

Terms of Reference for the Working Group for the Conservation of the Yellow/West Sea Intertidal and Associated Coastal Wetlands

1. Background:

The Yellow/West Sea ecosystem of intertidal wetlands, associated habitats and the biodiversity that depends on them, encompassed by the Republic of Korea (RoK), People's Republic of China (PRC), and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), is among the ecological wonders of the world. It represents the largest area of intertidal flats on the planet. It provides an important number of vital ecosystem services including fisheries, tourism, disaster risk reduction, blue carbon storage and climate change resilience, which profoundly underpin socio-economic development. It enables an ecosystem base for the regional economy and human well-being of the most populated coastal area in the world, with an estimated population of more than 200 million people at a density >500 people/km²). Furthermore, this Yellow/West Sea Ecosystem provides a major contribution to the global natural heritage as well as that of the three Yellow/West Sea nations. It is the most important staging area for migratory waterbirds in the greatest of all flyways, the East Asian-Australasian Flyway (EAAF) with millions of waterbirds using these wetlands. It also provides an important breeding area for regionally restricted waterbird species, as well as a non-breeding area for hundreds of thousands of waterbirds.

These Yellow/West Sea intertidal and associated coastal wetlands are critically threatened by a wide range of pressures, resulting in their degradation and destruction, especially through unprecedented rates of conversion; around 66% of intertidal wetlands in the Yellow/West Sea have been lost in the past 50 years. Consequently, fisheries and other coastal natural resources dependent livelihoods are at risk and populations of a number of migratory bird species have recently declined by 18–20% per year with the population of Spoon-billed Sandpiper declining even more sharply, at up to 26% per year.

Conserving and restoring the Yellow/West Sea intertidal and associated coastal wetlands, and sustainably managing their ecosystem functions, is vital not only for the citizens of the three Yellow/West Sea nations and their future generations, but also for all nations along the EAAF from Russia and the United States in the north, Bangladesh in the west, to Australia and New Zealand in the south.

Considering the transboundary nature of the Yellow/West Sea, the interrelation between coastal and intertidal areas and species (e.g. birds, fish and shellfish) and the interdependency of coastal dependent livelihoods in the three countries, successful management and conservation are reliant on an informed and coordinated approach among the countries.

This need for regional cooperation was emphasized in the Outcome document adopted by the participants of the IUCN Yellow Sea regional workshop held in Beijing in August 2016. This highlighted the need to “strengthen international collaboration and initiate the development of a joint, multi-sectoral transboundary cooperation mechanism to enhance the conservation and coordinated management of the intertidal wetlands and associated habitats of the Yellow/West Sea”. This proposed cooperative framework was subsequently discussed during a side event at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in September 2016 in Hawaii, USA and during the International Symposium on the Conservation and Management of Intertidal Wetlands in the Yellow/West Sea, held in Yancheng, China in December 2017.

In Yancheng, participants from the three countries agreed to participate in a joint working group for the conservation and management for the intertidal and associated coastal wetlands of the Yellow/West Sea, facilitated under the umbrella of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the East Asian - Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) and the Ramsar Regional Center – East Asia (RRC-EA).

2. Objective:

To facilitate international cooperation for improved conservation and sustainable use of the Yellow/West Sea intertidal and associated coastal wetlands, a working group shall be created and operated.

3. Name:

The Working Group shall be known as the Working Group for the Conservation of the Yellow/West Sea Intertidal and Associated Coastal Wetlands, hereinafter the "Working Group".

4. Structure and composition:

The Working Group shall comprise the following members:

- Representatives from the ministries of DPRK, PRC and ROK responsible for the conservation and management of coastal wetlands including coastal fisheries, tourism, urban planning, agriculture, aquaculture (maximum five nominated individuals per country) and biodiversity;
- Representatives of NGOs and experts as proposed by the governments;
- IUCN, EAAFP, the RRC-EA and the Ramsar Convention Secretariat;
- Other international expert observers by invitation.

The total number of participants shall not exceed 20 core members and up to an additional five facilitators and guests from international organisations.

5. Role and tasks:

The following roles of the working group shall apply from the date of adoption of this document:

5.1 Strengthen survey, monitoring and research on ecological characteristics of the Yellow/West Sea intertidal and associated coastal wetlands, including through the establishment and implementation of national and international coastal wetland and species monitoring systems;

5.2 Facilitate knowledge sharing on key issues and topics related to the intertidal and associated coastal wetlands ecosystems between the three countries (e.g. on site designation; conservation management and restoration policies, practices, plans and initiatives; and key threats);

5.3 Develop, implement and/or strengthen awareness and outreach programmes at international, national and local levels, emphasizing the importance of the Yellow/West Sea intertidal and associated coastal wetlands and associated ecosystem services, with a particular focus on decision makers and developers at local, provincial and national levels, using existing Communication, Education, Participation and Awareness (CEPA) programmes as far as possible;

5.4 Facilitate common approaches to the protection, management and restoration of the intertidal and associated coastal wetlands of the Yellow/West Sea among the countries which share it, including by: a) providing recommendations on strengthening the establishment and management of an integrated protected area network (including World Heritage sites, Ramsar Sites, and EAAFP Flyway Network Sites) with reference to Key Biodiversity Areas across the Yellow/West Sea Ecoregion; b) working towards the development of management and tourism strategies; and c) developing regional guidance on best practice for sustainable management of fisheries and intertidal and associated coastal wetlands including shellfisheries, aquaculture, mariculture and salt production;

5.5 Act as a point of liaison with other relevant ministries, projects and initiatives and facilitate a coordinated approach with regard to international conventions and agreements related to the conservation and management and use of the Yellow/West Sea. This will, include liaison and coordination with regional initiatives (e.g. the Yellow Sea Large Marine Ecosystem) and the provision of support for reporting on Yellow/West Sea activities (e.g. reporting to IUCN, EAAFP, the Ramsar Convention, RRC-EA and biodiversity conventions including the CBD and CMS) and the drafting of relevant resolutions and motions.

6. Operation:

- The Working Group will be facilitated jointly under the umbrella of the IUCN Asia Regional Office and the EAAFP and RRC-EA;
- The Working Group will communicate at face-to-face meetings and by email;
- The Working Group will meet at least once a year and possibly more frequently, depending on the needs and budget availability, in a location decided and agreed upon by the same group.
- The dates of meetings will be announced at least three months in advance. Meeting documents will be distributed at least three weeks in advance;
- Decisions of the Working Group will be made by consensus;
- The minimum number of respondents on a matter to be decided by circulated email will be at least half of the members. If an insufficient number of responses is received by the deadline, a decision can be made by IUCN and EAAFP;
- The Working Group can organise small task sub-groups to address particular issues of interest as/when needed.

7. Legal status

The Working Group is an informal and voluntary regional working group on the intertidal and associated coastal wetlands of the Yellow/West Sea and, as such, has no regional/international legal status. Official/legal status at national level can be determined unilaterally by participating countries.

8. Financing

- The Working Group shall generate its own resources and take the necessary measures to establish financial sustainability;
- IUCN, EAAFP and RRC-EA will lead the identification of funding opportunities;
- All participating parties are encouraged to provide assistance and in-kind contributions to the Working Group;
- In addition, donors are encouraged to provide funds for the activities of the Working Group.

9. Reporting and evaluation

IUCN, EAAFP and RRC-EA will be responsible for preparing draft reports of Working Group meetings, events and activities. Reports will be validated by Working Group members by email.

IUCN, EAAFP and RRC-EA will prepare an annual report on progress, together with a budget and work plan for the coming year.