

Environment and Conservation Fund

Nature Conservation Management Agreement Proposal – Wetland Management Programme for Fishpond

Purpose

This paper invites Members' advice on a funding application received under the Nature Conservation Management Agreement (MA) Scheme. The application is submitted by the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (HKBWS) (**Attachment 1**).

Background

2. Under the MA scheme, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may apply for funding from the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF) for entering into management agreements with landowners¹. In the MA schemes that have been approved so far, the NGOs provide the landowners or tenants or occupiers with financial incentives in exchange for management rights over their land, the carrying out of certain functions or activities on the land or their cooperation in enhancing conservation of the sites concerned.

3. The fishponds located in the Northwest New Territories are the largest stretch of continuous and contiguous wetland remaining in Hong Kong. The fishponds are of intrinsic ecological value as it forms an integral part of the Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay wetland ecosystem. They provide important feeding and roosting grounds for a diverse assemblage of bird species, in particular for migratory birds and ardeids (herons and egrets). Every winter, thousands of waterbirds are recorded in the Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay area, and many of these waterbirds are found to occur in the fishponds.

4. In the past, most fishpond operators in the Deep Bay area adopted traditional farming practice such as removal of weeds on pond bunds, regular drain-down and sun drying of fishponds. Under the traditional farming practice,

¹ The objective of the MA Scheme is to encourage partnership between competent conservation groups and the proper users of the priority sites in conservation activities. The reference to "landowners" is in a broad sense rather than strictly limited to the legal ownership title.

while fish are harvested to provide economic returns, the left-over trash fish on the drained ponds and the exposed pond bunds/shallow water habitats provide suitable feeding and roosting habitats for birds, representing a good example of wise use of wetland in which fish culture practice coexists in harmony with bird conservation.

5. Nevertheless, this ecologically desirable practice is no longer the dominant way of fishpond operation nowadays. Most of the fishponds in the Deep Bay area are under intensive commercial management at present. The mode of operation is different from the traditional one in that there is no regular drain-down and sun drying of fishponds. The water is typically kept at a high level such that many wading birds could not forage or roost in the fishponds. Besides, in order to protect the fish stock from predation by fish-eating birds (in particular Great Cormorants), the operators use various means to deter birds from entering their fishponds, including illegal use of nets and hooks, thus creating a conflict between bird conservation and fish farming.

6. With a view to protecting the ecological integrity of Deep Bay wetland, restoring the ecological functions of fish ponds there, and preserving the cultural heritage of local traditional practice of fish farming, the HKBWS proposes to implement an MA project to encourage maintenance and operation of fish ponds in Deep Bay area in a sustainable manner. Under the project, fishpond operators will adopt traditional and ecologically sustainable operation regime to manage their fish ponds such as regular drain-down of fishponds to the required water level, maintenance of shallow pond habitats for bird feeding and roosting, clearance of weeds on pond bunds to create more habitats for birds and prohibition of the use of lethal bird deterring device etc. The key conservation objectives are to restore and enhance the conservation value of commercial fishponds in the Deep Bay area and build up a more harmonious relationship between local fish pond farming and bird conservation. Besides, the indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage of traditional fish farming practice would be preserved. The project would also provide up-to-date ecological information for formulating strategies for long-term conservation of the wetland areas and raising public awareness on the ecological value of fishponds.

7. Under the project, about 700 ha of fishponds located within two Priority Sites for Enhanced Conservation, namely the Ramsar Site and the Deep Bay Wetland outside Ramsar Site (equivalent to around 70% of all the fishponds in the Deep Bay area) would be enhanced, and about 200 fish pond operators would be engaged. Of the 700 ha of fishponds, about 395 ha (i.e. 56%) are located on leased land and the rest (i.e. 305 ha or 44%) are on unleased government land. While the fishponds that fall on leased land are either operated by the lessees themselves or by their tenants, a majority of those fishponds on unleased government land

have been in operation for decades without formal authorization from the Government. HKBWS will provide fishpond operators with financial incentives for the adoption of traditional aquaculture practices which are beneficial to a significant number of waterbirds using the fishponds as foraging and roosting ground. In this connection, the proponent proposes to enter management agreement with the fishpond operators to adopt the ecologically friendly practices and no renting of land or tenancy agreement would be involved.

