

BirdLife position on the potential construction of the Saemangeum New Airport in the Republic of Korea, and its likely impact on migratory species and wetlands

BirdLife International is a partnership of 123 conservation organisations in 119 countries. [BirdLife International has been, and continues to be involved in supporting](#) the Government of the Republic of Korea in the ‘Getbol, Korean Tidal Flat’ UNESCO World Heritage process, including the Phase I World Heritage inscription in 2021.

Recognising the strong progress that the Republic of Korea has made in protecting coastal wetlands in the Yellow/West Sea of Korea in the recent years, BirdLife is deeply concerned about the potential construction of the Saemangeum New Airport. If built, the new airport may have severe ecological impacts on the nearby wetlands of Seocheon *Getbol*, a UNESCO World Heritage property that was inscribed less than three years ago.

Seocheon *Getbol* is one of four constituent wetlands under the *Getbol*, Korean Tidal Flats UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the most important of the four sites for migratory waterbird species of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. Importantly, *Getbol* was inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of its Outstanding Universal Value for these migratory birds (criterion x). The available data collected by researchers and relevant government agencies including the National Institute of Biological Resources and the Seocheon County Government clearly demonstrates this high biodiversity value, and continues to do so. Surveys for example, shows that the site regularly support more than 80,000 waterbirds, including 23 species on the IUCN Red List, and internationally important congregations of globally threatened species such as Saunders’s Gull, Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Far Eastern Curlew and Great Knot.

As it currently stands, the Seocheon *Getbol* UNESCO property is located less than eight (8) km from the proposed airport development in Saemangeum. Moreover, it is ecologically connected to the latter site by the movement of waterbird species which feed in the wetlands in Seocheon and fly to roost sites in Saemangeum. The close proximity of the proposed Saemangeum New Airport to Seocheon *Getbol* is expected to have major negative consequences for populations of migratory waterbirds dependent on both wetland sites, and for air safety.

Ecological implications

- Saemangeum (Important Bird and Biodiversity Area KR021) is close to and has strong ecological connectivity with the Seocheon *Getbol* World Heritage property; data collected on satellite tracked and leg-flagged waterbirds show that birds move between the two sites to forage and rest.
- The tidal flats of Saemangeum were globally important as stopover and staging sites for migratory waterbird species before large-scale reclamation commenced in 2006.

Despite the large-scale changes, they continue to be globally important for many migratory waterbird species, especially for large congregations of Great Knot (listed as Endangered with global extinction on the IUCN Red List) and Spoon-billed Sandpiper (Critically Endangered).

- Data from the 2021 Environmental Impact Assessment carried out at the wetlands within 3 km of the proposed airport shows that Saemangeum remains internationally important for waterbirds as defined by the criteria of the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention), providing critical high tide roosts for shorebird species such as the Grey Plover, among others.
- The intensive human development across most of the Korean West Sea coastal zone means that there is very little suitable habitat remaining available for high tide roosts for migratory waterbirds. The reduced availability of roost sites is a key limiting factor for shorebird populations, forcing them to move large distances to roosting areas when their foraging areas are covered by the high tide, meaning that they waste precious energy. BirdLife International has worked with BirdLife Australia to design and install roosts using artificial substrates in Seocheon to address this issue. The safeguarding of all existing waterbird roost sites is therefore vital.

Air safety considerations

- The high likelihood of bird strikes in coastal landscape heavily used by waterbirds, especially large-bodied waterbird species, can pose a risk to aviation.

Implications related to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention

- World Heritage Sites are the global gold standard for protected areas, giving the Korean *Getbol* equivalent standing to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador. The inscription has helped to showcase a Korean benchmark in wetland management and restoration to conserve in good health for future generations this exceptional coastal wetland ecosystem internationally.
- In view of the court case on the planned airport development in Saemangeum, brought in 2024 by more than 1,000 local residents, we would be happy to provide support when considering how to implement the recommendations of the official UNESCO documents relating to the *Getbol*: [Getbol, Korean Tidal Flats - UNESCO World Heritage Centre](#)
- It would be unfortunate if, soon after the inscription of Phase I (in 2021) and during the process of nomination of Phase II, Seocheon *Getbol* may be considered for the UNESCO World Heritage in Danger List.
- A precautionary approach should be taken by all relevant authorities, and we recommend the relocation of the proposed airport to somewhere with less ecological sensitivity, or its cancellation.

Similar recent cases elsewhere in the world

- Earlier this year, following substantial input from the BirdLife International Partnership and a national court case, [the New Lisbon Airport adjacent to an internationally important estuary in Portugal was cancelled](#). This was because research indicated that the increase in noise caused by potential flights to and from this airport would lead to reductions in populations of migratory waterbirds, while damaging conservation efforts. As with the Saemangeum case, the airplane routes of this proposed airport would have directly overflowed the protected wetland, subjecting it to noise levels above 50-65 dB, considered likely to cause excessive disturbance to wildlife, especially bird flocks. Low flying airplanes are likely to result in multiple impacts on such wetlands including visual and chemical pollution as well as noise pollution and bird strikes.
- Similarly, earlier this year, [a major development in Toondah Harbour in Queensland, Australia was withdrawn](#), following a decision of the relevant Minister about its impacts on a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance also known for its importance to migratory shorebirds.
- The proposed Jiangsu reclamation of Tiaozini, in the People's Republic of China was halted [and instead the area was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2019](#).

BirdLife urges the Government of the Republic of Korea to strongly consider a re-assessment of the project, and a proper consideration of alternative solutions that prioritize the conservation of these vital wetlands and the species they support, including species listed as National Monuments under domestic legislation. This would ensure that the ecological integrity of the *Getbol* UNESCO World Heritage Site is maintained, in line with international commitments the Republic of Korea has made, including under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

For more information

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