



Challenges Along the Journey (Part 2)

Visitor Impacts on Trails

Hong Kong's country parks attract numerous visitors each year, who come to appreciate the beauty of nature and engage in various outdoor activities. However, with the increase in visitors, the condition of the trails and the surrounding environment face significant challenges. Excessive visitor activity not only accelerates soil erosion and natural degradation of the trails but also, combined with some inappropriate visitor behaviours, can lead to trail problems, such as trail widening, shortcuts creation, and increased litter. If these problems are not addressed proactively, they will negatively impact the local ecological environment. This issue of the newsletter will explore how visitor usages and behaviours affect the condition of the trails.



Visitation and Outdoor Activities in Country Parks

The amount of country parks visitation has continually grown since the first bench of country parks designated in 1977. According to historical records, the average annual visitation has exceeded 12 million over the past twenty years, reflecting the public's interest in the natural environment and the ongoing demand for outdoor activities.

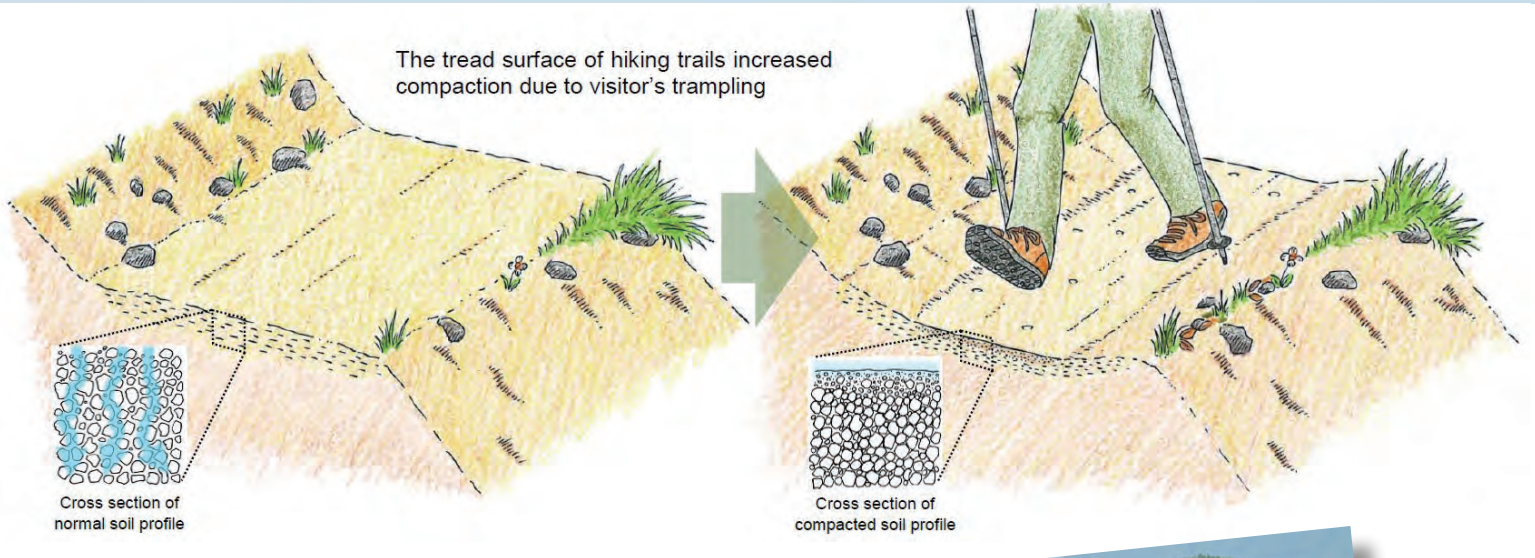
Additionally, the types of outdoor activities that visitors engage in the country parks have changed over time. In the past, barbecuing was the most popular outdoor activity, primarily concentrated around barbecue sites at the edges of the parks or near the entrance of trails. However, hiking has become increasingly popular in recent years, and it leads to a significant rise in trail usage. New types of outdoor activities, such as trail running and orienteering, has emerged recently, and expanded visitors' range of activities throughout the entire country park trail network. These changes in the amount, types and patterns of outdoor activities have resulted in various visitor-induced trail problems, which accelerate the degradation of the trails and impact both the trails themselves and the surrounding natural environment.



