
NEED FOR COOPERATIVE EFFORT IN WETLAND CONSERVATION IN THE NORTHEAST ASIA

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Networking: Get the Maximum Return by the Minimum Input

The Ramsar Center Japan is a non-governmental organization that was established in 1990, in Tokyo, Japan, aiming to promote the wise use of wetland and its resources and foster the mission of the Ramsar Convention or the Convention on Wetlands among Asian countries. Presently it consists of 110 individual members who voluntarily pay membership fees annually. They are mostly university professors, scientists, journalists, government officials, NGO activists, housewives and students from Japan and other Asian countries such as Malaysia, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, China and Korea.

It has no permanent staffs, independent office and relief fund as foundation. It does not receive any subsidy from the government and/or other funding agencies for its routine work. It sometimes gets support from several organizations on the project bases. Those are, however, temporary sponsors and do not support the pillars of RCJ. In other words, it is a completely voluntary organization that is basically run by the collected membership fees and part time workers as volunteers. It will be easily imagined that the scale of manpower and money source of RCJ is not big and solid. The activities of RCJ, however, are not small and insufficient.

The principal activities of RCJ are enhancing public awareness on conservation and wise use of wetlands and ensuring local people's participation in wetland management. It promotes research and data collection on wetlands, in particular, relations between people and wetlands, and supply information and resource materials for education and awareness as newsletter, booklet, website and video. A number of workshops and symposiums related to wetlands have been organized by RCJ in the region in these 12 years since its establishment in 1990. It performs those activities through networks and partnerships at all levels.

Networking is one of the most convenient and non-expensive instruments for NGOs like RCJ to get the maximum return by minimum input. For example, RCJ organized the Asian Wetland Symposium (AWS), 15-20 October 1992, Otsu and Kushiro, Japan. Although the idea of AWS was initiated by RCJ, responding to its call for partners, the symposium was finally co-organized by the Environment Agency of Japan, several local governments (Shiga, Hokkaido and Kushiro) and NGOs (International Lake Environment Committee (ILEC) and RCJ). This collaboration was remarkable because, in 1992, such partnership between GOs and NGOs was not popular in Japan. As a result, being sponsored by many organizations such as UNEP, UNDP, ADB, Ramsar Convention Bureau, WWF, IWRB, Environment Agency of Japan and others, the AWS was successfully held receiving 300 participants from 25 countries with the total budget of some USD300,000. From Asian countries, we could invite 30 participants with full funding support.

In 2001, the second meeting of Asian Wetland Symposium was successfully held on 27-30 August 2001, in Penang, Malaysia. The idea to convene the AWS2001 was initiated by RCJ Asian members or participants of the first AWS in 1992. Again, many RCJ members offered their work time and professional skills to feed and nurse the project voluntarily. We could collect about USD190,000 from various sponsors for the project. The AWS2001, which was finally co-organized by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, Malaysia, University of Science Malaysia, Wetlands International-Asia Pacific, Aeon Group Environment Foundation, Keidanren Nature Conservation Fund and Ramsar Center Japan, being participated by 400 participants from 34 countries, adopted the Penang Statement at its successful closing.

What was the work or role of RCJ in those AWS? Actually, RCJ did not contribute any money to the projects. It only provided an original idea of the symposium, untiring communication with peoples to be involved, repeatedly efforts to draft and submit project proposals to different organizations, constantly distribution of information for the Media. We have done those always with the strong will and conviction that "We should come the symposium true". Many RCJ members contributed their private time or holidays to work for the Secretariat as volunteers. One of them kindly offered his office in Tokyo to use as AWS Secretariat room with no rent. Another member, a senior writer of a Japanese newspaper wrote a column on wetlands as publicity of AWS, and so on. As you understand from these good practices of RCJ, a voluntary network of NGOs, once it is rightly activated, could achieve a big success.

