

A country boy's walk on the wild side

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COUNTRY Parks Board chairman Mr Carlos Cheung Hon-kau likes to take a walk through the lands of his domain. Each Sunday morning he leaves his family and the stresses of his busy schedule and stalks Hongkong's last remaining stretches of wilderness for a couple of hours before breakfast.

Those are his old childhood haunts, where he can chat to New Territories villagers, enjoy their old stone buildings or stride alone along remote mountain trails.

"I have no other hobbies," he said. "Not tennis, not soccer. I don't play golf. I don't go to Tsim Sha Tsui, I don't drink, I don't smoke, no *karaoke*. I lead a very plain life."

Though he was nine years old and spoke only Spanish when his parents returned to the old walled village of Tai Po from Panama in 1948, he soon learned the local dialects and now regards himself as a Hongkong country boy.

And as a "purist conservationist", who prefers listening to classical music, reading and collecting stamps to an evening on the town, he can enjoy the beauty of parks unspoilt by the developers.

It seems odd such a man should have sanctioned the controversial proposal to build a golf course at Shalotong, on the edge of the Pat Sin Leng Country Park. Opponents have criticised the development of a facility that will make money for the developers, for the indigenous villagers of Shalotong and for the Government in order to provide expensive unsightly amenities the hiking, park-going public does not want. As well as barbecue pits, toilets and picnic sites, it will bring in car parks and noisy, polluting traffic, unsightly high-rise developments and change the character of the area.

Most worrying, say the environmentalists, the development will be the thin end of the wedge. If one remote country area can be destroyed in the name of progress, how many more will follow?

Despite the furore, Mr Cheung stands by the board's backing for the plan.

He did not want to pre-empt the Executive Council's decision on the golf course but argued the board could not take the purist attitude conservationists would like. Its role under the Country Parks Ordinance was to develop parks for recreation and tourism as much as to protect wildlife and vegetation and to protect historic and cultural monuments.

A visitors' survey of country parks in 1988 showed people visited the most popular areas because there were barbecue pits and picnic sites, and they could get there easily by bus. A survey carried out by the Census and Statistics Department in the same year found respondents did not use country parks because they could not get there easily and there were not enough facilities such as toilets and barbecue pits.

"I, myself, am a purist conser-



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vationist. But the board has to balance conservation with other people's needs," Mr Cheung said. "We try to have a balanced development."

Explaining the 1979 guidelines drawn up by the board on what uses could be made of country park land, he said areas on the edge of the parks were in a category which not only allowed for development but specifically allowed the construction of golf courses.

The Shalotong development was a special case, because although Shalotong village was surrounded by the park on three sides, it was not on country park land. The board had no control over development there. It could only decide on whether the small area of parkland affected should be made available for use as a golf course.

"When we looked at the golf course, we had to look at it from the point of view of what recreation use we could enhance in order to give them this so-called golf course development," said Mr Cheung in a convoluted phrase which appeared to suggest the board had little say in whether the project went ahead or not.

"The existing recreational uses were very few. But this is the entrance to Pat Sin Leng. So we

thought at that time that if we can make use of certain facilities, if we can get them to build a visitor centre, some barbecue pits, some toilets, then we thought that the development would enhance the area, because it would encourage more people to use this entrance to go into Pat Sin Leng."

Because about half of the golf course will be on country park land, the board is able to insist it must be more available for public use than other golfing facilities in the territory. So while Fanling is open to the public for 10 per cent

of the time on weekdays only, the Recreation and Culture Branch has suggested 25 per cent of capacity at the Shalotong course be made available to the public throughout the week and that the fees be lower than at other courses. However, Mr Cheung admitted he did not know how much would be charged and, as a non-golfer, had no idea how much would be reasonable.

However, he denied the deal was the thin end of the wedge.

"Your concern is my concern. But I don't think it is the thin end of the wedge for country parks. I think we have to look at every case very carefully on its own merits."

The subsequent discussion, however, was not reassuring. It never became entirely clear, for instance, on what criteria the merits of future cases should be assessed. Mr Cheung agreed public concern over environmental issues had grown sharply since the 1988 surveys and since park use guidelines were drawn up in 1979, and promised in future that all applications for development would be made public and opened for discussion. But he did not suggest updating the guidelines and seemed to have no clear idea of how far future en-

croachment should be allowed within the existing limits.

"We have to be realistic. We can't say no all the time," he said.

But he did accept that the Country Parks Board should take more of a lead in raising public consciousness of threats to the environment, pointing out that even in areas where the board had no authority — such as the destruction of North Lantau and Chek Lap Kok for the airport development — there was room for public concern and debate. Pressure on the Government to complete and publish its environmental impact assessments of major public works was important, and as a private

citizen with some influence on environmental matters he should take a personal lead in asking to see these assessments more regularly.

"In hindsight, I think Hongkong is changing. I always fight for public consultation. Public consultation, short of a referendum as such, should be very widely conducted.

"As to Shalotong . . . we think we were right in endorsing it. But Exco has been receiving representations, opinions and comments from the public and I think Exco

will be taking all that into account when taking its decision.

"But I think, in future, the board will be working in more detail, public consultation will be more intense and we will welcome public comment and our working will be more open."

One thing more public discussion might show is how little information the board is getting from the Government or how much it feels it needs to know. Mr Cheung admitted he had no idea how much the Government would be earning from agreeing to a change of use for the Country Park Board's part of the golf course, arguing that because the money would not go to the board it was not necessary to find out.

But that was not, he felt, part of the board's role as a public watchdog. It was not there to decide whether the Government was acting from financial considerations alone, but to ensure the future use of the land was compatible with the parks plan.

The board had been convinced the building of the golf course would ensure the land remained open and green, that public right of way would be maintained — even though much of the existing footpath across Shalotong valley was outside the park — and that the risk of fire would be reduced.

There was also the question of possible damage to the flora and fauna of the land which would now be converted to a golf course. The board had been criticised for leaving it up to the developer to provide an assessment. But for this Mr Cheung had an answer. The board had asked the environmental groups to suggest the names of experts who would be able to do a more balanced environmental impact study of the area. But so far they had failed to come up with any.

From power plants to greenery

MR CARLOS Cheung Hon-kau, chairman of the Country Parks Board, came to Hongkong from Panama as a boy but spent almost half his life outside the territory.

He studied civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley and joined the San Francisco-based company T. Y. Lin on graduation in 1969. During his career he has built everything from

an oil platform off Alaska to suspension bridges and power plants.

He returned to Hongkong in the 1970s as a partner in the company, which is involved in a number of civil engineering and infrastructural projects, either as consultants or as structural engineers.

The company built the frame for the giant statue of Buddha on

Lantau. Mr Cheung's record of public service includes the Antiquities and Monuments Board — "I love old buildings" — the Town Planning Board and the Housing Authority.

He is also an appointed member of the Regional Council, and likes to lounge around in a Regco pullover.