Park rules

MANDY CHUNG

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COURTESY OF DAVID BIDDLECOMBE

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1. The "no-s" and "don't-s" list at the Kowloon Park, including "No graffiti", "No skateboarding" and "No cycling."
2. Founder of the Freedom Ball campaign David Biddlecombe said the action aimed at questioning whether the park regulations can really meet the needs of Hong Kong people.

by Mandy Chung

Hong Kong park regulations have been challenged by activists who are frustrated by long lists of "no-s" and "don't-s".

The Pleasure Grounds Regulation bans a list of activities in the city's 1,470 parks, gardens and sitting-out areas. This includes "no flying kites", "no riding bicycles", "no walking the dog" and "no sitting on the grass". There is also a section in the regulation which prohibits park-goers from bringing in cattle, sheep and goat.

The parks are managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), and offenders of the regulation can be prosecuted. A total of 204 prosecutions were made relating to breaches of Pleasure Grounds Regulation in 2007 and 2008, with around half of these breaches involving unauthorised cycling in public pleasure grounds.

Long lists of prohibited activities in the city's public parks shocked David Biddlecombe when he moved to Hong Kong 12 years ago.

"When I first came to Hong Kong, I went to the park and saw big signs with all the things that we can't do. And I thought, what can we do?" said Mr Biddlecombe.

Owner of an educational curriculum development company and the father of a 15-year-old, Mr Biddlecombe said there are problems on the way parks are regulated, designed and managed.

"I was in education. I know children and school textbooks well. Every year, when they (children) have to think about parks, the only thing is about 'don't-s'. When we teach parks, we teach 'don't-s'. Don't play in the park, don't run in the park, don't climb the trees," he said.

He added the "No ball games allowed" rule is one of the most obvious examples among the "problematic" regulations in Hong Kong parks.

"We questioned one of the park security guards in Kowloon Tong. He said if you want to play balls, you need to book a special indoor room. You would have to book it one month in advance," he said.

"There're so many regulations which aren't serving the interests of the Hong Kong people," he said. He added that children could have more spaces to play balls if parks are better designed.

Instead of telling children to come again a month later, he decided to take action to oppose to these "problematic" restrictions.

The Freedom Ball Campaign was started last July in parks in Wan Chai, Quarry Bay and the Kowloon Park in Tsim Sha Tsui. He said the campaign aimed at challenging the rules for public spaces and stimulating debates on whether the park regulations can really meet the needs of Hong Kong people.

With "Say No to No Fun" as the slogan, Mr Biddlecombe placed huge red inflatable balls printed with the slogan in parks, where ball games are prohibited, on an ad hoc basis. Mr Biddlecombe said small scale interventions were successful, and the number of balls are to be increased as he takes the project to the next level.

"We want to involve ordinary people who use the parks in the debate, not just 'activists'," he said.

Parents and children welcomed the idea, played with the balls and expressed their opinions on park regulations and designs. He said some parents have questioned why their children have nowhere to ride their bicycles and why they are not allowed to play on the grass.

Occasionally stopped by park management and security guards, Mr Biddlecombe regards that as an intrinsic part of the debate. He said the public has been showing its interest in the campaign.

Some locals share similar feelings that parks are not for them. Mrs Fung,

"When they (children) have to think about parks, the only thing is about 'don'ts'... Don't play in the park, don't run in the park, don't climb the trees."

the mother of a five-year-old, was one of the many Hong Kong people who questioned why ball games are prohibited in parks.

"I don't know how to explain to my kid why he can't play balls in the park. He's just five years old and I don't think he would cause any trouble to others," she said.

She added that parents may not always have time to take their children to play, and it would be inconvenient with such strict regulations in parks.

Seven-year-old Chan King-piu said he has ridden his bicycle and played ball games in public parks, but he has never been stopped by park security guards.

When asked what if bicycles and ball games are banned from parks, he said with a frown, "Then parks will become no fun at all".

"Please don't ban me from playing ball games (in parks), my mom won't let me play at home," he said.

Chan Wai-fun, a 38-year-old mother of three children, said the government has been trying to minimise the possibility of accidents, as some parks are too small for so many activities.

"Of course, it would be better if they can make different regulations based on the size of different parks," she added.

Paul Zimmerman, the founder of Designing Hong Kong, a non-profit organisation which promotes better living environment, said that people care more about the environment after the outbreak of SARS in 2003, but the government is still lagging behind in meeting new public aspirations and demands.

"In general, I think the LCSD is over-cautious. Whenever someone complains, the LCSD will post up a new rule. They could have responded differently, but they had the tendency to respond by putting up new rules," he said.

"The LCSD will feel comfortable if they have the rules and they can apply them if they need, and ignore them if the space allows," Mr Zimmerman added.

Admitting that regulations in local parks may be too strict, Ng Mee-kam, associate professor of the department of urban planning and design at the University of Hong Kong, said we cannot blame everything on the government.

"They're (the LSCD) also at a hard position because they're the one who would be responsible if accidents happen," she said.

With regard to urban planning, Ms Ng said the authority should take users' voices into account.

"There's nothing more useful than taking in their (park users') feedbacks. That facilitates management and implementation, as people have already come to consensus with the discussions beforehand," she said.

Ms Ng added that people have rights, but they should not neglect their responsibilities.

Talking about community participation, former Wan Chai District Council Chairman and community activist Ada Wong Ying-kay pointed out the importance of including the voices of the general public and the District Council in the park design and management.

Following closely the cultural and urban renewal issues, Ms Wong cited an example to illustrate how residents' participation in district affairs can foster emotional connection among the community.

"Residents in Wan Chai contributed to the design and operation of Luen Fat Street Sitting-Out Area. People in the community treasured the place, and some elderly would even help water the plants in the park," she said.

Ms Wong said that the Pleasure Grounds Regulation is outdated and "colonial", in the sense that many regulations stipulated in Britain were copied directly to Hong Kong.

"Why is there a regulation banning people from bringing cattle and sheep to the parks? It just won't happen in Hong Kong!" said Ms Wong.

Michael Siu Kin-wai, head of the Public Design Lab research team at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, said the government has to find a balance between freedom and control as different users have different demands.

Mr Siu said that such as Victoria Park, recreational areas developed in the 70s and 80s have a simpler design with less facilities. With more and more facilities in newly-built parks, he agreed that parks nowadays are over-designed.

"Some people may not regard it as a problem as it can ensure the safety of children, but others prefer children to grow by making mistakes. Personally I prefer fewer boundaries and more diversity and flexibility," he said. "After all, parks are for relaxation."

Spokesman of the LSCD, in a written reply to *Varsity*'s enquiries, said that they will consider a number of factors in choosing the location of recreational areas, including land use, District Council and residents' opinions and transportation.

They added that park goers can enjoy leisure activities in parks and playgrounds, as long as these activities do not cause obstruction or danger to other users, or damage to the facilities. Park users who are found violating the Pleasure Grounds Regulation will be given verbal warnings before taking necessary further actions.

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3. Signs can be seen everywhere in parks.
4. Some kids are oblivious of the "No ball games allowed" sign in the Kowloon Park.
5. Signs of actions prohibited in Hong Kong parks have been listed out at the entrance.
6. Community activist Ada Wong Ying-kay supports community participation in urban design and management.
7. Feeding pigeons and wild birds causing dirtiness to public areas is liable to penalty, says one of the park signs.

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