

Statement

Recovering “Healthy Wetlands, Healthy People” in East Asia Ramsar CoP10 as a Potential Turning Point

The 10th Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar CoP 10) will be held from 28 October through 4 November 2008 at Changwon City, Gyeongsang-nam-do Province, Republic of Korea. Ramsar CoP 10 will be the second Conference of the Parties in East Asia following CoP 5, held in Kushiro, Japan in 1993. During the intervening 15 years, Japan’s largest tidal flat wetland, Isahaya Tidal Flat, was lost when dikes closed it off from the sea in 1997 as part of the national Isahaya Bay Land Reclamation Project; one result was serious damage to fisheries in the outer sea. Korea’s largest tidal flat, Saemangeum, was also closed off from the outer sea in 2006 and now threatens to fade away. These facts show that the Convention’s two major Contracting Parties in East Asia are still pursuing projects that conflict clearly with the concept of wise use. These two projects symbolize how difficult it is in present-day East Asia to realize wise use, one of the ultimate goals of the Convention.

There used to be vast areas of tidal flats in coastal regions of East Asia. Tidal flat ecosystems are treasuries of biological diversity and are important not only as highly productive fishery resources, but as for their remarkably powerful ability to purify water. The lives of people living on and with tidal flats were sustainable, nurtured by nearshore fisheries and other natural tidal flat goods and services, a true example of wise use of wetlands. On land as well, the traditional cyclical rice paddy agricultural methods used in East Asia’s temperate monsoon climate zone co-existed well with the diversity of wild creatures that inhabited the wetland ecosystem created by rice paddy agriculture – an example of wise use implementation on a large scale. Traditional wise use of wetlands in East Asia was not confined to tidal flat and rice paddy wetlands. From the forests deep in the mountains from which water flowed forth, to the rivers, lakes, ponds, rice paddies, marshes, tidal flats and shallow coastal seas – all parts of the entire watershed that came into contact with people functioned to support a cyclical, sustainable way of life centered on traditional farming and fishing, and were thus wisely used. There did exist in the past East Asian traditional farming and fishing systems that sustainably used wetland goods and services and embodied CoP10’s theme of “Healthy Wetlands, Healthy People.”

However, with the advent of modernization that gave sole priority to economic growth, a traditional life style was seen as mere proof of poverty. Wetlands that were formerly wisely used were destroyed or degraded in the pursuit of economic wealth. Tidal flats were seen as convenient sites for agricultural, urban residential or industrial development and were landfilled one after the other. Of the 82,621 hectares (ha.) of tidal flats in Japan in 1945, about 40% had been wiped off the map by 2000. Korea has about 255,000 ha of tidal flats, accounting for about 2.5% of its national area – and this is after having destroyed about 81,000 ha with landfill. Destroying tidal flats destroys habitat for tidal flat dwelling fish, etc., robs migratory birds of vital stopover sites and eliminates habitat for bottom-dwelling organisms that function to purify water on a prodigious scale. Abnormal algal blooms occur and large masses of damaging deoxygenated water are created, turning formerly rich marine areas into dead seas. At the same time, traditional farming has been replaced with intensive modern farming dependent on mechanization and large amounts of pesticides and chemical fertilizer. Irrigation canals have been lined on 3 sides with concrete, and paddy fields have been re-built so they can be completely drained and dried out, making them inhospitable to wildlife. Species formerly considered everyday residents in and around paddies, such as minnows and giant water bugs, have now been placed on the Red Data list of endangered species. Construction of concrete embankments and tetrapods in rivers that connect rice paddies with tidal flats has altered natural flow patterns, while the construction in upper watersheds of multiple large dams designed to control severe floods or supply water has reduced flow volumes and cut off sediment supplies, causing serious effects, even to the point where some tidal flats and sandy beaches cannot maintain their form. Large volumes of toxic chemicals and organic compounds emanating from industry and agricultural land subjected to modern farming, and huge volumes of household effluent pollute rivers, lakes and ponds to the point where children are no longer allowed to play in these environments.

