PRESS RELEASE

Beyond Nature Tourism
– Think Tank Proposes a Conservation-First Ecotourism Model for Hong Kong

Hong Kong, 7 September 2026 – Today, Civic Exchange launched *Beyond Nature Tourism: Building High-Integrity Ecotourism to Support Nature-based Solutions*. Emerging from discussions, partnerships, and insights generated during Hong Kong Nature-based Solutions (NbS) Action Week 2026, the report proposes a coordinated 'Ecology + Tourism' initiative and three demonstration destinations within Hong Kong's Nature-based Solutions (NbS) agenda. Under this model, conservation defines the conditions for tourism, communities participate meaningfully, and tourism-generated value is transparently reinvested in nature and local livelihoods.

Hong Kong supports more than 3,300 vascular plant species, over 580 bird species, and 84 hard coral species. Its country parks received around 11 million visits in 2024. This creates an opportunity for high-integrity ecotourism. Without ecological limits and active management, however, visitor growth can intensify habitat disturbance, erosion, waste, congestion, and pressure on communities.

The report comes as the world faces the prospect of climate overshoot. At the seminar, Professor Debra Roberts, Co-Chair of IPCC AR6 Working Group II, delivered a keynote address on why biodiversity and climate resilience must be considered together. She noted that, at current rates, warming will reach 1.5°C around 2030, adding: '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.'

The report emphasises that ecotourism is not in itself an NbS, rather ecotourism can support financing of conservation areas. Ecosystem protection, sustainable management, or restoration must come first. Tourism should then support measurable outcomes through conservation finance, community livelihoods, education, and managed participation. 'Hong Kong need not choose between conservation and a stronger visitor economy. Conservation must define where and how tourism grows.' said Ms Kitty Tam, Programme Lead of Civic Exchange.

To convert these principles into practice, the report introduces the CLEAN Framework: Culture, Local Communities, Economic Value, Action through Education and Nature-Positive outcomes. The framework provides a shared basis for planning and assessing high-integrity ecotourism initiatives.

Building on existing government initiatives, the report proposes three demonstration destinations: Sharp Island to strengthen protection and visitor management; the planned Sam Po Shue Wetland Conservation Park to integrate conservation, community participation, and visitation from the outset; and the proposed Coastal Protection Park at Tsim Bei Tsui, Lau Fau Shan and Pak Nai to test integrated land–sea management.

These destinations are system tests, not simply new attractions. Baselines, carrying-capacity thresholds, and operating arrangements would remain site-specific. Formal decision gates would determine whether activities proceed, adapt, remain limited or stop, with ecological approval mandatory at every stage.

The report identifies five priorities: integrated governance; science-based and digitally enabled management; a network of demonstration destinations; a high-value, low-impact visitor economy; and transparent conservation finance. It recommends embedding the Hong Kong Nature-based Solutions Design Guidelines and IUCN Global Standard for NbS in planning and review.

Within the first 12 months, Hong Kong could confirm the initiative and destination briefs, adopt a shared readiness process, fund ecological and community baselines before promotion, and establish a common learning platform. 'These demonstrations can build a tested, repeatable system for Hong Kong. Ecotourism should connect responsible hospitality with destination stewardship, ensuring that the visitor economy supports local communities and protects the natural assets on which it depends,' said Ms Charlie Yip, Community Empowerment Assistant of Civic Exchange.

As the Government prepares Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan for 2026–2030, the report provides a practical route for connecting conservation, high-value tourism, resilience, and green finance. By 2030, success should mean more than three better-managed destinations: it should create a credible and repeatable approach to high-integrity ecotourism across Hong Kong.

Full Report and Press Materials available at this link or QR code below:

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