

LCQ16: Caring for the nature

Following is a question by the Hon Yiu Si-wing and a written reply by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, in the Legislative Council today (February 24):

Question:

It has been reported that quite a number of members of the public turned to the countryside for recreation and amenity since they could not travel abroad and most of the cultural, recreational and sports facilities had been closed amid the epidemic. However, a small number of countryside visitors who are uncivic-minded have performed acts which ruin the natural environment, such as recklessly discarding used face masks which may spread diseases and other rubbish, illegally riding motocross bikes which has intensified soil erosion, climbing up trees for photo taking, as well as camping and lighting a fire at non-designated locations. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the number of visitor arrivals to the countryside and the quantity of rubbish collected therein, in each of the past three years;

(2) of the respective numbers of prosecutions instituted, in each of the past three years, against countryside visitors for commissioning offences in (i) the country parks and (ii) other countryside areas, with a breakdown by the offence involved and the penalty handed down by the court (if any);

(3) of the expenditure and manpower involved in the maintenance of the facilities in the country parks (e.g. country trails), as well as the total area/length rehabilitated, in each of the past three years; and

(4) what new measures are in place to raise countryside visitors' awareness of caring for the nature?

Reply:

President,

There have been many visitors going to the country parks and other countryside areas since the epidemic last year. Relevant government departments have stepped up patrol and law enforcement against illegal activities in country parks and popular locations in other countryside areas. A series of measures have been taken to strengthen publicity on caring for the countryside.

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

(1) Over the past three years, the number of visitors to country parks and the amount of litter collected are tabulated in Table 1 in Annex. Departments concerned do not maintain relevant statistics on countryside areas other than

country parks.

(2) The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) is committed to combating illegal activities in country parks so as to protect the natural environment. Over the past three years, the number of convicted cases under the Country Parks and Special Areas Regulations (Cap. 208A) were 724 (in 2018), 574 (in 2019) and 678 (in 2020) respectively. These cases mainly involved littering, unauthorised possession or driving of bicycles or vehicles, damage of plants, and use of fire or camping outside the designated areas, etc. Offenders were fined from \$100 to \$2,000. Details are tabulated in Table 2 in Annex. Departments concerned do not maintain relevant statistics on countryside areas other than country parks.

(3) The repair and maintenance of country park facilities (including hiking trails, barbecue sites and campsites) form part of the AFCD's regular management work for country parks. There is no breakdown of the manpower and expenditure involved. Over the past three years, on top of the departmental staff, the AFCD also employed more than one hundred non-civil servants with a total of over \$20 million to assist in the trail maintenance work in various country parks. During these three years, the total length of trails constructed and repaired in country parks was about 40.5 km. The AFCD also carried out minor improvement works in country parks such as installation of water dispensers.

(4) The AFCD has been implementing the "take your litter home" public education programme together with green groups and hiking groups since 2015 and has installed water dispensers in country parks. The programme gets the public involved in the protection of the countryside by nurturing their good habits of taking away their own litter after visiting the country parks and bringing their own water bottles. The department also displayed promotional banners and posters at suitable locations of country parks, appealed to the public through social media and radio programmes to maintain environmental hygiene while visiting the countryside, as well as placing advertisements on public transport and media to carry out relevant promotion.

To minimise the impact to the natural environment brought by the increase in visitors due to the epidemic, the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) ran the Green Hiking Etiquette Campaign from September to November last year. Under joint efforts with non-profit-making organisations (NPOs), over a dozen of green ambassadors were employed to promote the "Leave No Trace at Mountain and Sea" hiking concept, 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 (such as Tai Tong in Yuen Long and the Tsing Yi Nature Trails) during the weekends. Since September last year, the EPD has also engaged about 100 shoreline wardens to assist in promoting clean shorelines, which includes conducting regular shoreline cleanups and refuse surveys at over 50 coastal sites across the territory, as well as producing promotional and educational videos. Furthermore, the Environment Bureau, through various social platforms such as "Clean Shorelines", "Big Waster" and "Environmental Campaign Committee" and collaboration with NPOs, also promotes relevant messages with multi-channels.