In September 2016 important discussions were held in Hong Kong to support a better dialogue concerning the long-term conservation management of the buffer zone around Mai Po Inner Deep Bay Ramsar Site.

Ania Grobicki, Ramsar Deputy Secretary General and Lew Young, Senior Advisor for Asia-Oceania represented the Ramsar Secretariat and held informal meetings with a number of wetland stakeholders, including Hong Kong SAR government, NGOs, urban developers and academics.

Hong Kong is known internationally for its urban landscape but the city is also important for its biodiversity. Some 40% of its land area has been designated as country parks also including the unique Mai Po Inner Deep Bay Ramsar Site. Deep Bay is a mosaic of coastal wetland habitats such as tidal-flats, mangroves and traditionally managed shrimp and fish ponds. The site is home to 60,000 water-birds in winter.

Acknowledging development pressures around the site in late 1990s, the Hong Kong government established a series of planning guidelines to ensure a long-term conservation and wise use of the site. Two buffer zones were established: an inner Wetland Conservation Area and an outer Wetland Buffer Area. In the latter developments can be considered provided that the development follows a “no-net-loss in wetland” principle which means complies with a private-public partnership approach and is supported by an Ecological Impact Assessment.

Over the past 25 years developers have proposed housing projects in fishponds areas around Deep Bay and these have been objected by local environmental NGOs.

The long term conservation and sustainable development of the Deep Bay area depends upon dialogue and cooperation of all stakeholder groups including government, developers, pond-fish farmers, environmental groups and academics. The lack of trust between stakeholders has disrupted common communication. The
informal visit of Ramsar representatives was an attempt to better understand concerns of each group and to hear their vision for the future of the Ramsar Site.

Despite the current impasse the latest discussions identified areas of common interests of stakeholders for the future of Deep Bay area. This includes agreement that limited development could be considered in the outer part of the Deep Bay area if it makes a positive contribution to wetland conservation. Developers’ contribution could be for example creating a diversity of wetland habitats through restoration measures and manage these habitats in the long term. However an integrated approach would be needed while approving such developments and the restoration and creation of wetland habitats.

The meetings served to facilitate a dialogue and proved to be successful in agreeing on initial steps to be taken towards a common vision for Deep Bay area.