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### **International scholars visit Taiping Island**

A group of experts on international law and political science from Taiwan and abroad toured Taiping Island in the ROC's Nansha (Spratly) Islands April 15 to gain a better understanding of conditions there.

The visit, at the invitation of the ROC government, came a day after the scholars had taken part in the International Conference on South China Sea Disputes and International Law at Soochow University in Taipei, where they were addressed by President Ma Ying-jeou and held wide-ranging discussions on related issues, including the arbitration by the Philippines against mainland China, and mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes in the region. Foreign academics joining the island tour came from Austria, Greece, Indonesia, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and United States.

The South China Sea has in recent years been subject to a series of sovereignty disputes impacting ROC sovereignty and legal rights over islands and their surrounding waters. In January 2013, the Philippines initiated arbitration against mainland China

concerning the South China Sea in accordance with Annex VII of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. During the second hearing from November 24 to 30, 2015, the Philippines distorted the facts and misinterpreted the law to argue that Taiping Island is a rock and not an island, and that it therefore should not have any maritime entitlements beyond 12 nautical miles. As an award is expected in this arbitration later this year, the Soochow University conference and trip to Taiping proved very timely.

On the island, the scholars surveyed the wells, natural vegetation, farm, Guanyin Temple, historical sites, solar power system, lighthouse, wharf, and communications equipment, as well as the Nansha Hospital. They drank freshwater drawn directly from well no. 5, affirming its high quality.

Dr. Chang Ta-wei, head of the Environmental Division of the ROC Agricultural Engineering Research Center, explained that the salinity of water from the four wells now in use (nos. 5, 7, 9, and 10) is less than 0.3 percent, much less than that of seawater, which is 3.3 to 3.5 percent saline. The value for total dissolved solids (TDS) for the well water ranges from 418 mg/L to 3,020 mg/L. Two samples from well no. 5 measured 427 mg/L and 418 mg/L, well within the ROC standards for drinking water sources and potable water.

According to the varied standards established by the Groundwater

Foundation, American Meteorological Society, and US Geological Survey, water can be regarded as fresh when its TDS measures below 500 mg/L or below 1,000 mg/L. The UK periodical Practical Fishkeeping goes so far as to consider water with a TDS value below 3,000 mg/L freshwater. These figures indicate that well no. 5 has the best quality water on Taiping Island, and can indeed serve as a source of potable water. Water from the other three wells can be used for daily activities including cleaning, bathing, and irrigation. Overall, the quality of the underground water on Taiping is superior to that of Penghu Island.

Professor Li Chia-wei of the Department of Life Science, National Tsing Hua University, introduced the flourishing natural vegetation, noting that land-based vascular plants belonging to 51 families, 125 genera, and 149 species have been recorded on the island, including three species of ferns, 113 species of dicots, 33 species of monocots, 13 species of naturalized plants, 43 species of cultivated plants, 93 species of native plants, 31 species of trees, 10 species of shrubs, and 108 species of herbs. There are 27 types of edible plants, including wild papaya and coconut that reproduce naturally and provide a large amount of fruit. Crops which produce seeds or reproduce asexually include cantaloupe, pumpkin, green beans, corn, loofah gourd, and bananas.

The island's vegetation falls into nine categories, include coastal forest, shrub land, coconut groves, natural grassland, artificial

forest, artificial grassland, vegetable gardens, and bare beaches and buildings. Trees in the dense coastal forest grow to nearly 20 meters, providing shade and a stable, moist environment in which ferns grow well. The forest also produces a large amount of plant litter to accelerate soil genesis, reduce topsoil water evaporation, and contribute to underground water storage. There are 147 trees on the island whose chest-high diameters are greater than 100 centimeters, belonging to four common tropical species: the Indian almond (*Terminalia catappa*), fish poison tree (*Barringtonia asiatica*), lantern tree (*Hernandia nymphaeifolia*), and Alexandrian laurel (*Calophyllum inophyllum*). Most of these trees are 100-150 years old.

The soil on Taiping Island can be put into five categories based on use—the sod area, coconut tree area, vegetable cultivation area, coastal forest area, and shrub area—as Professor Chen Zueng-sang of National Taiwan University explained. Field tests show that the island’s soil was naturally formed over roughly 1,000 years and supports indigenous vegetation as well as agricultural crops. The island also boasts abundant natural forest resources, with soil formation dependent on nutrients released from plant litter. Aggregate soil structure as well as plant roots and active microorganisms are thus found in topsoil at a depth of 20 centimeters or more.

