



environmental protection

# Life was simpler then

Reflecting on his rural childhood in Tai Po, *Yau Wing-kuong* remembers a greener, cleaner lifestyle

**S**tunned by the gigantic red sun rising quietly in the reflection of the mirror-like Tolo Harbour, watching welcoming sea birds and sampans that was my boyhood.

I remember lying on big rocks in the streams listening to flowing water, birds and insects. I recall climbing steep waterfalls to trace the source of the streams, chatting to friends of my childhood dreams. It was a simple, rural life.

I look back on my boyhood at Tolo Harbour with deep affection.

Then, one day, a television signal tower appeared atop a hill overlooking Tai Po. It marked the beginning of change.

We stayed indoors more and more, addicted to the wrestling show but its seeming cruelty made me weep. The acres of vegetable fields around our house turned into buildings.

The sea and wetland in front of my house, together with the mangrove forests, were filled in to build homes for eight villages that were moved for construction of the Plover Cove Reservoir.

There was more reclamation. The buildings got bigger and taller. There were more people and more trains. A new town was created for 300,000 residents.

The friendly waters, which had been a short distance for a 10-year-old boy, were now a major 45 minute detour across highways and science parks.

It's hard to remember the name of these new estates which rose so miraculously from the sea. Perhaps in my subconscious mind, the memories and affections of the sparkling waters are simply too deep for substitution by the reality of solid concrete.

We are moving away from nature. Or is it nature that distances itself from us?

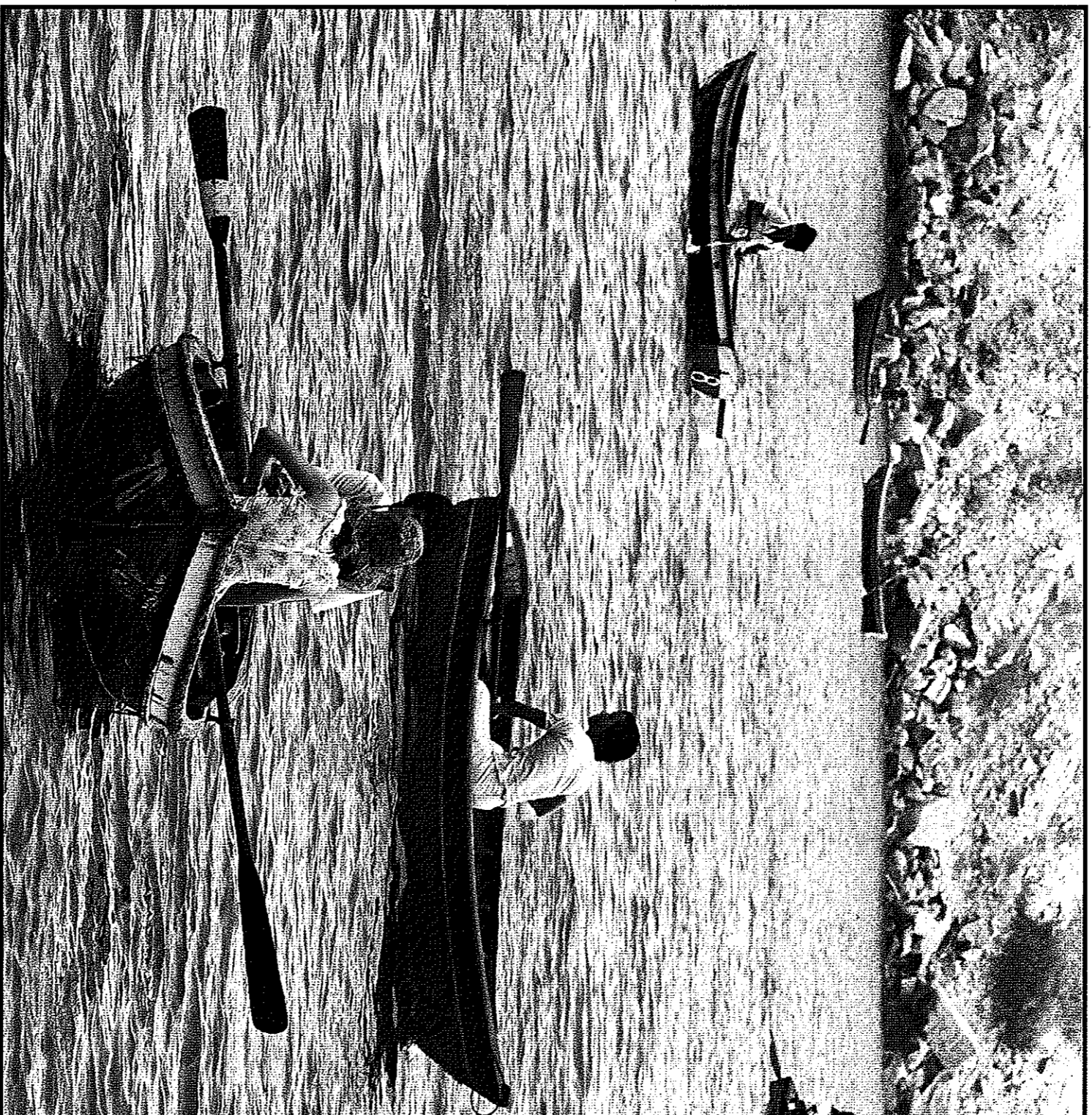
We learned to lock our doors at night, and then during the day too. We used to stroll unannounced into our neighbour's sitting room. Now we hardly know them at all.

