

## HKDCS Press Release (June 7, 2011)

Significant decline in dolphin abundance in Hong Kong detected in past decade  
Escalating volume of high-speed ferry traffic poses a serious threat to local dolphins  
Misleading information presented by Airport Authority for third runway proposal  
Latest dolphin information within third runway site to refute trivialization of its importance

### World Oceans Day

Tomorrow (June 8<sup>th</sup>) marks the annual celebration of the World Oceans Day. On this special day, it is time for the Hong Kong public to reflect on the plight of our resident dolphins and porpoises that have been living in our waters for centuries.

### Significant Decline in Dolphin Abundance

In his latest research, Dr. Samuel Hung, Chairman of the HK Dolphin Conservation Society, found that there has been a significant decline in dolphin abundance in the past decade. His team found that the dolphin numbers were declining in the three key areas of dolphin habitat, to the West, Northwest and Northeast of Lantau. The combined annual estimate dropped from 158 dolphins in 2003 to only 75 dolphins in 2010.

Dr. Hung speculated that the decline may be related to the increased amount of high-speed ferry traffic traversing through important dolphin habitats daily; overfishing problem contributing to the decline in prey resources for the dolphins; and habitat deterioration through coastal development such as reclamation works and dredging activities.

### Serious Threats Posed by Vessel Traffic on Dolphins

In particular, the escalating volume of high-speed ferry traffic from 1999-2010 in the Urmston Road and South Lantau Vessel Fairway may have contributed to the diminished use of Lung Kwu Chau (in Northwest Lantau) and Fan Lau (in West Lantau) by the dolphins, both of which were identified as critical dolphin habitats by Dr. Hung's research team. In fact, according to the *Port of Hong Kong Statistical Tables* published annually by the Marine Department, the total number of high-speed ferries that service between Hong Kong, China and Macau, have increased from 119,810 in 1999 to 177,877 in 2010 (48% increase). Moreover, the number of high-speed ferries that just service between Hong Kong and Macau has increased from 68,060 in 1999 to 120,499 in 2010 (77% increase). These high-speed ferries can potentially bring a tremendous amount of acoustic disturbance to the dolphins, as sound is their primary sense of detecting their surrounding. In addition, the increased amount of high-speed ferries likely causes their displacement from their preferred habitat, to avoid the risks of vessel collision. Dr. Hung found that dolphin densities at Fan Lau have dropped steadily from 2003 to 2010, and similar trend was also detected around the Soko Islands from 1996-2010. Research also showed that the finless porpoises also avoid the inshore waters of South Lantau (e.g. Pui O Wan) due to disturbance from heavy vessel traffic. Furthermore, latest results from HKCRP's acoustic monitoring programme demonstrated that noise levels within busy vessel traffic routes were several times higher than other areas, that may have adversely affecting the dolphins.

Dr. Hung suggests that immediate action should be taken by the Hong Kong Government to combat this serious problem. First, the high-speed ferry traffic should be diverted away from the important habitats

used by dolphins and porpoises. Secondly, the speed of these high-speed ferries and overall traffic volume should be strictly regulated to avoid further disturbance to the resident cetaceans and other marine life. Although more studies will certainly be needed to further explore this critical situation, the dolphins need urgent protection now, especially in light of the pending construction of the HK-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge.

### **Third Runway Project: No Way for the Dolphins?**

The Airport Authority (AAHK) has just released a consultation document to propose the third runway construction project. In the document, AAHK avoids a detailed discussion on various potential environmental impacts caused by the infrastructure project that could be insurmountable without some extraordinary measures. The document also trivializes the tremendous irreversible impacts on the dolphins due to the proposed massive reclamation project. For example, it misleads the public by adjusting a figure presented in AFCD's report on the dolphins demonstrating that the future reclamation site was rarely used. It also failed to address the close proximity (<1 km) of the reclamation site to the adjacent marine park that has been set aside for the dolphins. Moreover, AAHK claimed that 40% of the reclamation site overlapped with the contaminated mud pits to the north of the airport, but failed to mention that in the first place it was AAHK's airport construction in the 1990s that first caused habitat deterioration in this area for the dolphins.

To refute the claim that the third runway site is not an important dolphin habitat, Dr. Hung examined the range use of individual dolphins occurring in North and West Lantau waters to investigate the proportion of individuals that may be affected by the permanent lost of 650 hectares of marine habitat. He found that over 90% of individuals occurred in North Lantau waters had ranges overlapped with the third runway site. In fact, the proposed reclamation site is situated at the centre of the three core areas used by the local dolphins, namely the Lung Kwu Chau, Brothers Islands and Tai O to Fan Lau waters. The potential blockage of these "traveling corridors" can have a serious impact on dolphin movements within Hong Kong, and potentially discourage them to use Hong Kong waters in the long run. The long-lasting impacts of the third runway project should be properly addressed by AAHK right now instead of during the EIA process, as these impacts may be too insurmountable to be overcome by any mitigation measures proposed by past EIA studies. To facilitate a fair discussion of the third runway project, AAHK should face the hard truth and inform the general public of Hong Kong on the magnitude of negative environmental impacts posed by the huge reclamation project and its associated works.

Certainly, this is a critical time for the Hong Kong public to discuss whether we will be able to continue co-existing with our resident dolphins and porpoises. It will take every citizen of Hong Kong to safeguard their habitats by raising concerns to our authority.

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*This press release and associated information can be downloaded from:*

[www.hkdcs.org](http://www.hkdcs.org) (under announcement)