

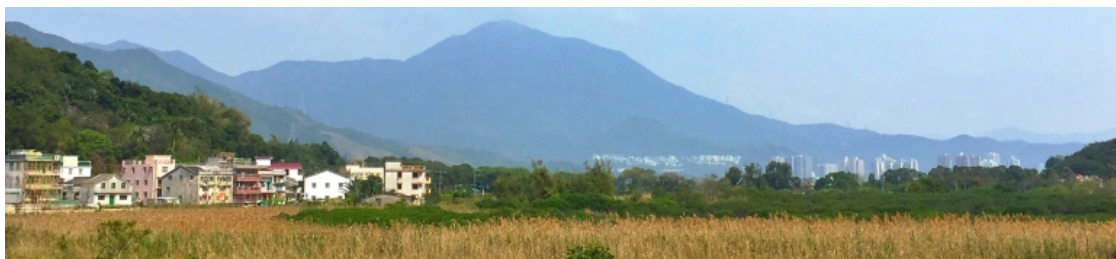


## Population pressure threatens Hong Kong's country park enclaves

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The village of Luk Keng lies in Plover Cove Country Park, on the northern-most border between Hong Kong and China. This centuries-old village was once home to hundreds of rice farmers. Today, some of the homes have been modernized with water, electricity and road access. The big city of Shenzhen, China sits in the distance. Photo by Kelsey Tamborrino

HONG KONG -- Toby Emmet stumbled upon his current home in a Hong Kong country park 34 years ago while on a camping trip with his three sons. An abandoned village house alongside an old rice field, it had a kicked-in front door, broken windows and graffiti on the walls. It was just beginning to seriously deteriorate.

After a quick negotiation with the nephew of the original Hong Kong Chinese owner of the house, he found himself with a nine-year lease and full responsibility for the maintenance and restoration of a house that had been used for generations by rice farmers.

He built a new gabled roof, maintained the ancestral home filled with ornate furniture and black-and-white photographs of the native family's ancestors, and replaced all the windows to look like the originals — twice (he didn't buy the right wood the first time).

"Everything I've done, I've tried to maintain the authenticity of it," Emmet said on his porch, surrounded by his two dogs and just a few yards from the hundreds of birds he keeps in a cage.



British expat Toby Emmett began renting this house in a Sai Kung Country Park enclave village of Pak Sha O Ha Yeung 34 years ago. He has restored it from a deteriorating building to a traditional-looking Chinese Hong Kong home. Photo by Kelsey Tamborrino

Emmet was born in London, leaving with his family in 1944 for Wales because of the bombings during World War II. More than seven decades later, he now lives in the middle of one of Hong

Kong's most beautiful and biologically diverse areas — in a home completely surrounded by a lush green forest that was “on a pathway to hell” when he found it.

Thirty miles away are the concrete and steel canyons of Hong Kong, a city with one of the world's highest population densities, where 7.2 million people make up the hustle and bustle of an international financial hub, where housing prices are going through the roof and students have made national news in their rallies for democracy.

But in Emmet's quiet sanctuary, where the main road wasn't built until 30 years ago, it is all but impossible to recognize the intricacies modern day urban problems. And Emmet is struggling to keep it that way against the pressures of the encroaching city and its appetite for space.

While the family has tasked him to keep part of the clan house intact with their family photos and relics, Emmet said most of the surrounding land — including his lawn — has already been sold to developers.

After his more than three decades of work on the house, and spending the last 17 years there as his primary residence, he has seen a company slowly buy up and prepare to develop the green space around him.

“They've been buying it stealthily over the last 15 years,” Emmet said. “And now they're getting quite aggressive.”

Villages like Emmet's are often referred to as country park “enclaves” — land carved out of the parks during their creation in the 1970s by the government to allow these native villagers to keep their long-owned land.

Today, 77 of these enclaves remain throughout the region. Many are abandoned. Many have already been sold to developers even though government policy prohibits it. Others are occupied by a new kind of villager — expatriates like Emmet who are renting their homes from those who still have the basic rights to the properties.

But with Hong Kong's booming property prices, village landowners are feeling the pressure more than ever to sell their ancestral properties to developers who can in turn make a hefty profit off those who want to live in Hong Kong's most pristine areas.

Emmet and the new demographic aren't just renting these village homes — they're fighting to conserve the land and keep an old way of life from slipping away into an urbanized countryside. And there is a reason that so many of those fighting the encroachment of the city are outsiders and even foreigners.