The insects, big and small, in different shapes and colours, that used to visit my balcony have all faded like dust. They never returned.

The golden rice fields that once ruled and covered the Tai Po countryside made way for weeds. My uncles, driven out by high inflation and low prices for their farm produce, left their ancestral homes and fields to work abroad.

Guessing the colour of water in the deep concrete *nulahn* that was built through the Fo Tan valley in Sha Tin became a game on our daily trip to school. We found out that it all depended on the fabrics being dyed in the factories. Sometimes the water ran red, often navy blue, but usually it was a rainbow mix with a background of jet black.

The rivers and streams were drying up, clogged by sewage and poultry farm waste.



Tolo Harbour in 1976 is picturesque but 12 years later runoff from fabric factories seeped into the cove, killing marine life. Photo: SCMP Picture

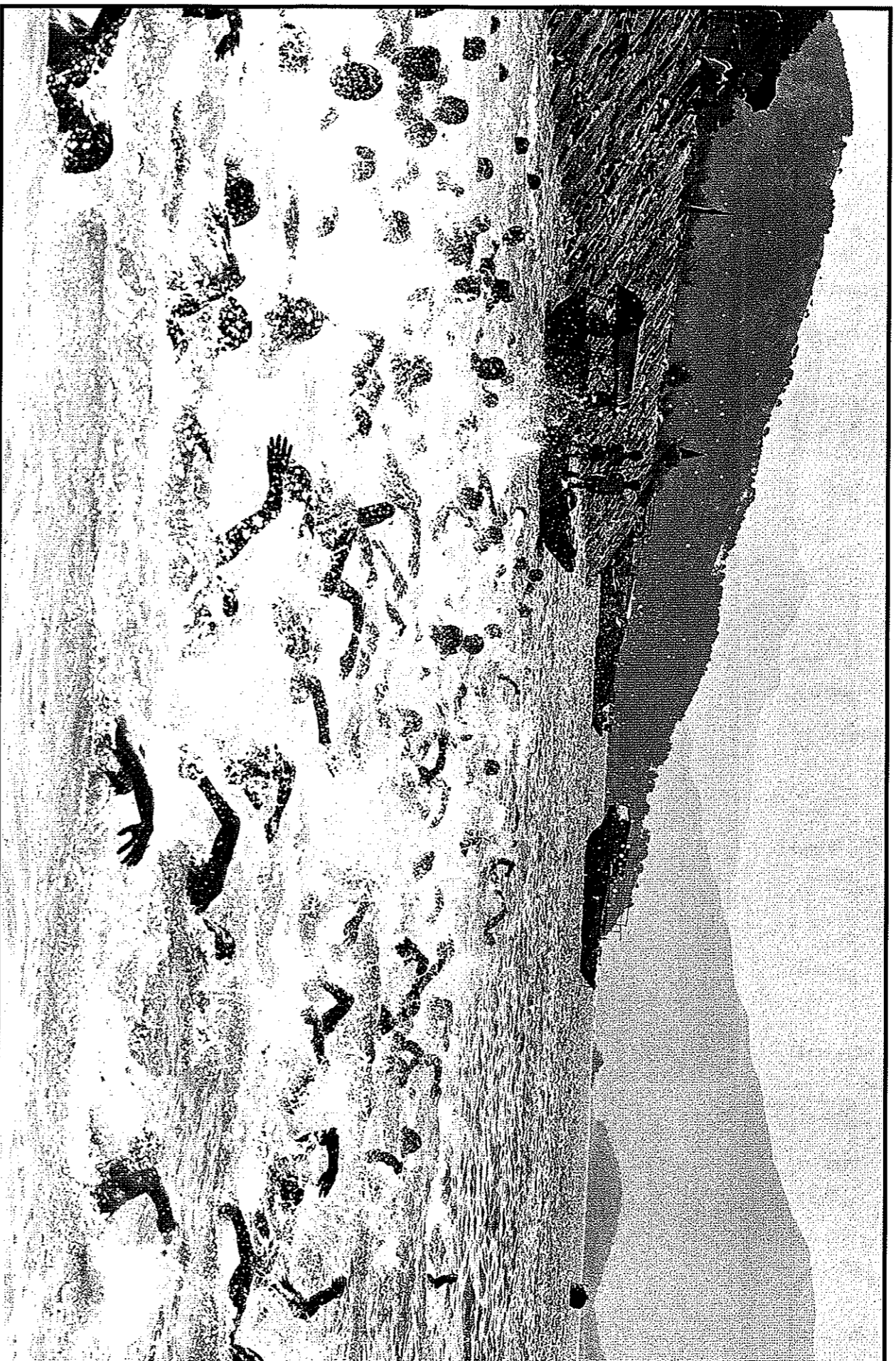
The pungent, black and lifeless runoff found its way into Tolo Harbour, helping the cove to run up a world record of 44 red tides in 1988.