8. Considering that the fishponds on leased and unleased Government land in the two Priority Sites are well blended in terms of locality and ecology, it is proposed that the current MA project should cover all fishponds in the two Priority Sites irrespective of their land status. Subsidy will only be granted to proven genuine fishpond operators of the engaged fishponds who have conducted the required management work as verified by field inspection. In this regard, Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department has maintained a database of genuine fishpond operators in the Priority Sites, which will be drawn upon for confirmation of the status of the operators. From a land management perspective, we are consulting the Lands Department on the implication of involving fishponds on unleased government land without Government's authorization in this project. Pending advice from the Lands Department, the MA project may be implemented initially on those fishponds on leased land, and extended to cover the unleased Government land when the concerns about the land issue has been addressed.

9. A summary of the application is at **Annex A**.

Recommendations

Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) and the Environmental Protection Department (EPD)

10. AFCD and EPD have examined the application in accordance with the following major evaluation criteria –

- (a) the benefits that a proposed project will bring to the efforts in enhancing the conservation of the site concerned, better achieving the nature conservation objectives, and evaluating the effectiveness of this new conservation measure;
- (b) the sustainability of a proposed project including its resource implications, participation of the landowner(s) and local community, nature and enforceability of the management agreement concerned;

- (c) the technical and project management capability of the applicant organisation, as well as its track record, including the effectiveness of past projects, and its ability to comply with funding conditions;
- (d) whether the proposed project's schedule of implementation is well-planned and practicable, and the duration is reasonable;
- (e) whether the proposed budget is reasonable and realistic, and whether the project is cost-effective, with full justification for every expenditure item; and
- (f) whether the proposed project has alternative sources of funding, and whether it would be more appropriate for the proposed project to be funded by other sources.

11. We consider that, on balance, the proposed project is worth supporting in view of the benefits the proposed project will bring to the conservation of the concerned sites. The two departments' assessment is at **Annex B** for Member's reference.

Nature Conservation Subcommittee under the Advisory Council on the Environment

12. At the meeting on 18 October 2011, the Nature Conservation Subcommittee under the Advisory Council on the Environment was briefed on the initial proposal of the new MA project at Deep Bay areas. The paper on the proposed MA project together with the assessment of AFCD and EPD was subsequently circulated for members' agreement on 28 October 2011. Members in general supported the proposal and recommended submitting the application to the ECF Committee for endorsement.

Advice Sought

13. Members are invited to advise whether the MA application should be supported and, if supported, the exact amount of funds to be granted.

*Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
Environmental Protection Department
November 2011*

**Summary of Application for
Nature Conservation Management Agreement Project**

Project Title	Wetland Management Programme for Fishpond 魚塘濕地管理計劃
Site involved	The “Deep Bay Wetland outside Ramsar Site” and the “Ramsar Site” Priority Sites for Enhanced Conservation
Size of Proposed Management Area	About 700 hectares (number of fishermen to be engaged: about 200)
Proponent	Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (HKBWS, 香港觀鳥會)
Project Description	This project aims at restoring and enhancing the conservation value of commercial fishponds in the Northwest New Territories, especially avifauna, through a partnership programme between HKBWS and local fishermen.
Key Conservation Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – To restore and enhance the conservation value of commercial fishponds in Northwest New Territories; – To build up a more harmonious relationship between local fish farming and bird conservation; – To preserve the cultural heritage of local traditional practice of fish farming; – To provide up-to-date ecological information and formulate strategies for long-term ecological conservation in the area: and – To raise public awareness on the ecological value of fishponds.
Duration	14 months (1 January 2012 – 28 February 2013)
Amount of Fund applied	Funding applied: \$ 4,988,200 Expected income: \$ 20,000

**Evaluation of Application for
Nature Conservation Management Agreement Project**

Our views on the applications received are set out below:

**Wetland Management Programme for Fishpond
(submitted by the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (HKBWS))**

