

Early Steps towards the Conservation of the Avian Biodiversity of the Yellow Sea

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The Yellow Sea (shared by the Republic of Korea, China and the DPRK) is an extremely important eco-region supporting the needs of many people and many species, yet as elsewhere its ecological health is threatened by unsustainable development. Particular challenges to conservation in this eco-region include long-standing regional tensions, extremely rapid economic growth and development, and the migratory nature of many of its species. As such, there are still few examples of successful habitat conservation available to decision-makers in the region, and local conservation efforts alone cannot achieve a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss as e.g. mandated by the Millennium Development Goals. As a small South Korean non-government organisation in a large and flourishing civil society, Birds Korea is dedicated to the conservation of birds and their habitats in Korea and the Yellow Sea. In the domestic context, Birds Korea presently has a unique structure, with both domestic and overseas membership and websites equally in Korean and English, both innovations designed to support the accelerated import and export of "best" information, and to help facilitate collaborative, regional approaches to conservation. Our present research focus aims to fill in some of the information gaps on the avian biodiversity of open sea areas and islands (largely overlooked by recent Yellow Sea literature), and to measure population changes in shorebirds and other threatened waterbirds in response to habitat loss. In partnership with the specialist Australasian Wader Studies Group, Birds Korea conducted national shorebird surveys and the Saemangeum Shorebird Monitoring Program (2006-2008, and as proposed again in 2010), which for the first time in this region have measured the impacts of a large-scale reclamation project on migratory shorebirds across hemispheres, identifying a 20% decline in the global population of the Great Knot. To improve their usefulness, the results of this research have been made freely available, online and in published reports, and have been supported by a range of educational and awareness-raising materials, including a book on the shorebirds of the Yellow Sea in Korean, Chinese and English. All such materials emphasise the value of birds as bio-indicators, and the theme of "Birds, Wetlands and People Are One". Further, as examples of conservation for avian biodiversity remain limited within the region, we have been conducting daily counts of birds at a



small threatened urban inter-tidal wetland in Mokpo. To help mitigate the development pressures that threaten this wetland and the wider Yeongsan Estuary a booklet and Powerpoint presentation on “Wise Use Guidelines” were developed in consultation with government officials and local and international experts with funding from the YSLME project. The guidelines include clarification of Ramsar guidance, site data, an outline of the values of and threats to the site, and examples of successful wetland management and restoration that are relevant to Mokpo City and the wetland. Throughout, the emphasis is on the benefits of wetland conservation to the city’s image, tourism and environmental education. By providing best information, and through continued consultation with local government, we intend that the guidelines and examples will help in the conservation of this wetland, and be incorporated into the management of the wider estuary, and of other inter-tidal areas nationwide. While this work has been effective and well-received by those open to conservation, the larger background remains of ongoing and massive investment in unsustainable development projects, including coastal reclamation. If much of the Yellow Sea’s avian biodiversity is to be conserved, and if national and international obligations are to be fulfilled, then there remains an urgent need to further improve information-sharing, to modify existing policies, and to strengthen existing conservation agencies.