Billy Hau, a professor in the University of Hong Kong's School of Biological Sciences, who himself grew up in the rural village of Ho Sheung Heung in Hong Kong's New Territories, said that the majority of people who come from these villages are just not interested in “saving their roots.”

Instead, most are like him. He returns on holidays and other special occasions. He said there are



Some village houses like this one in the enclave village of Pak Sha O have been abandoned and begun to deteriorate over the years. Many landowners do not remodel the homes, instead choosing to sell the land to developers. Photo by Kelsey Tamborrino

now third-generations of those who left the villages who can't even speak Cantonese.

"You kill your own culture," Hau said

## The pressure to change

John Wright, a British lawyer and 32-year-resident of Hong Kong, can walk less than five minutes from the front door of his house in an enclave village to a biologically diverse marine area that is home to 63 species of coral and a beach lined with mangrove trees.

The surrounding land area is home to porcupines, wild boar, pangolin, reptiles, 90-plus species of birds, 197 species of moths and 90-plus species of butterflies.

The four-year-old, three-story home he rents from descendants of original villagers is one of several in this small village of about 60 people, he said.

Only seven houses have been built in the village in the last 20 years, but now there are plans for 94 more, which would increase the population by at least 300, according to a report from Designing Hong Kong, a non-profit.

"We were astounded when these draft plans first came out because we couldn't believe what we were looking at," Wright said.

Wright is the chairman of Friends of Sai Kung, a grassroots group designed to stand up for the preservation of country parks. The group says that sewage, traffic and the destruction of a sacred biodiversity hot spot will ruin these remote natural areas.

According to Wright and his colleagues in Sai Kung, the government departments responsible for zoning and planning tend to skip any kind of extensive planning process for the rapid development of these areas.

"They don't provide for any amenities like emergency vehicle access, roads or recreational areas. You see villages where they're just cookie-cutters, eight feet from each other. Hundreds of them" Wright said. "And this is what we don't want to happen to the enclaves in the country parks, because we live in the middle of an area of biological diversity and great value."



In the remote Sai Kung village of Tai Tan, construction materials litter the ground as developers remodel the houses for the first time in decades. Photo by Kelsey Tamborrino

Wright contends the government doesn't even know what the map of the enclave boundaries looks like as they've changed over time.

He said that 30 or 40 years ago, a construction company removed hundreds of tons of sand from the beach, which eventually caused the tide and the coastline to come inland. Yet the government insists on using the old map, he said.

"It's ridiculous," Wright said. "There are plots of land that are now under the sea. The government still insists that they're there, and they're not."

The crux of the problem is what Wright and many others believe to be an outdated law called the Small House Policy. The policy gives a male descendent (women cannot inherit land) of an original villager the right to build a three-story house on that land.

Instead of going through normal planning and development procedures, the policy allows for the land to be passed down through the generations and gives these villagers the almost

automatic right to build, said Guy Shirra, a former resident of a Sai Kung Country Park enclave and the founder of Friends of Sai Kung.

"If he owns the land, then he can get on with it very quickly," Shirra said. "He can build it for about a HK\$1 million [about \$130,000], and depending on where it is he can sell it after paying a premium within the first five years for anything from HK\$7 million [\$900,000] to HK\$50 million [\$6.45 million] if it's got a nice sea view and it's got road access it can be very valuable."

The policy was designed in 1972, Shirra said, as a way to give the original villagers of the New Territories the right to own their village lands, but it has since proved counterproductive to its original goals.

"This small house policy is the driving force behind the destruction of the enclaves," he said.

Wright said "the government is turning a huge blind eye" to villagers who have sold their lands under the table to developers, who then gain permission under false pretenses to build.

If the policy was dissolved, Wright said, it would be much more difficult to gain approval to build in the enclaves because landowners would have to go through a different, and more expensive, approval process with the government.

### A glimpse of the old days

While many who originally benefitted from the Small House Policy have left their native lands, there are occasions where families still benefit from their ancestral homes.

In a village on the northern-most border between Hong Kong and China, an 84-year-old native villager who said his name was M. Chan works outside his home, across from the rice paddy fields that were once worked by hundreds of native farmers.

Wearing khaki pants and tucked-in button-up shirt, Chan strikes a piece of bamboo he is using to start construction on another small home across from his own. Chan said the family temple adjacent to his three-story home was built 300 years ago by his ancestors, and his family has remained in the village for 13 generations.

Located in an enclave in the Plover Cove Country Park, the village is made up of abandoned and partially-occupied one-to-three-story homes that line a road facing the old rice fields. Signs signifying Chinese New Year's wishes hang around the occupied doorways as tall grass grows out of stone ruins right next door.