How Visitor Behaviours Affects Trails

1. Soil Compaction

The tread surface of hiking trails is subject to increased compaction due to visitor's trampling. Compaction can lead to increased soil density and obstruct the flow of air and moisture. It affects the growth of surrounding plant root systems and increases surface runoff, which exacerbates soil erosion problems on the trails.



2. Trail Widening

Trail widening is a common problem on Hong Kong's hiking trails. If a trail is poorly designed or lacks maintenance, such as having a narrow width or excessive step height, hikers often trample on trailside vegetation to avoid encountering others or to navigate relatively rough trail sections. Trampling can cause damages to the trailside vegetation, and other hikers tend to follow these already trampled paths, gradually widening the trail. As the trail width expands, the underlying soil loses plant protection. When it rains, water is no longer absorbed by vegetation and instead flows rapidly onto the trail, eroding the surface and degrading trail conditions.

Moreover, erosional gullies and muddy conditions prompt hikers to bypass rough areas, creating a vicious cycle that further widens the trail. This can accelerate soil erosion and trail degradation, resulting in negative impacts on the natural environment.

Hikers often trample on trailside vegetation to avoid encountering others or to navigate relatively rough trail sections. Trampling can cause damages to the trailside vegetation, and gradually widening the trail.



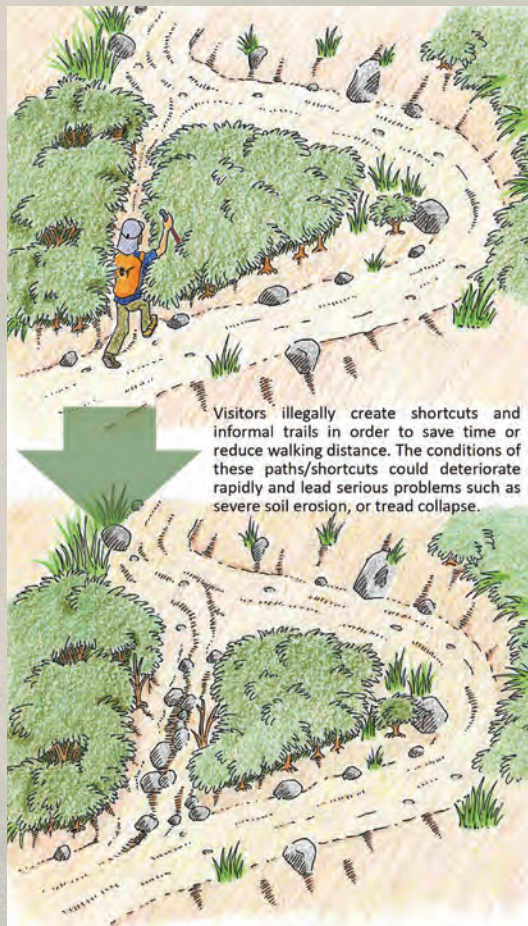
3. Creation of Short-cuts and Informal Trails

Some visitors choose to illegally create shortcuts and informal trails in order to reach popular spots more quickly or save walking distance. This behavior can damage the ecological environment and diminish the overall aesthetic appeal of the natural landscape. It also poses safety threats to other hikers. As these shortcuts are not official hiking trails maintained by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD), they do not receive regular inspections and maintenance. After storms or extreme weather events, the conditions of these trails could deteriorate rapidly and lead serious problems such as severe soil erosion, fallen trees, or tread collapse, which compromise hikers' safety.

Additionally, these shortcuts often traverse areas of natural vegetation, causing soil erosion and vegetation damage. This disruption has a negative impact on the local ecological environment, further compromising the integrity of these ecosystems.



In the vicinity of the official trails at Tai Cham Koi, Sai Kung, visitors have created shortcuts, resulting in a network of informal trails.



4. Littering

Littering has long been a significant problem in country parks. Discarded waste not only damages the natural landscape but also leads to environmental issues, such as plastic bottles and food packaging lingering in the environment, which can adversely affect wildlife.

Wild animals generally avoid human contact and forage in their natural habitats. However, the frequent disposal of food in outdoor areas, including trails, can lead to wildlife becoming reliant on scavenging in places frequented by visitors, which disrupts both animals and hikers. Furthermore, if wildlife is consistently attracted to discarded food, they may lose their natural foraging instincts and their inherent fear of humans.

