



THE ISSUE

Migratory birds rely on a series of stopover points between the wintering and nesting grounds to rest, feed, and replenish energy reserves during their arduous journeys along the north-south global flyways. The East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAF) extends 13,000 km from the Arctic Circle through East and Southeast Asia to Australia and New Zealand. This flyway is used by over 50 million migratory waterbirds from over 250 different populations. Every year, the waterbirds make a round trip within this region, covering 22 countries, to breed in the north and to winter in the south.

The continuity of this avian flyway is increasingly threatened by human activities that change the landscape, especially the stopover points, or staging areas, including wetlands; ponds, lakes, marshes, swamps, and floodplains that are highly productive and provide nutritious food and refuge. This very productivity also makes the wetlands suitable for agriculture, especially wet rice cultivation, and aquaculture, which are widely practiced in most Asian countries.

Consequently, wetlands are also extensively converted for human uses. For example, in China, as much as 70% of intertidal flat area was lost between the 1950s and 2000s. And in the Yellow Sea, the populations of seven out of 10 shorebird groups are declining by up to 8% every year. The EAAF region now has the highest proportion of threatened migratory waders in the world (20%). Currently, 62% of waterbird populations in the flyway are in decline or have become extinct.

WHAT WE ARE DOING

Securing the integrity of key habitats in priority areas within the EAAF is vital to the survival of these migratory waterbirds. WWF-Hong Kong believes that the issue has to be tackled through three actions:

- improving the management of existing coastal protected areas;
- conserving unprotected wetlands; and,
- supporting local conservation organizations that have experience, but lack financial resources.

Wetland Management Training Program (since 1990) involves an eight-day training course on conservation, the environment and ecotourism topics for conservationists from mainland China and around Asia. A large number of frontline wetland conservationists who attended the program now occupy senior government positions in mainland China and influence wetland conservation policies and regulations. WWF-Hong Kong trains about 200 wetland managers from government departments and non-government organizations (NGOs) along the EAAF annually.

China Wetlands Development Project (2005-2017) aims to start on-the-ground conservation in important wetland sites. WWF-Hong Kong provides assistance to sites along the EAAF. The choice of the sites is based on: its ecological value; the willingness and commitment of the management authority; and the likelihood of success. They include:

- Zhangjiangkou National Mangrove Nature Reserve, Fujian Province (2005-2010), designated as a Ramsar site on 2 February 2008.
- Haifeng Bird Provincial Nature Reserve, Guangdong Province (2006-2012), designated as a Ramsar site on 2 February 2008.
- Minjiang Estuary National Nature Reserve, Fujian Province (2012-2017), currently under the application process of Ramsar site designation.
- Luannan Wetlands, Hebei Province (2017-2021), where the WWF project team is now lobbying to establish a new Luannan Wetlands Provincial Nature Reserve.

Asian Waterbird Conservation Fund (since 2005) provides financial support to passionate and experienced groups that lack sufficient funding to carry out projects at sites of importance for migratory waterbirds along the EAAF, particularly through partnership with local communities. This includes non-government and community organizations, and academic or research institutes. Although similar grant programmes can be found in the region, attention to the conservation of migratory waterbirds in the EAAF is not always given priority. Since inception, the fund has supported 34 projects in 11 Asian countries, supporting the work of 26 local organizations and helping grass-roots NGOs gain project-management experience.

OUR ASK

By 2020 ensure 5,000 hectares of EAAF wetlands are brought under legal protection with 15 wetland sites recognized for their importance. By 2021, the Mai Po infrastructure upgrade provides new facilities for wetland management, training and community biodiversity education.

Through the AWCF, important waterbird sites in the EAAF will be improved through critical conservation actions such as improving fragile habitats to help stop the migratory waterbird populations from further declining.