

Speech by Commissioner for Tourism

Following is a speech by the Commissioner for Tourism, Mrs Rebecca Lai, at the "Eco-tourism Business Opportunities 2002 Conference" today (June 5) : (English only)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very honoured to be invited to join you at this conference on Eco-tourism Business Opportunities 2002.

Indeed, this conference is a very timely initiative given that 2002 is the International Year of Eco-tourism (IYE) declared by the United Nations General Assembly. The objectives of the IYE are three-fold, namely to generate greater awareness among public and private sectors and the community regarding eco-tourism, disseminate methods and techniques for the planning, management and monitoring of eco-tourism, and promote the exchange of experience in this field. I think today's conference has covered all these goals.

An often asked question is what the definition of eco-tourism is. I have come across quite a range of such definitions. A United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) paper, for example, describes two perspectives of eco-tourism. The first one refers to eco-tourism as a concept and as a component of the field of sustainable tourism. Some of the guiding principles include minimizing consumption of non-renewable resources, contributing to conservation of bio-diversity, and involving responsible actions on the part of the tourists and the tourism industry. It has a special reference to the local community as it means sustainable development for their longer-term well being, as well as participation, ownership and business opportunities. Secondly, the UNEP paper sees eco-tourism as a niche and growing market segment. It covers what we would normally describe as cultural tourism and rural tourism, as well as nature tourism where the prime motivation is the observation and appreciation of natural features and related cultural assets.

I would like to borrow these two perspectives and talk about how we in Hong Kong approach eco-tourism.

As a major tourist destination, Hong Kong has an interest in ensuring the tourism industry's sustainable development. As Asia's World City, we are also committed to our share of duty to ensure the sustainability of the environment while we pursue our various tourism development projects and products.

Actually, the Government has made major endeavours to contribute to the long-term overall sustainability of Hong Kong. Last year, a Sustainable Development Unit (SDU) was established directly under the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office to coordinate and promote sustainable development both within Government and in the community.

When it comes to the formulation of any major initiative and programme, whether tourism-related or otherwise, all Government bureaux and departments now need to complete sustainability assessments and explain the sustainability implications when they submit their proposals to the Chief Secretary's Committees or Executive Council for policy approval. Although this is a relatively new system, over time it will ensure that the essential sustainability principles and concepts will be integrated into our major policies or action programmes. For example, the Tourism Commission is in the course of selecting a franchisee and finalizing the design and framework for the construction and operation of a cable car system on Lantau Island. Our assessment and analysis also cover the sustainability angle of the proposals.

The tourism trade has actually made a head start on eco-tourism with an initiative in 2000 to adopt a charter in line with the Environmentally Sustainable Development Strategy published in 1999. In support of this initiative, a resource unit has been established and is being operated by the Polytechnic University to provide assistance to trade members and promote the Strategy through a dedicated website and regular publications.

The application of these good principles involves a wide range of areas, such as the management of facilities and resources, which requires private sector expertise; and the quality of tour guiding and resources for training. Every one in the community has a role to play in putting these principles to actions: corporates can contribute by providing financial support, or becoming owners of green facilities themselves, NGOs have a key role to play in areas such as raising awareness, working with the Government, and often acting as the conscience of society to ensure that a proper balance is achieved between conservation, public access and business opportunities.

I know it is the last two words that I said, business opportunities, that catch the attention of participants of this conference. So how do we see eco-tourism as a market segment and what are the business opportunities associated with its developments?

According to a World Tourism Organisation (WTO) study, eco-tourism currently represents between 2 and 4 per cent of global tourism. Worldwide, especially in western countries, eco-tourism activities have been expanding rapidly over the past two decades, and further growth is expected in the future. For Hong Kong, among the top ten special interest activities voted by our visitors are heritage, art and cultural exhibitions, aquatic activities and eco-tourism such as hiking in countryside. They are particularly popular among visitors from the long haul markets and Japan.

In his budget speech of March this year, the Financial Secretary identified tourism as one of four high-value-added economic sectors of particular importance to Hong Kong. And within the tourism sector, he places specific emphasis on ecological and cultural tourism. We have been working positively to make optimum and sensible use of our green resources to promote and develop nature-based tourism activities. These include hiking, cycling and other participatory experiences, dolphin watching and nature experiences, through to educational experiences such as museum and nature reserve visits. Our country parks and marine parks attract over 11 million local and overseas visitors in 2001. We have a rich heritage to do much more on this front - Hong Kong has 2,900 species of flora, 200 species of butterflies and 100 species of dragonflies, 450 species of birds, and many more. On top of this, we plant 600,000 trees every year, mostly native, and constantly enhance the education and visitor facilities.

The International Eco-tourism Society produced a rather straight forward definition for eco-tourism in 1991 and it describes eco-tourism as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people. Our latest effort in building the second phase of the Hong Kong Wetland Park is a good example. As part of the development of Tin Shui Wai New Town, a 64-hectare site is being rehabilitated as environmental mitigation areas on which wetland vegetation will regrow and which will attract birds and fowls to inhabit and visit. The Wetland Park development will allow half a million students and visitors to come close to this reconstructed wetland every year without causing disturbance to the

vegetation and wildlife there. In so doing, we can also safeguard the neighbouring nature reserve at the Mai Po Marshes which can entertain only 10% of this visitation.

At the same time, we are also actively exploring new opportunities to boost our green credentials. For example, we will soon commission a study into the tourism potential of the northern New Territories, with particular emphasis on nature-based tourism and local culture tourism. I am pleased to say that our efforts have the full support of the community: evident from the recent motion debate in the Legislative Council, and related discussions in a number of District Councils.

In pursuing these new initiatives, we are conscious of the fact that unlike major theme parks which can cater for tens of millions of visitors a year and generate billion dollars of economic return, eco-tourism is primarily for smaller groups and by smaller operators. Our challenge is not only in developing products which pass sustainability criteria but also make good business sense at least to some operators. A key solution lies with early involvement of the community and the business sector, and we look forward to receiving your support in our course of work.

Talking about community involvement and business partnership, the government's SDU has also been promoting sustainable development to the community and reaching out to the core stakeholders such as BEC. On 10 and 11 June, it will, together with the business and social services sectors, co-host an international symposium on "Sustainability and the City", with participants from overseas, the Mainland and local to share experience and visions and to discuss imminent sustainability issues particularly for Hong Kong and the region. I understand that SDU colleagues are also here and am told that you are most welcome to contact them to complete registration for the Symposium right away.

All in all, partnership amongst the Government, the business sector, and the community is the key to sustainable development. We hope that Hong Kong, through our concerted effort, would not only grow as a world class tourist destination, a world-class city, but also as a clean, comfortable and pleasant home for us and our future generations.

I would like to congratulate the Business Environment Council on this constructive and timely forum, and look forward to an interesting and fruitful cross-fertilisation of ideas on eco-tourism. Thank you.

End/Wednesday, June 5, 2002

NNNN

1

- 2 -