5. Improper Use of Hiking Poles

In recent years, many hikers have started using hiking poles for additional support on trails. However, improperly equipped hiking poles, such as failing to equip rubber caps on the metal tips, can damage soil structure and stability. Those metal tips can loosen soil on the trail threads, making them more susceptible to erosion from rainwater or surface runoff, thus exacerbating the problem of soil erosion. Besides, if the tips of the hiking poles are pressed directly onto plant roots, it can harm the plants and negatively affect their growth.



MacLehose Trail Section 4



MacLehose Trail Section 10

6. Illegal Activities

Some people behave illegally on hiking trails, such as mountain biking on a trail which is not designated as mountain biking trails, graffiti, camping or lighting fires in unauthorised areas, and plucking plant. These illegal activities not only violate country park regulations but can also cause significant damage to the trails and the surrounding natural environment.



Wildfires destroy the vegetation near Fu Tei Country Trail

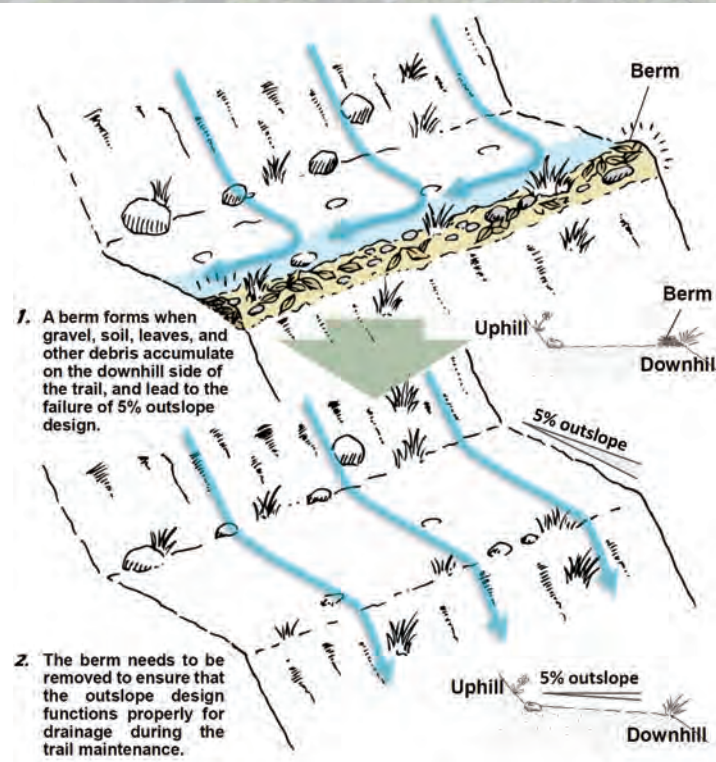
Many people may have seen the above trail problems but might not have noticed the consequences they bring. In this issue of the Trail Classroom, we will introduce the corresponding solutions implemented by the AFCD to mitigate these problems.

Trail Classroom:

Sustainable Practices for Preserving Our Hiking Trails

1. Regular Trail Maintenance

AFCD conducts trail inspection regularly to monitor trail conditions. If any issues are identified, prompt repairs and maintenance are conducted to ensure visitor safety and trail accessibility. For example, soil compaction near downhill sections can create berms, which cause water accumulation on the trail tread surface. It can result in muddy conditions and contribute to soil erosion. By regularly removing these berms, we can enhance the trail's drainage capabilities, ensuring a well-maintained surface that supports safe and enjoyable hiking experiences.



2. Shortcuts Blockage

To address the problem of shortcuts that appear at zigzag section or turning points, some larger fallen tree branches are placed on these shortcut. This approach helps protect the soil and vegetation on the shortcuts, slowing down the erosion caused by rainwater and reducing soil loss. It also provides visual guidance to hikers, indicating that these shortcuts are difficult to traverse and encouraging them to use the official hiking trails instead.

Moreover, warning notices and signage are installed to advise visitors to avoid using shortcuts and informal trails, thereby enhancing their safety while minimizing ecological impacts.

Before placing shortcut blockage at Ma On Shan Country Trail



Blocked shortcut



After placing shortcut blockage at Ma On Shan Country Trail

3. Vegetation Restoration

Vegetation restoration is one of critical tasks in trail maintenance. As trail usage increases and soil erosion intensifies, trails often experience significant damages and result in degradation to the surrounding natural environment. Destruction can occur rapidly, but restoration takes significant time and effort.

Currently, two methods of vegetation restoration implemented in country parks: fencing off damaged areas and planting seedlings. These restoration measures can improve the ecological environment along the hiking trails and protect the trail surface by reducing the water velocity and mitigating the effect of erosion. Besides, these measures enhance the visual appeal of damaged or cleared areas, creating a more natural and aesthetically pleasing environment that enhances visitors' outdoor experiences.