The Ramsar Convention Today:

Wetlands are among the most valuable ecosystems bringing benefits to millions of people in the Asia region. Asia's large population has derived much of its sustenance from wetland and its resources. This trend is prevailing and will continue in the future. However, due to persistence poverty, rapid population growth and its uneven distribution, high urbanization and industrialization, over exploitation of resources especially forests, water and air pollution, haze, rapid economic growth of the past decades: wetland and its resources are alarmingly being depleted in this region. Consequently, the quality of life has been deteriorating due to the loss and extinction of wetlands. Recognizing the importance of wetlands, the Ramsar Convention was adopted in 1971 to ensure and promote wise use of wetland, its resources and biodiversity, so that it can continue to provide benefits to the present and future generations.

According to the Website of the Ramsar Convention, the number of Contracting Parties(CPs) to the Convention is 131 as of 6 May 2002. One thousand and one hundred fifty wetlands are designated for the List of Wetlands of International Importance, and the total surface area becomes 96.3 million hectares.

The Ramsar Convention divides the world into 5 geographical regions namely, Africa, Asia, Europe, Neotropics, North America and Oceania. According to the geographical region, Asia region originally covers a huge area contains 42 countries from further east like Japan to middle east like Iran. Today, 24 countries of those 42 countries in the region or 57 % are the CPs of the Convention, namely Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka, Syrian Arab Republic, Tajikistan, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Vietnam. One hundred and thirty wetlands are the Ramsar sites in the region and the total area becomes about 8.1 hectares. I have to say that many countries, a lots of sites and huge wetlands area in Asia are still remained out of the umbrella or network of the Ramsar Convention.

The Diversity is the most typical characteristic of Asia. Geographically, historically, culturally, linguistically, racially, biologically, religiously, politically and socio-economically, diverseness of the region is very rich. Those particular characteristics cultivated the tolerance and adoptability of the people to the minor differences, on the contrary, good sense of finding out a common ground, constructing a vital, productive and

cooperative network or partnerships among peoples in Asia.

The Ramsar Convention is strongly calling the CPs and non CPs, GOs and NGOs, specialists and common people to create and strengthen wetlands network among the world. Responding to its call, I would like to suggest that we should put more effort to cooperative network in wetland conservation, in particular, in the northeast Asia.

Korea, China and Japan: Those Neighbor Countries

Korea, China and Japan have had the close and deep relationships over thousands of years.

In fact, in the very ancient days, the Japan archipelago was directly connected with Korean Peninsula and China. It was a part of the Asian continent. The race, wildlife, culture, art, language of Japan were mostly originated in China, cultivated by Korea and transmitted to Japan.

During the last centuries, the friendships and partnerships of those neighbor countries had been obliged to themselves in danger by historically inevitability and politically misleading. Yet today, there are many issues which have to be settled or improved.

For instance, in spite of those geographic in a near location, diplomatic relations among those is not so smooth like EU. We cannot travel freely among those countries without visa. Although our languages had been originated from the same old Chinese characters or Kanji, today, we cannot communicate anymore by our respective languages. The human exchange between two countries such as Korea-Japan and China-Japan, and Korea-China is active now, but I don't think the network which cover all those three countries are so vital, in particular, on nature conservation.

The Ramsar Center Japan has organized a series of Workshops and Symposiums in the region during the last decades. Some of them were held in Korea and China. Those were, however, bilateral ones and not a network-oriented projects which cover northeast Asia. In the context of partnerships and network among Korea-China-Japan, we think that we should go further forward.

Korea, China and Japan are the most developed or economically abundant countries in Asia. All those countries are CPs to the Ramsar Convention. As leading countries in the region on wetland conservation, I think we have the responsibility to guide and support the other countries and

promote those wetland conservation. As one of NGOs based in Japan, on a rim of northeast Asia, I sincere hope that this International Workshop on Wetland Conservation and Need for International Cooperation in Northeast Asia would turn a light on our real partnerships and move forward the vital network among those countries.