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**Why is the Environmental Protection Department Like an Incinerator Salesman?**  
Author: Martin Williams

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衛林士(Martin Williams)

### 香港老番：環保署是焚化爐推銷員？

身為熱愛環保的長洲居民，我特別關心環保署在石鼓洲附近人工島上興建巨型廢物焚化爐的計劃。時為約兩年前，我當時仍相信該署所指，新科技焚化爐可確保排放清潔安全；當然我也擔心建築物會扼殺美景，和威脅在香港小羣居住的瀕危江豚。

兩年過去，我對廢物處理和焚化爐（包括其主要問題）的認識已加深不少。令我大感不惑的是，環保署偏袒焚化爐、拒認弊端，更不認真考慮其他可行方法。

署方不讓步的態度，於12月一場.....

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地址：香港柴灣嘉業街18號明報工業中心A座16樓  
電話：(852)3605-3705 傳真：(852)2898-2590

I'm an environmentalist living on Cheung Chau, so was especially interested when I learned of the Environmental Protection Department's plans for a huge waste incinerator on an artificial island beside nearby Shek Kwu Chau. This was around two years ago, and I then believed the department's claims the incinerator would include new technology ensuring emissions were clean and safe; though I was concerned it would blight a beautiful area, and threaten Hong Kong's small population of the globally endangered finless porpoise.

Since then, I have learned far more about waste treatment and incinerators, including major problems with incinerators. But also, disturbingly, I have found the Environmental Protection Department is extremely biased in favour of the incinerator, and unable to admit drawbacks with incinerators or really consider alternatives.

This intransigence was demonstrated at a meeting on waste last month [[Dec – I anticipate Jan publication]], during which I voiced concerns regarding incineration, and said there are far better alternatives. As the meeting closed, EPD assistant director Elvis Au told the audience he had known me for two years, and my concerns were based on 40-year old incinerator designs.

It's true that Elvis has known me for close to two years – he serves as the EPD's front man for the incinerator project, and in several meetings I've questioned him and attacked the plans, which remain in place despite strong opposition. But it's nonsense to assert that my information on incinerators and health issues is outdated.

Elvis did note that newer incinerators produce far less dioxins than early designs. But this ignores a host of other poison emissions and the highly toxic chimney ash – which are of great concern worldwide.

For instance, incinerators belch massive amounts of particulates. Indeed, when Hong Kong closed its three waste incinerators in the 1990s, a key reason was that they contributed around 20 percent of local particulate emissions. Even newer technologies are far from efficient in trapping particulates – particularly the tiniest ones, which can travel hundreds of kilometres, and when inhaled may penetrate deep into the lungs, aggravating asthma, causing lung damage, and increasing risk of premature death. Gases also contain a wide range of organic chemicals, along with metals like cadmium and mercury.

If you still want to believe Elvis' claims that the emissions will be clean and safe, consider that the design for Shek Kwu Chau incinerator include a 150-metre chimney. Then, I once suggested to Elvis that since the incinerator will be so fabulous, it should be sited beside the new government offices in Central. He replied that the emissions would lead to air pollutants over the harbour exceeding target levels. So, it won't be so safe after all.

While discussions of incinerators often focus on emissions, the chimney ash is another major problem, as it may contain harmful chemicals that do not go up in the smoke, such as dioxins, mercury and other heavy metals. Indeed, it is listed as absolute hazardous waste in the European Waste Catalogue.

Elvis and others in the EPD have never mentioned this last fact, that I've noticed. But they do cite Europe when it suits their salesmanship, asserting that the incinerator emissions will meet European Union standards. If adopting a balanced approach to informing Hong Kong people, they might also highlight the European Parliament's goal to ensure that, by 2020, there is no incineration of waste that could be recycled or composted.

But the EPD is quiet about this too. In the meeting, Elvis ignored my mention of new research finding significantly more cancers near waste incinerators in Spain. Nor does EPD tell of current research into infant deaths near UK incinerators, or high asthma rates around Detroit's massive incinerator, or health concerns from badly disposed of chimney ash, or pollution from Singapore incinerators, or many other problems with modern incinerators around the world.

I have asked Elvis why he is such an avid promoter of incineration. It is not based on science; and though he's an engineer, this does not qualify him to make grand statements regarding human health. As yet, no reply.

Nor have Elvis or other incinerator proponents made informed responses regarding an alternative treatment using plasma arc technology. This involves temperatures of perhaps 4000°C that blast molecules apart, creating a simple gas mixture plus material like solidified lava that seals heavy metals within. This is relatively new for waste treatment, but major facilities are being built and planned worldwide, with some generating electricity, others to make jet fuel and shipping fuel. Maybe similar facilities could be built here, and make Hong Kong a world leader in waste treatment.

With no real answers as to why the EPD remains wedded to incineration, we can only guess at the reasons. My suspicion is that there have been

deals made or nearly made behind the scenes, and companies are eagerly expecting their shares of the estimated HK\$15 billion for the incinerator and its island, and HK\$8 billion to extend the life of landfills during the eight-year construction period.

Then, there's the sad fact that under director Anissa Wong and former Secretary for the Environment Edward Yau, the EPD seemingly forgot about protecting our environment, and became besotted with building yet another grandiose infrastructure project at taxpayers' expense.