

EDITORIAL

This year, 1995, is again significant for the development of marine science in Hong Kong and it reflects the growing interest in the marine environment locally. On 24 November 1994, Hong Kong's Legislative Council debated the first reading of the Marine Parks Bill. This was finally passed into law by the Council on 31 May 1995 and the Marine Parks Ordinance thus became effective on 1 June 1995. This will eventually allow for the designation of proposed marine parks and reserves in Hong Kong. On 10 August 1995, the Country Parks Board was officially retitled the Country and Marine Parks Board with new responsibilities for the proposed marine parks and reserves. At that time too, the Marine Parks and Reserves Working Group, which had been responsible for the drafting of the legislation, was renamed the Marine Parks and Reserves Committee. Established in 1989, with representation on it by the Marine Biological Association of Hong Kong, the working group presented its first report to the Government in 1990. That report, from a short-list of seven sites, selected three, that is, Yan Chau Tong / Li Chi Wo and Hoi Ha Wan, as possible marine parks and Cape d'Aguilar as a marine reserve. Subsequently, extensive consultation took place between the Government and interested parties and the final recommendation to gazette the three areas was made on 1 August 1995, at the last meeting of the working group. Between 1990 and 1995, the working group not only developed the legislation and its associated regulations, but also defined the sea areal extent of the proposed parks and reserves. The only action needed now is designation of the proposed parks and reserves by the Government. After that is accomplished, work can commence to manage them, effectively, for the future generations of Hong Kong people. Two books about the marine parks and reserves, *Hoi Ha Wan* and *An Introduction to the Cape d'Aguilar Marine Reserve, Hong Kong*, can be obtained from the World Wide Fund for Nature Hong Kong and The Swire Institute of Marine Science, respectively.

Another important date in 1995 was 4 September, when the Hong Kong Government agreed to a proposal to designate the Mai Po Marshes, Hong Kong's largest area of mudflats, mangroves, marsh, prawn ponds (*gei wai's*) and fish ponds as a RAMSAR site in recognition of its vital international role as a stopover place for large flocks of migrating waterbirds and resident birds, in particular.

In 1994, The Hong Kong Government sponsored two Ph.D. students based at the Swire Institute of Marine Science (SWIMS), to study the Chinese White dolphin, elsewhere referred to as the Indo-Pacific Humpback dolphin (*Sousa chinensis*), in view of the emerging concern regarding the large number of dead animals (nine in 1994) recorded as strandings in northwestern waters. Such a tragedy was (and is) widely believed to be the result of the developments taking place in the waters to the north of Lantau Island, particularly with regard to the construction of the new airport at Chek Lap Kok and its 10,000 hectare reclamation 'footprint'. Other developments are also taking place in these waters, however, and which, it is now known, are the almost exclusive habitat of the dolphin. Studies now indicate that the population size is around 80 individuals and with nine more adult deaths up to the end of 1995, seven births in 1994, but only four in 1995, one of which has subsequently died, the mortality rate is estimated to be 20% per annum, so that the population will have become locally extinct by the beginning of the next millenium. It has become a matter of the greatest concern that Hong Kong — ranking as eighth in the world league of trading economies, with the sixth highest per capita GDP in the world in 1993 and a budget surplus in 1994 of HK\$19.2 billion — cannot protect this species. The dolphin particularly prefers the shallow area of water around a group of three islands, Tree Island, Sha Chau and Lung Kwu Chau, in the furthest northwestern waters of Hong Kong and this was proposed by the Swire Institute of Marine Science researchers as a possible dolphin sanctuary. Regretably, however, the Provisional Airport Authority had already and unknowingly decided that the islands would be the site of a temporary

Aviation Fuel Receiving Facility (AFRF) for the new airport with docking facilities for between 3,000-10,000 tonne tankers, four of which will each week unload aviation fuel for onward transmission to the new airport via submarine pipelines. This temporary facility will require a dredged turning circle and channel for the vessels. The life span of the facility is estimated at between two to seven years, whilst a permanent pipeline is constructed. Notwithstanding, in an attempt to placate conservationists who argued that such a facility was both unnecessary if plans had been made in time to build a permanent facility direct to the airport and that its construction would spell the end of the dolphins, the Government has proposed that a 1,200 hectare area of sea bed around the islands be designated as a marine park.

Although this must be seen as a positive attempt to conserve an important component of Hong Kong's marine life, indeed one that is specifically protected by the Wild Animal Protection Ordinance (Chapter 170, 1976; revised 1992), there is now an emerging view that the proposed park will not be effective in protecting the dolphins. If no developments were planned for the area, there might be a chance that the dolphins could be saved. The AFRF and all the other activities that will, of necessity, grow as this area is developed, along the Planning Department's guidelines, to marry Hong Kong into those other developments taking place in China around the Pearl River delta, must result sooner or later in the local extirpation of the dolphins. The only possibility for their survival would be the establishment of a much bigger park to the south, west and north of northwest Lantau, ideally extending into Chinese waters also. The Chinese white dolphin is protected by Hong Kong law, by Chinese State Law and is internationally classified as endangered (CITES, Appendix I). It is a remarkable fact that, despite being afforded all this protection, the dolphin will probably become locally extinct and that Hong Kong and China cannot, together, protect it.

Thus, although such local conservation legislation, proposals and achievements are very real, the truth is that, for example, the Mai Po Marshes are still threatened by surrounding developments, the dolphin sanctuary will be one on paper only, corals at Hoi Ha Wan continue to die and, as reported to me just recently, all of the colonies of the coral *Porites lobata* have died in the pool at the proposed Cape d'Aguilar Marine Reserve. Laudable though, therefore, that so much has been achieved, it is now increasingly doubtful that any of the places proposed for designation as marine parks and reserves will actually survive. It is abundantly clear that every existing and proposed marine park and reserve is at the extreme periphery of Hong Kong and that around them developments in China are accelerating, for example, the northern and eastern shores of Mirs Bay and the north shore of Deep Bay. Any Hong Kong proposals, therefore, to protect sensitive marine environments from internal pressures will meet external ones which will grow in ignorance of what the Hong Kong Government is attempting to protect and why.

What is needed is for Hong Kong to be placed within the regional context of southern China so that conservation plans are understood by both the governments of China and Hong Kong. To help achieve this, the Third International Conference on the Marine Biology of the South China Sea is to be convened in Hong Kong by the Marine Biological Association of Hong Kong and the Swire Institute of Marine Science from 28 October to 1 November 1995 (inclusive), at the University of Hong Kong. The conference will hear presentations on and discuss three major topics: (i), Taxonomy and Biological Diversity; (ii), Biology and Ecology and (iii), Coastal Zone Management and Conservation of the Biological Resources of the South China Sea. Interested potential participants should contact the Conference Secretary at the Swire Institute of Marine Science.

At the 13th Annual General Meeting of the Marine Biological Association of Hong Kong, held on 26 May 1995, the following persons were either elected or re-elected to positions on the Council of the Association: Dr S.F. Leung (Vice-chairman), Mr K.F. Leung (Meetings Secretary) and Dr S.G. Cheung, Dr C.K. Wong and Dr P.S. Wong (Councillors). Retiring from the council, Dr S.T. Chiu (Vice-chairman) and Dr R.G. Ong Che and Dr K.H. Chu (Council members) are herein thanked for their contributions to the work of the Association.

Retiring from the Editorial Board of *Asian Marine Biology* after serving for two years is Dr M. Williams and her position has been filled by Dr J.E.N. Veron of the Australian Institute of Marine Science, Queensland, Australia.

Brian Morton