

LCQ13: Members of public flocking to countryside amid epidemic

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Lo Wai-kwok and a written reply by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (February 3):

Question:

Some residents in the New Territories have relayed that since the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, the number of visitors to the countryside such as country parks has been increasing incessantly, giving rise to public health and hygiene problems such as the spread of the epidemic disease and the accumulation of rubbish left by visitors. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that a large number of countryside visitors gather from time to time in the countryside for recreation and amenity, increasing the risk of spreading the epidemic disease, whether the relevant Government departments will step up management and law enforcement in such places; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given that the authorities have reduced the numbers of rubbish bins and recycling bins in the country parks in recent years to encourage visitors to "take their litter home with them", whether the authorities have reviewed if such arrangement has aggravated the haphazard disposal of rubbish by visitors in the country parks; whether the authorities will adjust such arrangement during the epidemic; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether the authorities have communicated with the rural committees and local organisations in various districts to explore ways of tackling the aforesaid public health and hygiene problems; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) whether the authorities will step up promotional efforts through the media and social platforms to advise members of the public to avoid flocking to the countryside during the epidemic, and of the matters requiring their special attention when engaging in activities in such areas; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government notices that there have been a considerable number of members of the public visiting country parks and other countryside areas since the epidemic broke out last year. Relevant Government departments have stepped up patrol in country parks and other hiking hotspots and have taken

measures to strengthen publicity and law enforcement.

Having consulted the relevant departments, the Government's reply to the question raised by Dr the Hon Lo is as follows:

(1) For a more effective suppression of the spreading of the virus, the Prevention and Control of Disease (Prohibition on Group Gathering) Regulation (Cap. 599G) (Control of Disease Regulation) prohibits group gathering of more than a specified number of persons (Note) in public places (including country parks). To appeal to the understanding of the visitors of the importance of observing the regulation, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has displayed large-scale banners, posters and notices at locations in country parks where crowds may gather from time to time. The department also flexibly deploys staff to strengthen site inspections, cleaning and enforcement in order to maintain the cleanliness of country parks. Publicity ambassadors are employed to remind visitors to pay attention to personal and environmental hygiene, maintain appropriate social distancing and wear facial masks, etc. at hiking hotspots.

In addition, the barbecue sites and campsites in country parks have been closed from March 28 to May 20, 2020 and from July 15, 2020 up to now (until further notice). During the closure of the above facilities, no one can carry out barbecuing or camping activities in country parks for the sake of reducing social contact of the public as much as possible.

Last year, the AFCD conducted over 60 000 inspections for enforcing the regulation on group gathering under the Control of Disease Regulation and the prohibition of camping and barbecuing activities under the Country Parks and Special Areas Regulations (Cap. 208A). Enforcement actions have been taken against over 700 persons for contravening the relevant anti-epidemic measures. The AFCD will closely monitor the situation in country parks and take necessary actions to strengthen publicity and enforcement.

(2) The AFCD has been running the "take your litter home" public education programme since 2015 with the support of green groups and hiking groups. The programme aims to encourage public participation in the protection of the countryside environment by encouraging them to build up the good habits of taking away their litter after visiting the country parks. To tie in with the relevant public education programme, litter bins and recycling bins along the hiking trails were removed by end of 2017 while there are still litter collection facilities at recreational sites (e.g. barbecue sites and campsites) for visitor use if needed. When patrolling the country parks, the AFCD staff would remind visitors to take away their litter and take appropriate enforcement actions against littering if detected.

Although all barbecue sites and campsites in country parks are temporarily closed during the epidemic, in view of the increased number of visitors recently, the AFCD has adjusted the cordoned off area as needed to ensure that country park visitors could continue to use the litter collection facilities in some recreation sites for maintaining environmental hygiene. As regards littering problem on hiking trails outside country parks, the

relevant departments will take appropriate follow-up actions.

To minimise the impact brought by the increase in visitors to the countryside environment, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) implemented the Green Hiking Etiquette Campaign from September to November last year. With joint efforts with local non-profit-making organisations (NPOs), over a dozen of green ambassadors were employed to promote the concept of "Leave No Trace at Mountain and Sea", such as "take your litter home", "bring own bottle to reduce single-use plastic consumables", "proper disposal of masks", etc. to the general public at popular hiking spots during the weekends.

(3) Regarding the public hygiene issues of the rural area, the departments concerned will, subject to the circumstances and as necessary, contact the relevant Rural Committees (RCs) or village representatives (VRs) direct for follow-up from time to time. District Offices of the New Territories (DOs) liaise closely with the VRs and RCs in respect of rural matters. As for the anti-epidemic work in the rural areas, DOs have arranged cleaning and distribution of anti-epidemic supplies for those areas having regard to the situation.

The AFCD has also been liaising with relevant district organisations from time to time with a view to improving the management and anti-epidemic work in country parks. Taking Tai Tong, Tai Lam Country Park as an example, the AFCD discussed with several Government departments and other relevant local organisations in October last year on the necessary management work for the peak season of the red leaves appreciation. The department deployed more staff accordingly to the Tai Tong area to publicise the anti-epidemic regulations and measures and stepped up cleaning in that area.

(4) The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health has been reminding citizens to be aware of personal and environmental hygiene through various channels, including thematic websites, Announcements in the Public Interest on television and radio stations, guidelines, leaflets and posters. The CHP also sends out health messages on personal and environmental hygiene through various publicity and health education channels such as websites, Facebook page, YouTube channel, television, radio, health education infoline, publications and media interviews, etc. The CHP will continue to maintain close liaison with different stakeholders through various platforms and keep them informed of the latest epidemic situation and preventive measures. Health-related messages will continue to be distributed to different groups through their collaboration and support.

The AFCD continues to carry out publicity to countryside visitors through various channels, including the display of promotional banners and posters at suitable locations of country parks and appeal to visitors through social media and radio programmes to maintain environmental hygiene, avoid crowded places during the peak time in planning visits, and pay attention to anti-epidemic regulations and measures at countryside. Advertisements are placed on public transport and media with messages such as "take your litter home". Various relevant social platforms of the Secretary for the Environment

and the Environment Bureau, such as "Clean Shorelines", "Big Waster" and "Environmental Campaign Committee", as well as those of the NPOs working with the EPD in promoting the Green Hiking Etiquette Campaign, have also worked together to promote the relevant messages with multi-channels.

Note: The number of specified persons will be adjusted depending on the development of the epidemic situation.