

A green quagmire in Mai Po marshes

If a developer follows an eco-friendly path, shouldn't everyone be happy? Not at all, says Patricia Young

THEY say the ancient art of alchemy was lost when Atlantis was overwhelmed by the sea. But nothing else can readily explain the successful conjuring attempts by Henderson Land Development Co to transform 98.8 hectares of mud, mangroves and rotting fishponds into \$10 billion.

Four years ago Henderson Land announced an ambitious project to develop an 18-hole golf course and luxury residential complex for 9,000 people on a site it had acquired at Nam Sang Wai.

A single block of undeveloped land, Hong Kong gold. It is the most precious thing in the territory. But Henderson's tract was part of the wetlands which nuzzle the edge of the Mai Po Marsh Nature Reserve.

Mai Po is not the pristine wilderness it is often perceived to be. The 320-hectare reserve on the western edge of the New Territories opens on to Deep Bay — the filthiest body of water in Hong Kong. To the south is Yuen Long Industrial Estate. Pushed up against Mai Po's eastern border is the sprawling Fairview Park development. To the north is Shenzhen.

But each year more than 55,000 migrating birds ignore the encroaching development and pass through what is the largest wetland marsh in southern China. And for that reason alone it deserves protection.

"Once you start nibbling away at the edges, the entire marsh will be affected," Llewellyn Young, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) manager at Mai Po, said. "And if all the developments which are before the Town Planning Board were approved we would lose over 40 per cent of the wetlands."

"What we are really afraid of is that they [Henderson] are setting a precedent for development in the area. Currently seven other projects in Mai Po are under review."

"Henderson has proposed a unique development and if they go through with all of the environmental safeguards they say are in place, then they would be setting a new standard. The problem is there are no laws which will guarantee they live up to their promises."

The promises Henderson Land has made are impressive. The company realised from the start that the project was not going to get approval from the Town Planning Board unless it kowtowed to the interests of the environmentalists, so it embarked on what it bills as "Hong Kong's first eco-friendly development".

Some of the measures, like non-chemical pest control on the golf course are simple to achieve and gave the company a strong environ-

mental profile. But Henderson's shrewdness shone through in a land swap it negotiated. Henderson owned a 40-hectare site at nearby Lut Chau, which is in a portion of the wetlands zoned for no development. Henderson offered to turn its Lut Chau section into a nature reserve in exchange for Government land bordering their property at Nam Sang Wai. The swap was approved.

Henderson executive director Wan Ma-yee estimates the Lut Chau reserve will cost between \$50 million and \$100 million to build. The value of the property after development has been estimated at \$10 billion. Mr Wan says he does not understand the controversy surrounding the project. Henderson has the development it wants and the people of Hong Kong get another managed wetland area.

"Only in Hong Kong can you do this because the profits in land are so high," Mr Wan said. "Elsewhere in the world it is not worth it to the developers. It will probably cost us another \$3 million a year to operate the reserve."

The new reserve will comprise an intricate patchwork of mangroves, reeds and reconstructed wetland to attract birds. A network of boardwalks will wind through Lut Chau. Hidden cameras will record the birds.

But not everyone was as easy as the Government to be convinced of Henderson's motives. The Town Planning Board rejected the Henderson project twice. But this summer Henderson got the green light to build after the Town Planning Appeal Board reviewed and approved the project. Normally Appeal Board reviews are handled quickly. Between March and May, Henderson met the Appeal Board for nine three-hour sessions to petition its cause. In the end the board of four voted 3-1 for Henderson.

The one dissenting Appeal Board member, David DaSilva, signed a three-page brief detailing why he could not vote for the development. "Once wetlands are lost, they are lost forever," he wrote. "The proposed development will result in the loss of many hectares of fishponds and that means a substantial reduction in the feeding and resting grounds for waterfowl and other wildlife. Fishponds, once filled and built over, cannot readily be replaced."

Even the Appeal Board members which voted in favour of the decision cited the misinterpretation of technical points by the Town Board representative as one of the main reasons Henderson got the nod.

Necklacing the Mai Po Nature

Reserve on the Town Planning Board map are eight small rectangles. Each one represents a proposed development. And each one has been rejected. But then the Henderson project was rejected twice before winning final approval.

"It is our biggest worry ... these other projects," Mr Young said. "In all fairness Henderson has put a lot of effort into trying to diminish its environmental impact. But these other ones. They worry me."

SITTING in his office at World-Wide House, Mr Wan dismisses the argument that Henderson is the thin edge of the development wedge in Mai Po. "We did not set a precedent. We set a challenge," Mr Wan said. "I challenge any other company to match what we have done. No one can match us."

But that much money cannot be dredged out of muddy fishponds without someone taking note and watching how it is done.

A new development is being proposed just west of Lut Chau, at Fung Lok Wai. And advising on the "eco-friendly" project is British environmentalist Gary Grant; the same man Henderson hired to pilot its Nam Sang Wai/Lut Chau project.

"There will be more residential building at Fung Lok Wai, but we could build an even better reserve," Mr Grant said. "We are being more pro-active than either the Government or the green groups. The cost is a number of carefully designed housing and recreation projects in the outer [wetland] buffer zone areas."

Climbing up a steep hill overlooking Mai Po, and followed by a phalanx of reporters and cameramen, Llewellyn Young points out to the marshy land and patchwork of fishponds below with the bursting pride of a father. "This is where the birds come each year," he said. "Without these wetlands there would be no place for them to go. They would die. This is why it is so important."

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