

A BirdLife Australia Special Interest Group (ABN 75 149 124 774)

To Whomsoever it may concern,

The Australasian Wader Studies Group (AWSG) is a Special Interest Group of BirdLife Australia. Our mission is to ensure the future of waders and their habitats in Australia through research and conservation programs and to encourage and assist similar programs in the rest of the East Asian – Australasian Flyway. The AWSG has been a Partner of the East Asian – Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) since the inception of the Partnership and has been active in research and conservation on waders internationally in China and the Republic of Korea.

AWSG congratulates Hwaseong City for the nomination of the Hwaseong Wetlands as an EAAFP Flyway Network Site.

As conservation scientists and professional researchers, we are writing at this time to offer our support to decision-makers, NGOs and local communities in their efforts to conserve the waterbirds of the Hwaseong Wetlands Flyway Network Site (FNS) in Hwaseong City, Gyeonggi Province.

We are writing to express our growing concern at the proposed construction of a hotel resort immediately adjacent to the Maehyangri Tidal Flats, which form a key part of the Flyway Network Site. Based on the AWSG's own research in the Republic of Korea (2006-2008) and on more recent data, the higher part of the Maehyangri Tidal Flats in the Hwaseong Wetlands FNS is one of the most important remaining migratory shorebird feeding and roosting sites in the Republic of Korea and the Yellow Sea. The area is of outstanding international importance and its conservation will make a significant contribution to securing migratory shorebirds in the Flyway.

The Maehyangri Tidal Flats are an integral part of the Hwaseong Wetlands FNS for those waterbird species which are ecologically dependent on intertidal wetlands for food and other resources, enabling them to complete long and perilous annual migrations successfully.

Based on the "Wise Use of Hwaseong Wetlands" report, posted on March 31st on the website of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership Secretariat, we understand that the Hwaseong Wetlands FNS regularly supports at least 16 species of waterbirds in internationally important concentrations.

This total includes at least eight species of migratory shorebirds which are ecologically dependent on tidal flats, three of which are assessed by the IUCN as globally Near Threatened

(Eurasian / Far Eastern Oystercatcher; Eurasian Curlew; Bar-tailed Godwit) and two of which are assessed by the IUCN as globally Endangered (Far Eastern Curlew and Great Knot). In addition, there is a recent observation within 500 m of the proposed hotel site of a Critically Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper, and multiple observations of globally Endangered Nordmann's Greenshank. In addition to migratory shorebirds, three more globally threatened waterbirds are regularly found on the Maehyangri Tidal Flats in internationally important concentrations: Saunders's Gull, Black-faced Spoonbill and Chinese Egret. We note that the site may be of even greater importance than is currently recognized, survey work at key times in the migration season has been limited.

The conservation and wise use of internationally important wetlands, like the Hwaseong Wetlands FNS, is both in the national and global interest. Many waterbird species in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway are in decline, indicating a continuing and chronic loss of wetland ecosystem health and diversity. Causes of declines in migratory waterbird numbers are many and are linked to permanent habitat loss from development and disturbance, especially in relation to sensitive feeding and roosting sites.

Research conducted along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway indicates that increased levels of disturbance close to roost sites can result in substantially increased energy expenditure by shorebirds, as birds are forced to fly more frequently and further from these sources of disturbance.

In the case of long-range migratory shorebirds like the Far Eastern Curlew, increased energy use associated with as few as ten disturbance-caused "escape" flights per day could have negative consequences to the point of reducing survival or reproductive success, thus negatively impacting the species' population in long-term.

Most waterbird species, including shorebirds, are sensitive to disturbance. Many species of shorebirds fly away when still at a substantial distance from sources of disturbance, which can even include people simply walking on the tidal flat.

The recently-announced plans for a hotel complex are within 100m of the Maehyangri Tidal Flats, and the related infrastructural development will, in our opinion, result in a substantially increased level and frequency of disturbance to the waterbirds which need to feed and roost at this site.

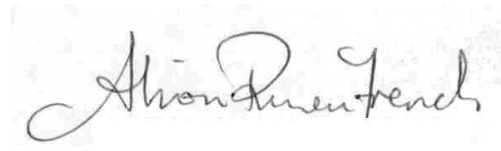
If the proposed hotel resort and road development proceeds, it is difficult to see how disturbance to roosting and feeding sites could be avoided. A thorough Environmental Impact Assessment to assess and mitigate all impacts on waterbirds that could be caused by any development close to the Maehyangri Tidal Flats is essential.

A substantial body of scientific evidence has shown that equitable, economic, environmental and social benefits can only be accrued through appropriate management and wise use of internationally important wetlands. Protection of the Maehyangri Tidal Flat and nearby roost sites will both benefit the waterbirds and also create golden opportunities for responsible eco-tourism and environmental education, as demonstrated at many Ramsar Sites throughout the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.

In closing, as experts specializing in the conservation of migratory waterbirds, we would again like to encourage Hwaseong City and relevant government bodies in the Republic of Korea to conserve internationally important wetlands and the birds that depend upon them.

We encourage Hwaseong City to designate the Hwaseong Wetlands FNS as a nationally protected wetland area and Ramsar site.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Alison Russell-French".

Alison Russell-French OAM
Chair, AWSG

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Danny Rogers".

Danny Rogers
Chair, AWSG Scientific Committee

13 April 2021