It became a bay of death. Almost all habitats were wiped out. What a sad change for a glorious inlet that was the pearl farm for the Chinese emperors. Not that long ago, it provided abundant harvests of fish, crabs, scallops and abalone that fed our coastal villages.

The government and the Environmental Protection Department finally stopped the pollution. Nature started to heal. Slowly, the habitats are returning. It was a suggestion that the entire harbour be reclaimed to build houses and that sparked formation of the Tai Po Environmental Association. To raise aware-



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Just when it was safe (and clean enough) to be in the water, people compete in the the Cross-Tolo Harbour Swimming Race in July 1976. Photo: SCMP Picture

ness of our surrounding treasures, to conserve and to appreciate them, is our aim and mission.

**W**e train ecological ambassadors, publish the *Tai Po Green Guidebook* and brochures on butterflies, birds and culture. We hold meetings, contests and discussions to inform people, especially the young, about their natural heritage.

In February, acres of land were burnt in Sha Lo Tung Village, one of the 12 listed important conservation sites and a noted site of special scientific interest (SSSI). It has rare dragonflies and fish.

Thoughtless hunters were fishing with electric rods to kill off fish, eggs and insects. Four-wheel-drive vehicles used the valley as an illegal rally site, scouring the earth and leaving a trail of floral carnage. Air pistol enthusiasts used the listed Hakka village heritage houses as make-believe war sites, kicking down doors and roofs and storming the empty houses like US marines searching for Saddam Hussein.

Then we have overseas visitors coming to Fung Yuen, fully equipped to catch butterflies, caterpillars and their eggs.

And this is a largely unknown but important conservation site and SSSI with rare butterflies. Together with volunteers and local villagers, we fly banners in several languages asking people not to catch the butterflies.

We monitor the area and call the authorities when suspects are seen trapping insects and threatened species. This has proven effective. But we need proper management, removal of the horrific Mikama vine - that smothers and kills other plants - and other prompt action to ensure long-term sustainability.

In Fung Yuen, the association decided it should not wait any longer for official support. We lease land to enhance the area for butterflies to live and breed. We provide education, guidance and a conservation mindset for the public and schools.

Our volunteers dig and plant, water and care, prepare education and conservation materials, and guide visitors to share our joy of getting close to nature. People and nature should live in harmony for mutual survival and support. It's like the Chinese story about the old man committed to moving a mountain. Our shovels are small but every bit of earth moved brings us closer to our goal.

We would like all of Hong Kong to join us. Take up a shovel and make our Hong Kong a better place.

*Dr Yau Wing-kuong is founder and chairman of the Tai Po Environmental Association.*

*A descendant of a fishing clan from Cheung She Tan village in Tolo Harbour, he has a doctorate in environmental engineering and is a director of Asia-Pacific studies at Chinese University of Hong Kong*

## AN ENVIRONMENTAL QUAGMIRE

**A government rethink is needed on green issues to bring effective ecological safeguards says Alex Chan**

**T**he Environmental Protection Department has come a long way. From a small environmental protection unit in 1977 it grew to a fully fledged department in 1986.

