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Hong Kong green group blasted for ad on LED screen as big as five tennis courts urging lights off for Earth Day

Fellow environmentalists and district councillors say raising climate change awareness on 1,400-sq-m facade is ‘contradictory’

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Ernest Kao



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The local branch of an international green group calling on Hongkongers to turn off their lights for an hour to raise climate change awareness has landed in hot water – for using too much electricity to do the job.

WWF-Hong Kong’s decision to place its ad this Saturday for Earth Hour 2018 on the city’s largest LED display panel drew the ire of fellow environmentalists and district councillors over its “contradictory” message.

The 1,400-sq-m screen – the size of five tennis courts – was erected on the facade of Sogo department store in Causeway Bay in October last year, raising public concerns about light pollution in a district already notorious for being too bright at night.

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They're advertising on ... a Hong Kong landmark of light pollution

ROY TAM, GREEN SENSE

"On the one hand they're telling people to turn off their lights and on the other they're advertising on ... a Hong Kong landmark of light pollution," said Roy Tam Hoi-pong of the environmental group Green Sense, who campaigned last year against the billboard's construction.

"This is quite contradictory."

Tam said local green groups were disappointed in WWF-Hong Kong, which comes under one of the world's most influential and best resourced non-profit organisations. He urged it to pull the ad or at least "pressure the operator to shut off the screen for a week".

Causeway Bay district councillor Yolanda Ng Yuen-ting described the ad as "ridiculous" and "disheartening". She has been lobbying for the city to legislate against light pollution.

In 2015, a government task force shelved proposals to pass a law to curb light pollution, saying there was no 'majority' opinion on the issue. A voluntary charter scheme was created instead.

"Green groups should be helping us tackle pollution, not adding to it," Ng told the *Post*. "Nor does it make sense from the standpoint of a sustainable use of resources. Earth Hour has always been effective as a climate change campaign and has huge educational impact."

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According to advertising industry sources, a two-week display can cost anywhere from HK\$200,000 (US\$25,500) to HK\$4 million, depending on the time length of the ad and its frequency per hour. WWF's ad is paid by a corporate pro bono media sponsor.

But Ng, a member of the government's Environment and Conservation Fund Committee, said even had the ad been sponsored, there were "basic do's and don'ts that green groups should know better".

The LED screen, facing Hennessy Road, sits above one of the busiest pedestrian crossings in the district. According to the operator POAD, it turns the heads of about 353,000 "tourists, trendsetters, shoppers and business executives" with some 220,810 vehicles passing it daily.

WWF-Hong Kong said the ad would not be pulled. It stressed that it sought to build positive dialogue with businesses and the community, motivating them to look at their lifestyles and carbon footprints so that they realise their impact on the environment.



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“We partner with various community and corporate groups to implement renewable energy initiatives and go beyond the one hour of Earth Hour to reduce our city’s overall consumption of resources,” a group spokeswoman told the *Post*.

The billboard would be turned off for an hour during Earth Hour, she added.

A veteran member of the local environmental movement familiar with NGO operations said the ad’s appeal was understandable from a marketing perspective but risky amid rising awareness of environmental protection and political correctness.

“It’s not the first time a green group has been in trouble for double standards,” the source said, pointing to instances when conservation advocates provided disposable cutlery or bottled water at events.

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“No one can be perfect, but green groups must be more sensitive and careful nowadays.”

First held in 2007 in Sydney, Australia, Earth Hour is described by the World Wide Fund as the largest collective environmental movement on the planet.

Last year, more than 187 countries and regions participated, encompassing more than 7,000 cities and 12,000 global landmarks. In Hong Kong, 5,600 companies and buildings, nearly 300 primary and secondary schools and various landmarks took part.

A countdown in the city is to be held at the Cultural Centre in Tsim Sha Tsui at 8.30pm on Saturday for the one-hour, lights-out event.