitoring budget.
5. A clearly delineated park boundary, designated access points and physical or operational measures to prevent uncontrolled entry into sensitive areas, supported by enforceable rules governing visitor movement, domestic animals, commercial activities and temporary closures.

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[45].

Since the proposed CPP spans land and sea areas that may rely on different management mechanisms, its demonstration brief should map the legal status and enforcement authority of each zone. It should identify where existing protected-area, planning or other controls apply, where gaps remain and what additional measures are required before visitor access is expanded.

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 statutory and enforcement map identifying the applicable controls, regulatory gaps, responsible authority, and enforcement arrangements for each management zone.

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

5. 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, conducts 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 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 biodiversity 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 the 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 the 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.

6. 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.

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.

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.

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.

Conclusion

Hong Kong does not need to choose between conservation and a stronger visitor economy. The practical task is to build a system in which conservation defines the conditions for tourism, communities participate meaningfully, financial responsibilities are visible and evidence guides what happens next.

As the Government prepares Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan for 2026-2030, this report provides a practical starting point for translating its broader ambitions for ecological conservation, high-value tourism, green infrastructure, resilience and green finance into coordinated action.

The three proposed demonstration destinations offer a timely way to begin building this system through work already under way. By 2030, their most valuable result would be more than three well-managed destinations. It would be a credible and repeatable approach to high-integrity ecotourism that supports NbS across Hong Kong.

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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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