



Saying Goodbye to Lung Mei

Text and photo: Derek Li & Nectar Gan

A gentle breeze blows as couples walk along the rocky beach. The last of the fading sunlight catches the water, producing glimmers on the waves. Children laugh as they splash the water. The sun is slowly setting and dusk is falling on Lung Mei Beach.

Lung Mei Beach has been in the headlines recently because the government plans to build a 200-metre artificial bathing beach there, but many have probably passed it without noticing it. That is because Lung Mei Beach is unassuming at first glance. It is a small, muddy bay along the Ting Kok shoreline in Tai Po. Located in an intertidal zone of the enclosed Tolo Harbour, the mudflat is abundant with microorganisms and has become a home for more than 200 kinds of marine animals. At low tides, you can see seashore creatures

such as starfish and anemones left between the rocks.

The government's Environmental Impact Assessments say the beach sustains around 20 marine species but environmental groups say they have identified more than 200, some of which have conservation value. Derek Li Kam-wa, a spokesman for the Hong Kong Wildlife Forum says a report on seahorses in Hong Kong found five species in 10 different locations. Four different species were found in Lung Mei Beach alone. "We believe we have found a community with the habitat based here," says Li.

Although environmental groups have been opposing the government's plan to provide a public swimming beach for Tai Po area residents since 2008, the issue did not gain wider coverage until this summer. The Legislative Council approved

HK\$200 million to fund the project in July and a rally to protect the beach in November, attended by thousands of people failed to change the government's mind.

Apart from organising petitions and protests, environmentalists have also invited citizens to join tours of the mudflat and observe the sea creatures.

Coral Kwok, a member of the Hong Kong Wildlife Forum, says that it is even more important for people to see the place if it is to be changed forever. As of October, she has already led four tours with 40 to 50 participants each. It was on one of these tours that she saw demon fish for the first time in her life.

Kwok has opened a Facebook page called "Lung Mei Seaside Education Centre", which updates information



about the on-going action to halt the reconstruction plan. She hopes people can learn more about coastal ecology from Lung Mei Beach.

Social media have played a big part in raising awareness about the bay. Ray So Lok-hin, an ecology graduate, arranged an event on Facebook to invite people for a night visit to Lung Mei. As the tide is lowest at 5 a.m., many seashore animals that cannot be seen in the day time will appear on the mudflat in the early hours of the morning. "[The project] will ruin the whole coastal environment, so [we] need to grasp the last chance," So says.

And so in the small hours one mid-week day in October, around two dozen people holding their lights and cameras, waded in the cold seawater, amazed by the beautiful seahorses, demon fish and jellyfish.

Since Lung Mei Beach started to get intensive media coverage this

summer, many people have made the trip to see the mudflat before it disappears for good.

One, who gives his name as Kam, wanted his children to have the chance to see and touch the sea creatures. "When I travel to other places, usually it will be the aquarium and marine parks that provides starfish which we can touch," he says. "[Here] you can see them in this natural environment."

Not all of those coming to bid their farewells are new visitors. Some have been travelling here for years. Wong Yuet-Han, 65, lives in Tsuen Wan but has been coming to the beach for over 30 years. "I come here to dig clams," she says, "and then I will cook them at home." Wong is very fond of the place and thinks it is a pity it will be wiped out.

But the surge in visitor numbers has also brought concerns about the negative influence human activities

can bring to the mudflat and its creatures.

The Hong Kong Wildlife Forum's Derek Li, who has studied marine life for more than a decade, is disappointed by visitors who capture the sea creatures and take them home, as a lot of the animals will soon die after leaving the sea.

"The education [level] of marine conversation [in Hong Kong] is zero. It has not yet started," Li says. He hopes that Lung Mei will raise people's awareness of the need for coastal protection regardless of whether or not their efforts to preserve the mudflat will succeed in the end.

Not everyone is opposed to the artificial beach plan. Some point to the tourism value and job opportunities created by the project. A Sha Tin resident who gave his name as Wong says he has always hoped there could be a beach in the neighbourhood. He points out that Lung Mei is right next to a bus stop and accessible to all.

"It will be a public beach and this is very good. The rich can come, and the lower class can also come," Wong says.

Despite all the protests, reconstruction is slated to go ahead. The mudflat is doomed to be replaced. But for those who have enjoyed their time on the mudflat and appreciated its beauty, Lung Mei will still exist. It will be preserved in their memory. ▽





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