

Four reasons Hong Kong businesses should be taking more interest in local bogs and birds

(Published in South China Morning Post on February 14, 2019)

World Wetlands Day was celebrated earlier this month. However not many people in Hong Kong realise that wetlands, freshwater or intertidal, cover about 5 percent of our land area. We even have our own internationally recognised Ramsar wetlands, the Mai Po Inner Deep Bay, located at the fringe of the Indo-Burma Hotspot, one of the most biodiverse regions in the world.

But urbanisation and unsustainable consumption are affecting the delicate relationship between human beings and the environment. Hong Kong's densely built-up dwellings characterise our compact city. Thankfully, though, 40 percent of our terrain is reserved for country park use and through the government's efforts, our conservation efforts are iterated through the city's Biodiversity and Sustainability Action Plan.

Businesses can play a role in protecting Hong Kong's biodiversity. Studies worldwide have highlighted the economic value in preserving natural resources, from local livelihood support to tourism income. But the intrinsic benefit lies in 'shared value', a business concept coined by Michael Porter, head of the Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness at Harvard Business School, that relates the dependency of a company's competitiveness to the health of the communities and natural environment around it.

At first glance, there may not seem to be any connection between wetlands and businesses. However, there are four important points to draw upon.

Firstly, wetlands are an important factor in mitigating climate change. Carbon dioxide is captured in trees and vegetation, and the root networks found in wetlands serve to stabilise the soil structure at the same time absorbing water and acting as a means of flood control. In times of battering by typhoons, coastal wetlands are an important protection against weather extremes. There are not many ways available for mankind to avert the two degree rise climate scenario despite the rhetoric put out by the recent CoP talks in Poland. Carbon intensity may stabilise but we are nowhere near the proposed zero carbon rise scenario set for 2030. Reforestation is an option but this takes decades to mature for effective carbon sequestration. It is therefore in business's interests to retain natural resources like wetlands, which can act as vast carbon sinks. Think of Mai Po multiplied several thousand times over in the reaches of mighty river basins and coastal deltas across the world. This initiative requires corporate support and backing for governments to act. Businesses that believe that climate change will not affect them need to think twice as severe weather pervades not just in direct damages to property and assets but also in commercial losses along disrupted supply chains.

Secondly, companies could learn a lot from nature. Biomimicry is Mother Earth's way of teaching us techniques that have evolved over millennia that can be deployed in modern applications. There is too much emphasis placed on technology and finding man-made solutions to our problems when often the answer is staring us in the face. Take solar cells for instance, the best advancements in photovoltaics can only muster a conversion efficiency of sunlight to electricity of less than 25 percent. Plants have been converting sunlight into useful biomass since the beginning of time through photosynthesis. Similarly, materials like water resistant coatings and stealth skin have been adopted from duck down and chameleon scales respectively. The sources of inspiration for innovative and creative discovery abound in biodiverse settings like wetlands.

Thirdly, wetlands are repositories for rare species of plants, some of which have medicinal properties. White willow, a riverine plant, is a source of salicylic acid and is used in aspirin and skin care products, whilst bogbean, a species that thrives at high latitudes in bogs and shallow water, is commercially approved in Europe to treat dyspeptic discomfort and loss of appetite. Labrador tea, a

widespread bog bush, is used against many illnesses and also as a mosquito repellent. Such species are best wild-cultivated rather than bred in farms. The unique conditions of wetlands allow this.

Lastly, visits to wetlands are powerful tension relievers especially for those embroiled in a fast and high-pressured urban setting like Hong Kong. Companies could do no worse than to send stressed out employees to spend a restful day or two at the Mai Po nature reserve periodically to recharge and to learn first-hand about the fascinating species that reside there. For the more energetic, there are volunteer programmes to clear out mikania, an invasive weed species that threatens the wetland eco-system. Whilst Mai Po may not match the glamour of a safari or ski resort, therein lies a huge opportunity to foster a more caring and considerate corporate culture.

Amidst the hubris of busy urban living, we need to recognise nature conservation as one of the defining characteristics of a modern yet sustainable city. Companies can play a major part in this - and the business rationale for doing so exists. This is crucial as it spells out a message to the rest of the world that if a bustling centre like Hong Kong, with its overwhelming dominance of commerce and trade, can spend the time and effort to preserve nature and safeguard the survival and restoration of species - so can others.

ENDS

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