Over the years, the department has made a number of contributions to public education and safeguarding our environment and ecology.

For example, the department tackled the air pollution issue by banning high-sulphur industrial fuels in the late 1980s and lead petrol in 1999, and the liquefied petroleum gas-only taxi fleet has helped reduce emissions.

The department's statistics show that while the number of vehicle-kilometres has risen 10 per cent since 1994, emissions of nitrogen oxides and particulates dropped by 20 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively, between 1997 and 2002.

Yet looking more closely into the trend of roadside pollution at the city's three monitoring stations, only the readings at the air pollution index at Causeway Bay have significantly been lowered. At Central and Mongkok, the index has generally worsened since 2000.

Hong Kong still consistently fails to meet its long-term air quality objectives.

Pollutants including sulphur dioxide, respirable suspended particulates (RSPs), nitrogen oxides and ozone cause respiratory and other illnesses. The real issue is that despite the department's efforts, it has little say in overall environmental

policies, and it sets no total compliance requirements. The department is supposed to formulate and implement plans to improve the environment. But it is the Transport Department, or the boss of both departments (the Environment, Transport and Works Bureau) that decides to build more roads and allows more vehicles, thereby spreading pollutants. The government still fails to charge for road use. Buses continue to get diesel duty exemptions while the cleaner rail systems need to be self-sustaining.

The Environmental Protection Department has no say in whether Hong Kong would restructure the electricity market to allow more competition and the development of clean renewable energy, while about 40 per cent of RSP and nitrogen oxide emissions come from local power generation.

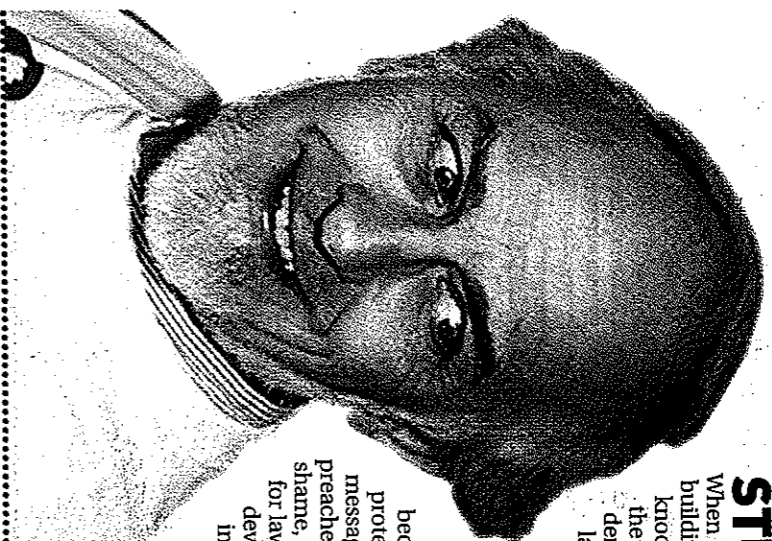
The mainland is again burning more poor-quality coal to support its booming economy, directly affecting Hong Kong's air.

There has been at least two unusually poor air episodes in June and July of this year. The Environment, Transport and Works Bureau could take the issue more rigorously with the Guangdong Authorities.

What Hong Kong needs is for the government to truly make sustainable development a core part of decision-making.

Officials would need to stop looking at environmental protection and economic development in terms of striking a "balance" because the environment would lose every time, but instead adopt a "no major trade-off" attitude to find innovative solutions.

*Alex Chan is chairman of the Citizens Party.*



## STUART REED

When Hong Kong developers regard a wish to building they become infatuated with a wish to knock it down. The older and more charming the building, the more frenzied their need to demolish it. If the site includes a swathe of lawn, plus some trees, they slaver at the thought of covering it with concrete. Today they have become more secretive about their vandalism. Let us then regard with deepest sympathy the struggle ahead of Dr Stuart Reed when he arrived in the mid-1980s to become director of environmental protection. Conscientiously he tried to get the message across. Grimly but unavailingly he preached to developers and, to their everlasting shame, qualified architects. Patiently he waited for laws with real teeth. He argued that here "a development goes up and the environmental impact is considered afterwards". Finally the laws are in place and enforced, such as the recent \$32 million penalty that Cheung Kong (Holdings) paid after 250 trees were destroyed at its One Beacon Hill luxury development.