Pyramid Hill (Photo taken on Feb 2023)



Pyramid Hill (Photo taken on May 2025)



4. Litter Cleanup

Cleaning up litter along hiking trails is one of the daily duties of the country park management centers. It helps maintain the cleanliness of the trails, minimizes the impact on wildlife, and enhance visitors' experiences in the country parks.



Management centre staff regularly conduct litter cleanups on the trails.

Recently, a number of organisations and schools have started to organise trail cleanup activities to help collect litter left by irresponsible hikers. These activities can significantly reduce the environmental impact of litter while enhance public awareness of "Leave No Trace" principles. They also encourage a deeper appreciation for natural resources, promote the programme of "Take Your Litter Home", and inspire collective efforts to protect the country parks.



A "Take Your Litter Home" banner posts along MacLehose Trail Section 10.

5.Trail Usage Monitoring

AFCD has consistently monitored visitor numbers in country parks. Traditionally, this involved manual counting of trail usage to estimate visitor numbers. With advancements in technology, the department has installed automatic people counters on certain trails, enabling automated data collection and transmission.

These counters allow for real-time and accurate monitoring of trail usage, which assists in assessing trail conditions and developing more effective trail management strategies. This enhances trail resilience and ensures visitor safety.



Automatic people counter for monitoring trail usage at Ma On Shan Country Trail

6. Public Education and Enforcement

Public education is a critical management strategy to enhance public awareness of environmental protection and sustainable trail management. It aims at raising public awareness of hiking etiquette and the natural environment through various activities, such as lectures, exhibitions, participatory workshops, and social media campaigns. These activities can fosters an understanding of the fragility of ecosystems and the negative impacts of harmful behaviours.

Additionally, informative signage provides clear guidelines to help visitors adopt responsible practices while enjoying outdoor activities, such as using hiking poles correctly, disposing of waste properly, staying on designated paths, and protecting wildlife.

AFCD staff also conduct regular patrols on hiking trails and enforce regulations. These inspections allow enforcement officers to promptly identify and address violations while promoting "Hiking Etiquette" principles among hikers. What exactly does " Hiking Etiquette " entail? The next section will provide more details.



AFCD staff conduct enforcement actions on trails not designated for mountain biking.



AFCD staff promote and educate hikers.



AFCD staff handle violations related to illegal camping.

行山有道

In recent years, Country Parks received around 12 million visitors annually, with visitors hiking, camping, barbecuing, and enjoying the natural environment. Under the theme of "Hiking Etiquette", the AFCD promotes good outdoor practices, cultures and etiquette so as to deepen the public's understanding on hiking safety and care for nature. Visitors' behaviour are closely related to the health of the hiking trails. Let's learn about "Hiking Etiquette" and put it into action to protect the environment!



Waymark



Information Board

1: Hike Safely

Safety is most important aspect of outdoor activities. To ensure safety, hikers should choose trails managed by the AFCD. Information boards and maps are available at the trailheads, waymarks and distance posts are set up along the trails to minimise the chances of getting lost. When hiking, never create your own path or wander into unmarked trails. Apart from the risk of getting lost and exposing yourself to possible injury, it would be very difficult to be found or rescued in case of an accident. Taking shortcuts or bushwalking not only increase your risk but also damages the vegetation, degraded the soil, and causes soil erosion.

Safety always comes first. While hiking, be sure to "Stay on the right path, protect the trails."

The AFCD's "Enjoy Hiking" website provides detail information on country parks' hiking routes, including transportation, distances, elevation profiles, and scenic attractions, making it easy for everyone to choose hiking routes that is within their capabilities and personal preference while planning a hike.



Distance post

When hiking, you should wear appropriate hiking clothing and bring along all necessary items, including sufficient drinking water and food. When planning a hike, check the Hong Kong Observatory's "Hong Kong Hiking Trail Weather Service" and download the "MyObservatory" mobile app for the latest weather updates. Before setting off, review the Observatory's latest weather forecast and stay alert to any changes in the weather. Enable push notifications in the "MyObservatory" to receive location-based lighting and rainfall alerts, so you can respond quickly when there is a sudden change in weather.