Japan joined Ramsar in 1980 and Korea in 1997. As Contracting Parties they have the obligation to wisely use all wetlands in their territories. However, although both governments are putting on a terrific show of promoting wise use of wetlands, they are at the same time continuing to carry out the same old wetland-destroying public works projects. They have not deviated even slightly from the path of economic growth-dominated modernization that has destroyed sustainable lifestyles based on traditional agriculture and fisheries, nor have they taken any real, honest steps towards switching over to sustainable social systems that will allow sustainable use of wetlands. Even while our NGO forum was in progress, the Korean government was attempting to revoke legal protection for a nature conservation area in the Nakdong River Delta presently protected under 5 different

laws, in order to promote a bridge-building project. It seeks to undo protection not only in the vicinity of the bridge, but for a much wider area as well. We feel we must raise very loud objections when Korea, the host country of the next Ramsar CoP, is actively pursuing policies in direct opposition to the Convention's concept of wise use.

As Japanese and Korean wetland conservation NGOs, we have been calling for the wise use of wetlands based on the Ramsar Convention, opposing land reclamation and landfill of important tidal flat wetlands such as Isahaya and Saemangeum, and also opposing needless dam construction while advocating river environment rehabilitation. While giving first priority to protecting remaining wetlands, we have continued advocating restoration of damaged or disappeared wetlands and promoting recognition of the importance of wetland protection on an entire-catchment basis, directing our efforts towards local governments, businesses, farmers, fishermen and ordinary citizens; we have also worked to educate primary and middle school children with the cooperation of schools. We have also undertaken at our own expense migratory bird counts and other monitoring surveys at various sites in order to gather the baseline data needed to protect important wetlands, while questioning governments on their continued support for environmentally destructive public works projects, often undertaken as mere economic stimulants, pointing out their derelictions of duty in failing to adopt strong wetland protection policy and petitioning them to add important wetlands to the Ramsar List. We have also cooperated widely with organic farmers attempting to grow rice without using chemical fertilizers and pesticides in order to enhance biological diversity, and with fishermen who recognize the value of nearshore fisheries and the importance of protecting wetlands in order to maintain these fisheries. In Japan, our efforts contributed significantly to the cancellation of a land reclamation project at Nakaumi and a landfill project at Fujimae Tidal Flat, and the designation of these wetlands and of Kabukuri-numa and the surrounding rice paddies to the Ramsar List; and in Korea to the opening of sluice gates and resulting water quality improvement at Lake Sihwa and cancellation of a landfill project at Janghang Tidal Flat. However, such positive results have been achieved in only a tiny fraction of cases. The mainstream priorities are still economic growth and development at any cost. In the East Asian region, a true movement aiming for sustainability and seeking to re-construct systems that wisely use wetlands based on learning from traditional ways has not yet even begun.

If the Ramsar Convention truly seeks to realize wise use of the world's wetlands and a sustainable world, why has it so far proved to be completely unable to even open a path in the East Asian region, site of its next CoP, towards wetland restoration following the cessation of large-scale public works projects now destroying tidal flats and other internationally important wetlands at Isahaya, Awase and Yoshino Estuary in Japan and at Saemangeum, Nakdong Delta, tidal flats of Gyeonggi Bay including Incheon and Han River Estuary, and the Western and Southern Coasts of Korean Peninsula? We feel that an inquiry is now needed into the reasons for this and possible solutions, which includes discussions of legal systems, wetland policy and CEPA. We also feel the need for an inquiry into issues and future potential relating to the possibility of reconstructing East Asian wise use regimes that were achieved by farming and fishing communities in the past but lost during the modernization process. We hope that CoP10 will undertake sincere discussions of these issues and decide to adopt Conference Resolutions that will be useful in pursuing the restoration of "Healthy Wetlands, Healthy People" through the re-construction of modern wise use regimes in East Asia that are informed by its past traditions. If it fails to do so, we, as wetland conservation NGOs of Japan and Korea, will be hard pressed to find anything meaningful in the convening of the Conference in East Asia again after 15 years' time.

Participants of the 1st Japan/Korea NGO Wetland Forum (Tokyo, October 12-14, 2007) share a recognition of the issues discussed at the Forum and summarized above, and based on this shared awareness, look to CoP10 as an opportunity to seek no further landfill or reclamation of tidal flats and restoration of "Healthy Wetlands, Healthy People" wetland wise use regimes in East Asia. In our position as NGOs, we pledge to identify problems and call for action by the Ramsar Bureau, the governments of Japan and Korea and other Contracting Parties, and to plan an NGO pre-conference capable of having a significant impact on the Conference of the Parties. This statement is our confirmation and promise to carry out this pledge to the best of our abilities.

14 October 2007

Participants of the First Japan/Korea NGO Wetland Forum