## MEI NG

The director of Friends of the Earth (FoE) once went to the frontier zone to inspect industrial sites near the border. Mei Ng Fong Shi-mei took one look at rusting vehicle wrecks, piles of old truck tyres and rotting factory debris then sat on the side of Sha Tau Kok Road and cried. Any committed environmentalist has reason to weep as they walk through parts of modern Hong Kong and observe the desecrated landscape. Ms Ng, however, and the patient educational campaigns carried out by FoE, might raise a wan smile of hope. Her voice has been persistent and her lobbying of government consistent in calling for a cleaner, greener city. She contends the time has come to have a new vision for the city and its future. She urges the government, business and the public to work together to repair the environmental damage caused by years of neglect. It's been an uphill battle in such a materialistic society. "But I believe it's better to light a candle than to curse darkness," she says.

# Being green is no walk



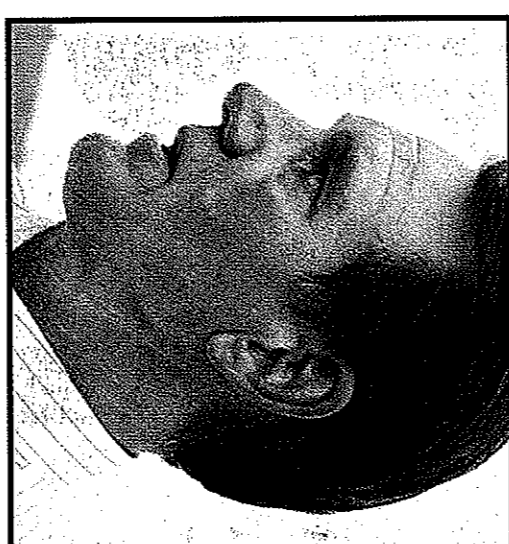
## YAU WING-KWONG

Land developers used to scoff at embryonic environmental groups, dismissing them as pampered expatriates divorced from the reality of life in Hong Kong. Then came Yau Wing-kwong. The scoffing stopped. Nobody could dispute his rightful stature as a person who knew the realities of what development had done to Tolo Harbour; he grew up there as a boy in a Hakka village, played in the waters and roamed the hills. Then he earned a PhD in mechanical engineering at London University. He came home to Tolo Harbour to work as a consultant in energy and water conservation. And Dr Lau set up the Tai Po Environmental Association to try to preserve the remaining natural beauty of his heritage. The active body he heads organises field trips, painting and photography competitions, working parties to help clean sites where rare migratory birds nest, and exploratory walks through old villages. "We can't keep everything from the past," Dr Yau says. "But we can treasure what is left."



## CHRISTINE LOH

A self-appointed ombudsman fighting equally hard for good and lost causes, Christine Loh Kung-wai heads a think-tank with a community conscience - Civic Exchange. Her organisation mostly pays its running costs from voluntary donations but happily for Ms Loh she has friends (and the Li family) not only in high places but also in high finance. Civic Exchange's periodic reports reverberate either in the corridors of power or in the bowers of big business. Sharp-eyed researchers go through subjects and projects with a fine-tooth comb, and when they give the tree a hearty shake it's amazing what spills down, soon to find its way on to the pages of her latest carefully-crafted expose. With her perception and depth of knowledge as a student of the community's nuances, Ms Loh has taken the "dial a quote" response to a far higher plateau than we were accustomed to - and possibly deserve. An unlikely stint in the Legislative Council somewhat cooled her democratic ardour, yet you could do much worse than read her publication of last year, *Getting Heard - a Handbook for Hong Kong Citizens*, or visit [www.civic-exchange.org](http://www.civic-exchange.org)



## TOM MASTERSON

Ordinary people often feel helpless when they find out government or big business is about to launch some major project which will change their lives. "Don't despair," counsels recruitment executive Tom Masterson. "Organise." That's precisely what the long-time Lantau resident did with a group of friends when they found out the government wanted to build a super-prison on Hei Ling Chau. They formed the Living Islands Movement, one of the most successful environmental advocacy groups in Hong Kong. The proposal to use 80 hectares for a jail to hold 7,220 inmates unified many Lantau residents. Living Islands swiftly signed up 200 members, and started a reasoned and determined dialogue with the government and politicians. The Californian-born executive who has spent 30 years in Asia says one problem with planned developments is that the government says what it wants to do and then asks the public to agree. He and Living Islands members urge the administration to change this approach, to treat the people as customers and to make sure the customer is happy. There is a lack of transparency, openness and consultation in the planning system, he contends.