

The Saemankeum Project – World's Largest Ongoing Reclamation Project Will Destroy South Korea's Most Important Shorebird and Waterfowl Site

Nial Moores,
Korean Wetlands Alliance,
South Korea

Despite its immense ecological and economic value (e.g. fisheries), South Korea adopted a National Reclamation Master Plan in the 1980s, which aimed at 85% landclaim of all remaining tidal-flats, whilst in the mid-1990s China stated that it intends to reclaim fully 100% of its tidal-flats by 2018.

North Korean data are scarce, but suggest that between 200,000 and 300,000 ha of flats and shallows have been similarly targeted. Satellite images show that many areas in all three countries have already been significantly altered by development. Fisheries are apparently in decline throughout the region.

The largest and most damaging of all projects is the Saemankeum landfill (pronounced "Say-Man-Goom") in the southwest of South Korea. The project aims to simultaneously landfill two estuaries, those of the Mankyung and Tongjin Rivers, by the construction of a 33 kilometer long sea-dyke. The justification for such a landfill is to increase the area of national territory, to create land for agriculture and to make reservoirs for industry and farming. At 40,100 hectares, Saemankeum is the world's largest ongoing reclamation.

Korean experts argue against the project, pointing out that the tidal-flats at Saemankeum (and elsewhere) are already "national territory"; that already much farm-land is under-used regionally and nationally (due largely to the depopulation of the country side accompanying industrialization); that tidal-flats and sea shallows are of course critical to fisheries and aquaculture; and that the Saemankeum project is clearly in breach of spirit of the concept of "wise use of wetlands" of the Ramsar Convention, which South Korea acceded to in 1997.

Saemankeum is South Korea's most important wetland for waterfowl. In surveys from 1998-1999, a minimum of 126,278 waterfowl were recorded, with 23 species in internationally important concentrations. Peak counts included, e.g. 38,500 Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* (12% of the world population) and 624 Saunders' Gulls *Larus saundersi* (world population ca 6,000). Furthermore, 61 Nordmann's Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* (worldwide 1,000 individuals) and 180

Spoonbilled Sandpipers *Eurynorhynchus pygmaeus* (worldwide 4,000 – 6,000 individuals) were counted: for the latter species this is worldwide the highest count for 20 years.

In November 1998, already 56% of the 33-kilometer sea-dyke had been completed, with full closure intended by 2004. But there is still hope of stopping the project. Several ministries or government agencies (e.g., the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, the Forestry Administration) have recently voiced their opposition to reclamation in general. The Ministry of Agriculture, which is the ministry responsible for the Saemankeum reclamation, similarly showed some change in policy direction when they cancelled a 55,000 hectare reclamation proposed for the Yongsan River region in July 1998. In January 1999, the provincial governor for the first time accepted that the Saemankeum project was flawed, and following several hundreds of letters from international NGOs and individuals, the government announced in April that it would set up a panel of 29 specialists (9 government, 20 semi-government or NGO) to survey the wetland and analyze the reclamation's possible impacts. To illustrate the political nature of this action, however, a related government official simultaneously stated, "Although environmentalists call for cancellation of this project, the government position has not changed."

Nevertheless, the wetlands movement is growing rapidly in Korea, and many environmental groups are increasing their efforts, encouraged by international interest and support. There is every chance that, with this international support, the Korean Wetlands Alliance and allied organizations can convince the government to cancel this project. Please contact the addresses below for further information.

Nial Moores

Korean Wetlands Alliance
Palyongdong 192-6 2F
Changwon 641-465, South Korea
e-mail: spoonbill@hotmail.com
website: <http://kfem.or.kr/engkfem/index.html>

Axel Bräunlich

NABU, Bundesvertretung Berlin
Invalidenstr. 112
D 10115 Berlin
e-mail: braunlich@ipn.de