Where simplicity used to be the only way of life, cars now line the streets and electricity and water flow into the remaining homes.

Chan grew up in this village, but like many native villagers, he took advantage of a British passport during the period of the 99-year lease. He moved to the United Kingdom 55 years ago and continues to split his time between the U.K. and Luk Keng.

He said many of his old neighbors moved out of the area to find work when the agriculture proved to have no value. Many have not returned.

But as the generation that left decades ago retires and reaches their elderly years, it hasn't been uncommon for them to return from wherever they lived in Canada, the United Kingdom or other places to come back to their villages, said Lawal Marafa, a professor in the Department of Geography and Resource Management at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

"There is now a revitalization of some sort where those local people are now coming back. There are not many, but some of them are actually returning from their sojourn overseas," Marafa said.

Chan is one of them. His children are all British subjects and grandchildren who work in the British government.

The reason he returned when others have just left was a simple one: "I was born here," he said.

According to an analysis by the Save Our Country Parks Alliance, in a survey of 12 enclaves within Plover Cove Country Park, the proposed development would have the population increase, collectively, from 360 to about 13,000.

Anna Chan (no relation to the Chan family of the village) frequently hikes this country park enclave area with her husband and dog. She said she doesn't believe it's a good idea to invite developers to the area.

While the land-owning villagers have every right to sell or renovate their homes, Anna Chan said it's a very common situation for large native families like M Chan's to argue over whether or not to sell their homes, or to rebuild them for themselves.

"To rebuild the house is very complicated for the Chan family," Anna Chan said. "It's very controversial and difficult for the children to agree."

A similar case is occurring for Toby Emmet in his village in Sai Kung — about an hour's drive south of Chan's in Plover Cove.

And because Emmet rents his home from the descendants of the original land-owning family, he doesn't really have a say in its fate of whether or not they decide to sell it to a developer.

"I have seven landlords], which actually works very well, because you have someone to knock it down, someone to keep it. They need seven unanimous decisions," Emmet said. "So I've been living on a knife edge."

## Preserving a history

A short drive away from Emmet's historical home, past the road and a resurrected patch of cultivated land, the sounds of drills and saws echo down the corridors between closely-knit houses. They were built as stone and brick defensive fortresses in 1915 — only 17 years after the U.K.'s 99 year lease began.

One hundred years later, the watchtower and sliding doors made of thick wooden bars remain. But the sounds of construction come from ongoing renovations to make these buildings into historical landmarks and rebuild a home for their true owner, said Tim Collard, a 12-year resident of the village called Pak Sha O.

Collard, who spent 10 years of his education in England and went to school at University of Bristol, rents two houses in the village that were built in this defensive mindset. One of his homes sits right alongside the old rice paddies, which have in recent years been bought by a developer who in turn rented it to a local farmer for the time being.

Today, with its white walls, hardwood floors and simple design, it's anything but flashy in decoration and equipped with modern appliances and technology from the gas stove to Collard's desk with his laptop, where he works



In the remote village of Luk Keng, only a few original native families remain while others have abandoned their homes and let them deteriorate. Photo by Kelsey Tamborrino

as a biological scientist.

"When I moved in, there were no indigenous villagers," Collard said. "There were no Chinese in the village at all. They had all moved out. They were given opportunities to move out."

At the end of Collard's row of houses sits ruins of another old house. He said it was once the home of a couple who resided there 25 years ago. Now it just looks as if the walls caved in and the rubble was left untouched.

Old ruins like this remain untouched for so long, he said, because the land is worth more than any home the villager could build and rent out for profit.

"They could renovate it and spend the money, make a little bit of money renting it out, and then sell it, and the developer comes in and knocks it down," Collard said. "The land is what's worth money in the economics, not the building itself."

Collard said his village's representative, who is a descendent of the original family that farmed and settled the land in the 1700s, has committed to preserving his clan houses and not selling out to developers because the representative's family grew up there and it's part of their heritage.

However, that is not the case for every family and homeowner even within the same village.

Collard said there is one continuing case in Pak Sha O in which the owner has sold a home to a developer, has abandoned the house, and is "waiting for the roof to fall in... He wants a ruin."

One of Collard's landlords, he said, only has one son — which makes it easier to keep his home because oftentimes the natives will have several children who argue about whether or not to sell the property.

"If you've been brought up in [the more urbanized Hong Kong town of] Tai Po, or in London, you don't care," he said. "It doesn't mean anything anymore. It's just a place where grandfather and grandmother grew up. It doesn't really have that resonance."

