

Report on the 12th Korea-Japan and international Wetlands NGO Meeting

22-24 September 2017

Busan, South Korea



This annual meeting was held in Busan Korea. It was organised by:

- Wetlands and Birds Korea (WBK), Korea Wetland NGO Network (KWNN)
- Ramsar Network Japan (RNJ), World Wetland Network (WWN)
- Busan Environment Forum, Council for the Restoration of Brackish Water Ecosystem in Nakdong Estuary

WWN's Regional Representative, Minoru Kashiwagi, played a significant role organising the meeting, and I represented WWN in my role as Chair. Wetland conservation and alignment with the Ramsar Convention is very strong in South Korea. Ramsar COP 10 was held in Changwon in 2008. The NGO leaders who instigated the COP are still very actively involved in wetland education and conservation a decade later, and have an ambitious program of activities planned for 2018 to celebrate a decade of activity since COP 10. The same group who initiated World Wetland Network in Changwon are still working on the front-line of wetland conservation. It was wonderful for us all to meet and see how WWN began and the progress we've made.

On Day 1 of the meeting we toured the infrastructure built as part of the Four Rivers project. Eight dams were built in the Nakdong river. These structures have had a devastating effect on ecosystem health. Fish are no longer able to travel upriver to spawn, so important fisheries have collapsed. There has been toxic algae outbreaks, stratification of the water column, reduced dissolved oxygen and eutrophication across tens of kilometres, causing fish kills. Changes to the river bank have caused losses in habitat for the migratory White-naped Crane. This same story has been repeated at many rivers in South Korea and Japan.

The new President pledged to restore the Nakdong River during his election campaign. The Busan Municipal Government also supports the restoration. Efforts are now underway but it will be a slow process. A restructure of the ministries will bring river management under the Department of Environment. Environmental modelling is being done, and there is a program of community consultation. All levels of government are committed to plans to open the estuary sluice gates. NGOs and Civil Society are monitoring and supporting the process to reach positive outcomes for river health.

On Day 2 we had an excellent series of presentations and case studies on wetland and river projects in Japan and Korea. Topics included the Nakdong River, Arase Dam, Public Works Projects at Ramsar listed wetlands in Japan, and a fascinating talk on the nature conservation values in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a no-man land between North and South Korea.

On Day 3 WWN presented on our Global State of the Wetlands Survey, and our progress implementing the WWN Strategic Plan, which was developed at the 11th Korea-Japan meeting in Gifu last year.

Dr. Jacky Judas attended the meeting, representing the Emirates Wildlife Society – World Wildlife Fund (EWS-WWF) based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Jacky reported on wetlands and the NGO sector in UAE and the Middle East, to help us understand the context for Ramsar COP 13. Among the

13 Middle-East countries, 10 are signatory parties to the Ramsar convention. There are 47 Ramsar-listed wetlands in the region, of which 24 are in Iran where the Ramsar Convention was signed, and 7 are in UAE. Jacky gave an overview of 20 NGOs in the Middle East, many of which have a focus on nature and wildlife conservation and links to wetland projects. In UAE itself there are three of the six International Organisation Partners (IOPs) to the Ramsar Convention: IUCN, BirdLife International and WWF in association with the Emirates Wildlife Society.

We then had open discussion to start preparing for Ramsar COP 13 to be held in Dubai in October 2018. RNJ and KWNN have focussed strongly on the importance of rice paddies for biodiversity for over a decade. A new theme emerging is the issue of dams, and especially estuary dams, causing the collapse of ecosystems including fisheries. WWN will be supporting its Asian colleagues to present this issue to contracting parties at Ramsar COP 13, and to build support for a draft resolution for Ramsar COP 14.

Minoru led the preparation of a statement to be presented to the Asian Wetland Symposium in Saga, Japan from 7-11 November. The statement addresses degradation of the Ariake Sea. Many of its tidal flats have disappeared as a result of development projects including Isahaya Bay Reclamation Projects. There has been serious damage from the construction of estuary dams, port improvements, large scale gravel-digging and other activities carried out for development projects.

Several new groups from Korea and Japan joined WWN at the meeting, and we were able to meet with Mr. Yong-un Ma, who accepted nomination to be a Sub-Regional Representative for South Korea and has now been appointed to this role.

While in the Republic of Korea I was also fortunate to spend a week working with the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership on a new project conserving the Far Eastern Curlew. I visited beautiful Upo and Hwapocheon wetlands, and went birding on a sand island in the mouth of the Nakdong Estuary.

My heartfelt thanks to Minoru Kashiwagi-san, Mr. Kyuncheol Kim, my wonderful guide Mikyung Moon and all the delegates who gave me such a warm welcome and who work so effectively for wetland conservation.

Louise Duff, Chair, World Wetlands Network





