

# Transboundary Nature Cooperation – Protection of Wetlands in the DPR Korea

Office Seoul



Nature knows no manmade borders. This becomes particularly obvious if migratory birds are crossing the border at the demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea. HSF Korea supports the protection of migratory bird habitats, and is hereby connecting people.

## CHALLENGES

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) is of great importance due to its central location on the „East-Asian Australasian Flyway“, the most important flight route of migratory birds in East Asia. The Yellow Sea bordering the west coast of North Korea is a bottleneck on this route. In the past 50 years, 66% of intertidal wetlands in the Yellow Sea have been lost and concurrent a significant share of resting places for migratory birds. Without a sustainable conservation of North Korean intertidal wetlands, endangered species such as the spoonbill sandpiper are likely to become extinct in the near future. At present, their population is declining by 26% per year. Wetlands also provide a wide of indispensable benefits, so-called ecosystem services, for humans. They regulate water quantity, groundwater recharge, and can contribute to regulate floods and the impacts of storms. Wetlands are also an important source of food, for example through fishery.

However, North Korea is also one of the most isolated countries on earth. While globalization has created bridges between many places - often also between formerly hostile states - the DPR Korea remained isolated. Thus, environmental information was collected and shared worldwide, while at the same time North Korea was a blank spot on the map of scientific data for a long time.

Now a paradigm shift is taking place. The fact that environmental protection only works on a transboundary basis is accepted and can be seen by the fact that the political



Wetlands are beneficial for humans, e.g. as a protection from flooding or as a food source for the rural population

focus on the environmental sector is increasing in North Korea. However, administrative obstacles as well as political differences often prevent successful cooperation with international actors in the environmental sector. The Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF) has been working in North Korea for almost 15 years, and since 2009 it has been increasingly active in the field of environment. It is an ideal platform for international exchange and cooperation - despite often unbreakable political differences.

**A better understanding of wetlands and their sustainable use is a prerequisite for the accession of North Korea to the Ramsar Convention.**

Kim Jong Chol, Department of Foreign Economic Relations of the Ministry of Land and Environment Protection (MoLEP)

## APPROACHES

The Hanns Seidel Foundation brings the actors in North Korea, especially the North Korean Ministry of Environment and Land Protection, together with representatives of international organizations and national governments. At the same time, trainings in the DPR Korea and abroad, conferences and practical environment surveys in North Korea are being conducted to improve the expertise of decision-makers in the environmental sector.

This shall not only be beneficial for the environment, but primarily for the local population in North Korea. For this reason, a large part of the projects is also focusing on the



During events in North Korea and neighbouring countries, e.g. in China and Mongolia, joint strategies for the protection of wetlands in Northeast Asia are developed.

question how people can benefit from the conservation of wetlands. Between the conflicting priorities of economic development and environmental protection, the improvement of the living conditions of the local population is most important.

Through pilot projects in the country the awareness for the links between environmental protection, the improvement of the living conditions of the rural population and sustainable development has been raised. This becomes particularly obvious in the Rason Special Economic Zone where the management and marketing of the local Rason Migratory Bird Reserve is being included in the planning and strategies of political actors and combined with the focus on economic development.

## IMPACT

The initiated exchange with international actors in the field of environment as well as the participation of North Korean researchers and decision-makers in international events have already led to an increased collaboration in the region. In 2018, the DPRK acceded the United Nations Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Rason Migratory Bird

Reserve and Mundok Migratory Bird Reserve became the first two Ramsar Sites of International Importance and are thus officially designated as Protected Areas. HSF Korea has been supporting this process and the increasing collaborating with international organizations to identify priority areas for the conservation of migratory waterbirds through survey and monitoring projects along the coastal and inland wetlands of North Korea. The country has updated their National Wetland Inventory which yields important information on the biodiversity of those areas and the services that they provide for people.

In the years ahead, the Hanns Seidel Foundation Korea is going to continue this path consistently. The reintegration of North Korea in the environmental sector is a great opportunity to find a way of cooperation despite political differences, that brings people closer together and allows cooperation across borders. In 2016, the HSF Korea itself became a partner of the East Asian Australasian - Flyway Partnership (EAAF), due to its commitment to transboundary cooperation. The partnership consists of national governments in Northeast Asia as well as international organizations and NGOs. With North Korea becoming the 36th partner of the EAAF in 2018, a framework for cooperation in Northeast Asia is established. Different so-called task forces on conservation priorities, for example on the Yellow Sea Ecoregion, are seeking to cooperate in the area of transboundary conservation. The North Korean Ministry of Environment has already been involved in the formulation of regional environmental strategies during international workshops. This is now institutionalized through the long-term integration into international conventions and networks. ■

## OUR MAIN PARTNERS



East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership



Birds Korea



Ramsar Regional Center East Asia



Ministry of Land and Environment Protection, DPR

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