Apart from using the "My Observatory" mobile app for weather alerts, you can also turn on the "HKSOS" mobile app or activate the "Hiker Tracking Service" in "Enjoy Hiking" mobile app before setting off. If an emergency occurs, rescue personnel can locate the exact position more quickly to speed up search and rescue efforts. When hiking, always go with companions, know your limits, stay alert to the weather, and pay attention to your own and your companion's physical conditions.

For more information on hiking safety, please visit the following website:



"MyObservatory" Mobile App



"Enjoy Hiking" Mobile App



"HKSOS" Emergency Rescue Mobile App



Country Park Hiking Safety Guidelines

2: Respect Nature

The various habitats in country parks are essential for the survival of wildlife, nurturing rich biodiversity. Visitors should cherish the countryside environment, respect nature, and should not disturb or feed wild animals. Do not pick or remove any plants, and avoid disrupting the soil and streams. When visiting country parks, visitors must comply with the Country Parks and Special Areas Regulations as well as other relevant laws concerning protection of wildlife and the environment.



3: Respect Others

When enjoying country parks, please be considerate of others by showing mutual respect and understanding. Savor the tranquility of nature by keeping noise down. To ensure everyone's safety, do not throw any objects. On narrow paths, walk in single file to allow faster hikers to pass. If you need to take a break, step aside and leave enough room for other hikers.

Take good care of the facilities in country parks and be considerate of others. Do not vandalise public property, and keep toilets, barbecue sites, and campsites clean so that others can also enjoy these amenities comfortably.

4: Prevent Hillfire

A small spark can ignite a vast fire, and hill fires can destroy an entire forest, leading to soil erosion and degradation, cause loss of natural habitats and home for wild animals, or even their lives. The majority of hill fires in the countryside are caused by human negligence. To prevent hill fires, you should:

- During grave sweeping, remove weeds around graves with tools and never burn weeds
- Burning should only be done inside a container or iron bucket, and never leave burning offerings unattended
- Only use fires in designated barbecue sites or campsites using barbecue pit. Do not light fire on the ground
- Never release sky lanterns
- When leaving, ensure the flame is completely extinguished

If you encounter hill fire, you should:

- Stay calm and leave the fire scene immediately
- Call the AFCD Fire Control Centre at 2720 0777 or 999
- Observe the direction in which the fire is spreading and escape in the opposite direction
- Choose properly managed trail and route with less vegetation to escape

Don't:

- Go uphill, as hill fires tend to spread upward and windward
- Go near thick bushes or overgrowth where hill fires spread more quickly and generate more heat



5: Reduce Waste

To reduce environmental impact and keep the countryside clean, visitors should use reusable items such as water bottles, cutlery, and towels. Water filling stations are installed in various locations for refilling. When camping or barbecuing, visitors can prepare food in advance by removing the packaging and use reusable containers to reduce waste generated in the countryside. Additionally, only pack the right amount of food and drinks to reduce food waste or rubbish. Before you leave, remember to sort recyclable wastes into recycling bins to help keep the countryside clean.

6: Take Your Litter Home

Littering not only causes hygiene issue, affect the natural environment and scenery, but also alters wildlife's natural behaviour. Unlike urban areas, countryside is remote and some areas are only accessible by hiking. Cleansing staff have to walk a long way to collect rubbish. Littering spoils the beauty of countryside; and light-weighted rubbish can be easily blown to places such as valleys and streams that are hard to reach, polluting the environment and wildlife's habitat.

To encourage country park visitors to "Take Your Litter Home", all rubbish bins on country park trails had been removed. Please remember to take your litter home after visiting country park and sort it properly for recycling.



Water Filling Station



"Take Your Litter Home" banner

To preserve the natural beauty of country parks, we need everyone's support and participation. We hope all of you will always cherish the countryside and the homes of wildlife by putting "Hiking Etiquette" into action. Every small step taken by each of you contributes significantly to conserving our countryside. Together, may the beauty of our natural environment be sustained from generation to generation.

Want more information?

Welcome to visit Hong Kong Country Parks Facebook Webpage and YouTube Channel



Editorial team:

CHOW Siu-hung CHAN Sin-wai CHEUNG Suet-yi
TSANG Kit-man LI Fung-leung YAM Wing-yiu
CHENG Yuk-hin CHAN Wai-chung

Illustrations by YAM Wing-yiu

Video by CHENG Yuk-hin

Text by CHAN Wai-chung

All articles, drawings and photographs in this publication may not be reported without written permission of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department. All right reserved.



漁農自然護理署
Agriculture, Fisheries and
Conservation Department