Shirra said while the Save Our Country Parks Alliance initiative focuses on maintaining the ecologically diverse habitats of the enclaves, preserving the heritage that indigenous people seem to care little about also plays a role.

"Local people really appreciate it when they see it, but they don't seem to have the [wherewithal] to do it themselves," Shirra said. "I've only come across a handful of indigenous descendants who have said, 'We hate what is happening and we want to preserve our villages and our heritage.' That's really quite bizarre."

## The grim future of development

Even though Collard's landlords believe in preserving their ancestral homes, he and others don't see a future so bright for the 20-person village of Pak Sha O.

Collard, a member of Friends of Sai Kung, said the land currently being farmed outside his home was once "a beautiful water meadow" after the villagers stopped cultivating rice.

Now, he foresees extreme environmental consequences because of the farming that has since been resurrected on that land. The agricultural chemicals, he said, are in close proximity to the river that leads to the Hoi Ha marine area. While some of these chemicals



Some of the land in the village of Pak Sha O has been bought by a developer and leased temporarily to a farmer. Even with the return of agriculture to the village, locals are concerned that pesticides and other chemicals from the farming flows

aren't toxic to people, they can have dangerous effects on wildlife and the unique blend of natural species there.

downstream to harm the biological diversity in the Hoi Ha marine area. Photo by Kelsey Tamborrino

"The Hoi Ha marine reserve is finished," Collard said. "It's over. It's too late to save it."

While Shirra and Collard, Friends of Sai Kung and Save Our Country Parks Alliance will continue to fight, their faith in the political system to reverse itself and save the area is nonexistent, and the outlook is grim.

"The current government is certainly not going to help turn this back at all... You're going to see some impact," Collard said. "There's no question at all. How serious it will be in 10 or 20 years, I don't know, but I think if you came back in 50 you'd see a very different scenario here in Hong Kong."

As they stand now, the Hong Kong country parks are comparable to the United States national parks for their recreational uses and natural beauty, serving as an escape for city dwellers and tourists who spend their weekends camping, hiking and beach-going.

With the widespread popularity of them, Collard said, many people would not tolerate a rapid transition of country parks to urbanized areas — but they would tolerate a gradual one, and they wouldn't do anything about it anyway.

"They want to urbanize the country parks, that's the point," Collard said.

## Economic momentum to urbanize the countryside

The Sai Kung Country Park has been called the "Garden of Hong Kong."

When Guy Shirra lived there a decade ago, it looked far different from the "garden" it is today.

Shirra, an exceedingly fast-talking Briton, lived for a year in the village of Tai Tan, another village with thick green brush surrounding it and near the coastline of a breathtaking bay — miles from anywhere that looks close to a densely populated city.

Now, past the government signs aimed at deterring builders are the sounds of chainsaws and drills.

The surrounding homes are under construction. One, right along the water with a dock on the bay, has a swimming pool and a shiny black facade. Nearby, a row of old hakka-style houses have been under renovation for a year, and construction material continues to scatter the area.



In the Tai Tan village, government signs attempt to fend off builders, yet brand new homes sit in the background. Many people are critical of the government for not doing enough to prevent the development of these enclave villages, which are in biologically diverse natural areas of Hong Kong. Photo by Kelsey Tamborrino

"The places I used to run every day, it's very sad. I don't like going back," said Shirra, who spent 30 years in the Hong Kong police force.

The home he used to live in there has been renovated — he predicts it was sold for HK\$10 million, or about \$1.3 million.

Hong Kong's population currently stands at about 7.2 million. Even with a low birth rate, that population is expected to increase to almost 8.5 million by 2041, according to projections from the region's Census and Statistics Department.

State-of-the-art skyscrapers continue to go up in the urban areas of Hong Kong, but the fear is

that with an increasing population, these land values will only go up — and developers will not just build skyward but outward into these country park enclaves even more.

“I would have loved to have seen the government say we’ll buy the whole bloody thing,” Shirra said about his friend Tim Collard’s enclave. “Rebuild it as a traditional Chinese village, turn it into hostels, get tenants in there, put the paddy fields back, bring the cattle back, turn it into an old Hakka farming village where people could come and see the original Hong Kong life. That would be a beautiful thing to do.”

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Sam Janesch was the editor in chief of The Daily Collegian for the 2014-15 academic year. He has interned at the Daily Local News in West Chester, the Intelligencer Journal/New Era in Lancaster and will spend the summer of 2015 at the Pennsylvania Legislative Correspondent's Association internship in Harrisburg. He has attended the 2014 Online News Association Conference in Chicago, the 2014 Associated

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