Evaluation criteria	Comments
Benefits that the project will bring to the efforts in enhancing the conservation of the site concerned and in better achieving the nature conservation objectives	<p>The project would benefit the conservation of Deep Bay fishponds and protect the ecological integrity of the Deep Bay wetland by –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reducing and minimizing the incidence of any irregularities and environmentally incompatible activities on the fishponds; • restoring and enhancing the ecological value of fish ponds in the Deep Bay area by providing financial encouragement to pond-fish farmers to continue the traditional management of their ponds; • enhancing conservation of waterbirds and wetland dependent birds in Deep Bay areas; • providing up-to-date ecological information to improve the long-term conservation and management of fish pond habitats in Hong Kong; • enhancing communications with fish pond operators/owners to maintain the long-term sustainability of the fish pond farming, and gaining their support in nature conservation; • increasing the public and pond-fish farming community's understanding of the importance of the Ramsar Site and the Deep Bay fish ponds; and • demonstrating how stakeholders cooperate in biodiversity conservation to the general public.
Sustainability including its	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The present proposal requires a funding of

<p>resources implications, participation of the landowners and local community, the nature and enforceability of the management agreement</p>	<p>\$4,988,200 from ECF. The expected income generated from public visits \$20,000 will be returned to ECF to cover part of the cost.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This pilot scheme will provide HKBWS with seed money to initiate management agreements with fish farmers in Deep Bay wetland so as to enhance the conservation value of fish ponds. Experience gained will help formulate strategies for the long-term ecological conservation in the area. • About 200 fishermen would be engaged in the proposed project. • Other than wetland conservation, this project would also help preserve the cultural heritage of local traditional practice of fish farming. It could demonstrate how ecological conservation, cultural heritage preservation and local economic activity could be brought together through partnership amongst the Government, NGOs and the local community.
<p>Technical and project management capability and track record of the applicant. NGOs may seek support from other relevant professional bodies when necessary</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HKBWS is experienced in bird monitoring in Hong Kong and implementing environmental projects including projects funded by the ECF. • HKBWS is currently participating in the waterbird monitoring programme in the Deep Bay area funded by AFCD. • HKBWS has gained rich experience and knowledge on nature conservation of private land in Long Valley in the Pilot Scheme and current MA scheme. The results produced so far are encouraging in terms of species and habitat diversity, cooperation with local communities and conservation education. • The project is supported by the Hong Kong New Territories Fish Culture Association (HKNTFCA).
<p>Whether the proposed project's schedule of implementation is well-planned and practicable,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposed schedule of implementation is mainly based on the actual plans of pond draining of the fishermen. Habitat

<p>and the duration is reasonable</p>	<p>management (e.g. draining down of fish ponds) will be arranged in a staged basis over one year. Water bird monitoring is scheduled year-round while public activity is scheduled as appropriate. It is considered well-planned and practicable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considering that the current proposal is a pilot MA scheme covering around 700 ha of fish ponds in Deep Bay area, the proposed duration of one year of habitat management is considered reasonable.
<p>Whether the budget is reasonable and realistic, and whether the project is cost effective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project will involve the management of about 700 ha (around 70%) of fish ponds in the Deep Bay wetland and a wide range of ecological monitoring and public awareness programmes. This habitat conservation management measure will account for 63% (\$3,150,000) of the budget. It also involves revenue generating activities (e.g. eco-tours) to enhance the sustainability of the budget. The requested amount of funding is considered reasonable. • Given the large extent of fish ponds to be managed and the substantial amount of work to be undertaken by the applicant, the project is considered cost effective and the budget is deemed reasonable. The exact amount of funding to be approved will be decided by the ECF Committee. • The exact amount of funding for the management of fish ponds is based on the number of participating fishermen. The fishermen will be reimbursed by management work done. It is considered a cost-effective means to solicit the support of fishermen in this MA project.
<p>Whether the proposed project has alternative sources of funding, and whether it would be more appropriate for the proposed project to be funded</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General public members are required to pay for eco-tours (\$40 per visit). It is estimated to generate \$20,000 over a year. • The income generated from the eco-tours activity is limited. Other possible revenue

by other sources	<p>generating activities, such as bird watching courses and harvesting activities could be considered. Sponsorship from the District Council could also be sought as other sources of funding to meet part of the expenses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Financial support from sources like the ECF is still required. However, funds required may be reduced in the long run if the above income generating measures are proved to be effective.
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*Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
Environmental Protection Department
November 2011*