Professor Chen pointed out that the island’s soil composition and

soil-profile characteristics exhibit two main types of soil. The first is found mainly on the outer periphery of the island in the coconut tree area and sod area. Its 20 centimeters of topsoil is grayish black. The soil at a depth of 20-40 centimeters consists mainly of eroded coral materials, while the bedrock is coral rock below 40 centimeters. This type has no guano layer in the soil profile. The topsoil consists mainly of sand with abundant organic matter from plant litter, and also includes eroded coral materials. The soil is calcareous, with an aggregate structure and abundant plant roots. The organic matter contained in this type of soil can accumulate to more than 10 metric tons per hectare annually.

The second type of soil is found chiefly in inland parts of the island in the areas of natural vegetation, shrubland, and vegetable cultivation. The top 20 centimeters of the topsoil is black and consists mainly of sand, with plenty of plant roots. Most of the plant litter is naturally recycled, creating soil with an aggregate structure. At a depth of 20-40 centimeters guano leaching has created a lumpy, light brown guano layer of calcareous soil, still containing many plant roots. At a depth of 40-60 centimeters, the soil mainly consists of medium and coarse sand, mixed with eroded coral materials. At 60 centimeters and deeper is the coral reef bedrock. The organic matter contained in this type of soil can accumulate to more than 20 metric tons per hectare annually, providing sufficient nutrients to sustain the ecology of all types of

natural vegetation.

Dr. Tang Shi-yeoung, research fellow at Academia Sinica's Research Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, introduced the group to the cultural and historical features of Taiping Island, including the Guanyin Temple, built in 1959 to meet the spiritual needs of personnel stationed on Taiping Island. The original temple was built in the form of a big shrine using readily available materials, with its pillars made from cans strung together. It has since been renovated several times.

Near the temple is a tombstone dating back to the Qing dynasty, as well as a stone marker erected when Japan incorporated the Shinnan Gunto (part of the Nansha Islands) in Takao City of Takao Prefecture (today's Kaohsiung City and Pingtung County), under the jurisdiction of the Japanese governor-general of Taiwan. Also in the vicinity is a memorial stele marking the recovery of the island by the ROCS Taiping on December 12, 1946. These features demonstrate that humans have long been active on Taiping Island, offering additional convincing evidence that it can sustain human habitation.

Personnel stationed on the island provided the visitors with lunch prepared from locally produced ingredients, as well as freshwater from the island. Staff were also on hand to introduce the ingredients and cooking methods, demonstrating how the natural

resources on Taiping Island are sufficient to sustain human habitation.

The scholars also toured the island's wharf, lighthouse, solar power system, and hospital, all designed for peaceful and humanitarian purposes. The Nansha Hospital drew a great deal of attention, with medical staff briefing the visitors on humanitarian rescue missions over the years and introducing the advanced and comprehensive medical facilities.

Following the inspection visit to Taiping Island by this group of international scholars, the ROC government once again reiterates that Taiping Island is the largest naturally formed island in the Nansha Islands, can sustain human habitation and economic life of its own, and meets the criteria of an island as defined in Article 121 of UNCLOS. The ROC government staunchly defends Taiping Island's status as an island. Attempts to undermine this status, as well as corresponding maritime entitlements accorded by UNCLOS, will not succeed. Any party that wishes to alleviate tensions in the South China Sea should refer to the South China Sea Peace Initiative put forward by the ROC government and seek to resolve disputes through peaceful negotiations in accordance with the principle that, even though sovereignty cannot be divided, resources can be shared, so as to jointly transform the South China

Sea into a sea of peace and cooperation.

The foreign scholars visiting Taiping Island were: Ambassador Hasjim Djalal, a leading Indonesian expert on South China Sea issues; Prof. Antonios Tzanakopoulos, Faculty of Law, Oxford University, UK; Prof. Surya P. Subedi, School of Law, University of Leeds, UK; Prof. Gerhard Hafner, University of Vienna, Austria; Prof. Iain Scobbie, Co-Director, Manchester International Law Center, University of Manchester, UK; Prof. Ilias Plakokefalos, the Netherlands Institute of the Law of the Sea, Utrecht University; and Prof. Maria Gavouneli, Faculty of Law, Athens University, Greece.

Domestic experts in the group were: Cheng Chia-jui, Professor of International Law, Soochow University; Nigel N. T. Li, President, Chinese (Taiwan) Society of International Law; Song Yann-huei, research fellow, Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica; Prof. Li Chia-wei, Department of Life Science, National Tsing Hua University; Dr. Chang Ta-wei, head of the Environmental Division of the ROC Agricultural Engineering Research Center; Dr. Tang Shi-yeoung, research fellow, Research Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, Academia Sinica; Prof. Chen Zueng-sang, Department of Agricultural Chemistry, National Taiwan University; and the following university presidents: Lee Tien-rein, Chinese Culture University; Ku Chia-hung, China University of Technology; Joe Y.C. Wu, Shih Hsin University;



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