

SETW's speech at Opening Ceremony of the First Wetland Link International-Asia Symposium (English only)

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Following is the speech (English only) by the Secretary for the Environment, Transport and Works, Dr Sarah Liao, at opening ceremony of the First Wetland Link International - Asia Symposium at Hong Kong Wetland Park this morning (January 24):

Mr Peter Bridgewater, Mr Eric Bohm, Mrs Hung, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning! I am honoured to be here with you today, at the Hong Kong Wetland Park, to witness the opening of the first Wetland Link International - Asia Symposium.

I still remember that 20 years ago when I started working on environmental protection, wetland conservation was still a novelty to the public. Wetland centre was usually synonym for wetland site with only a few interpretative signs.

After years of education efforts to raise public awareness, people throughout the world today are aware of the importance of wetland conservation. At the same time, the world of wetland centres is growing fast. Apart from wildlife protection, wetland centres also concentrate on the importance of the wetlands to the surrounding population, including their cultural relationships, sustainable livelihoods and archaeological heritages.

The Wetland Link International, established in 1991, is a platform for the wetland centres in different countries and regions to share knowledge and practical expertise as well as to support the development of Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CEPA) programme. Endorsed by the Ramsar Convention on wetlands, Wetland Link International helps wetland centres throughout the world to work together to achieve conservation goals.

In response to an increasing number of wetland centres in Asia, representatives from six Asian countries, UK and Australia met in Hong Kong in June, 2005, to discuss the concept of developing a pan-Asian wetland centre network under the WLI to deliver WLI objectives in the Asian region. Hong Kong has undertaken to take the lead in the establishment of this new network. One and a half year later, we are

proud to present the first WLI-Asia Symposium to you.

We hope, through this symposium, we can provide a forum for all our neighbours in Asia to exchange expertise and information to make our parks better. Wetlands in Asia form important ecological corridors for many migratory species. We believe that with the close co-operation of the wetland centres in the region, we can create a better wetland environment in Asia.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Hong Kong Wetland Park, the venue of our three-day symposium, is one of the world's newest and largest wetland centres. The park not only offers a home for the local wildlife, but also plays a critical role in promoting public understanding on how man interacts with wetlands and the importance of wetland conservation in the territory. Since its opening in last May, it has already received more than a million visitors, more than double of our original projection. The thousands of visitors coming to the park day after day clearly reflects the important role of our park in raising public awareness on wetland conservation.

Because of its popularity, the Hong Kong Wetland Park provides the ideal platform for a wide range of CEPA activities. The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, the manager of the park, is committed to promoting the Park as a hub for CEPA activities in the Asia Pacific. In collaboration with other government departments, schools and green groups, Hong Kong Wetland Park has launched a series of meaningful education activities.

We also conduct regular ecological monitorings at the Hong Kong Wetland Park. Rare or endangered species of birds such as Black-faced Spoonbill, Greater Painted-snipe as well as uncommon dragonflies and damselflies such as Four-spot Midget, Scarlet Dwarf and Eastern Lily squatter are some of our visitors. I am sure some of them will greet you later when you have a chance to visit the Wetland Reserve outside this Visitor Centre.

Besides the Hong Kong Wetland Park, I would also like to appeal to you to visit other nature heritages of Hong Kong. Contrary to the common perception of Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan city, about three-quarters of our land is countryside and rural area. The territory's physical and sub-tropical climatic environment provides

a wide range of habitats that support a rich biodiversity.

Finally, I would like to thank the efforts of the staff of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department and World Wide Fund for Nature Hong Kong in preparing the symposium. I also wish all participants enjoy the rest of the event. Thank You!

Ends/Wednesday, January 24, 2007