

Grave sweepers urged to prevent hill fires

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) today (April 3) reminded people paying respects to their ancestors at graveyards in the countryside during the Ching Ming Festival period to exercise caution and prevent hill fires.

An AFCD spokesman said it is an offence under the Forests and Countryside Ordinance (Cap. 96) to burn offerings improperly or leave behind kindling in the countryside. Any person who contravenes the ordinance is liable to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and one year's imprisonment.

The AFCD will deploy staff and enforcement officers to patrol graveyards in the countryside during the Ching Ming Festival period. Those found breaching the law will be prosecuted.

The majority of hill fires in the territory are caused by human negligence. Accidents can be prevented if grave sweepers observe some simple guidelines:

- * Remove weeds around the graves with tools and never burn weeds;
- * Burning should only be done inside a container or iron bucket;
- * Never leave burning incense unattended; and
- * Make sure all kindling is put out before leaving.

The spokesman said that metal containers for burning offerings properly will be handed out to grave sweepers at suitable locations in the country parks during the Ching Ming Festival. The AFCD will also deploy additional country park wardens to step up patrol at hill fire black spots.

Members of the public are reminded to keep the countryside clean. Before leaving, grave sweepers should not leave behind their offerings or rubbish. The AFCD issued fixed penalty notices to 94 persons for littering in the country parks last year.

With the view of preventing the spread of COVID-19, the spokesman also appealed to the public to avoid grave sweeping during the peak period on the day of the Ching Ming Festival. Members of the public are urged to go grave-sweeping long after the festival to avoid overcrowding, which could increase the spread of the virus. The public must comply with the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap.599G) during the specified period.

Meanwhile, the spokesman reminded grave sweepers to maintain appropriate social distance with other people, avoid meal gatherings at worship sites or in crowded places as well as maintain good personal and environmental hygiene so as to lower the risk of disease transmission, adding that the country park

barbecue sites and campsites have been closed until April 11 in light of the latest developments of COVID-19 epidemic.