

Status of Some Important Wetlands in Japan and Future Approaches for Wetland Conservation

One Hundred Ramsar Sites in Japan by CoP16!

Japan's Ramsar sites increase from 13 to 33

In a resolution adopted at CoP7, the Parties declared their intention to double the number of Ramsar sites in the world to 2000 by CoP9, and the Japanese government also aimed to double its sites from 11 to 22. In fact, when it adds 20 new sites to the Ramsar List here at CoP9, Japan will have 33 Ramsar sites. This alone is cause for celebration. However, many important wetlands that should on the List are not.



Fujimae



Isahaya (1997)



Isahaya



Wajiro



Wajiro

Status of 4 wetlands JAWAN has been trying to get on the List since CoP5

At CoP5 in Kushiro, Japan, JAWAN raised the issue of four threatened tidal flat wetlands – Isahaya, Wajiro, Fujimae and Sanbanze. All were exceedingly important for the international migratory bird flyway, but at the time all were being threatened by development projects, and JAWAN argued that these developments should be cancelled and the wetlands protected as Ramsar sites. The only one of these now on the List is Fujimae tidal flat, added in 2002 at CoP8.

ISAHAYA

Formerly Japan's largest site for migratory shorebirds, Isahaya's muddy tidal flats were completely obliterated by a national land reclamation project aiming to create agricultural land and function as a barrier against tidal surges. In April, 1997, 3,550 hectares of Isahaya Bay were cut off from the sea by a 7 kilometer-long barrier. This brought about changes in tidal flows in the greater Ariake Sea of which Isahaya Bay is part, which in turn brought about increased algal blooms that are contributing to disastrously poor cultivated seaweed harvests, steep declines in harvests of ark shells, razor clams and other shellfish, and declines in catches of blue crab, bastard halibut and other commercially fished species. These conditions are referred to locally as "The Ariake Sea Disaster." Fishermen filed a lawsuit calling for a court order to stop the project, but as things presently stand, construction work continues, aiming for completion in fiscal 2007.

WAJIRO

The artificial island construction project that was the object of protests by proponents of the conservation of Wajiro tidal flat and Hakata Bay's natural environment is now under construction. This project has not only caused degradation in Hakata Bay; its post-construction land use plan has also turned out to be a failure. At the same time, however, the remaining tidal flat at Wajiro has been designated a national Wildlife Protection Area, but the Ministry of the Environment has not made any progress in designating it further as a Special Protection Area, the ministry's prerequisite for Ramsar site designation, giving as its reason difficulties in reaching agreement on the local level. Even the monitoring program being carried out by Fukuoka City (promulgator of the artificial island project) has confirmed the decrease in numbers of migratory birds, pointing to the urgent need for protecting (and restoring) the degrading environment of Wajiro tidal flat.



Sanbanze

SANBANZE

Tokyo Bay has lost over 90 percent of its shoreline to landfill, and 740 hectares of Sanbanze (in Chiba prefecture), one of the few remaining natural areas, were to have been landfilled for a sewage treatment facility, construction of the No.2 Tokyo Bayline Expressway and other uses according to a 1993 plan, but in April 2001, the present governor of Chiba prefecture was elected on a platform of canceling the landfill project. The landfill was cancelled, but the prefecture still retains its intention of building the No.2 Tokyo Bayline through Sanbanze. The prefecture maintains that Ramsar site Listing now would be premature, while continuing to muddle towards landfill at Sanbanze.

Status of other important wetlands:**Awase tidal flat, Nakaikemi Mire and Watarase Marsh****AWASE**

The plan to landfill Awase tidal flat (265 hectares) is going forward. Awase is the largest remaining natural tidal flat on Okinawa Island, and Japan's largest overwintering site for the Pacific Golden Plover. The landfill project aims to provide a dump for dredge spoil from ship channels being dug for new harbor facilities under construction nearby, and to build a marine resort. There is already plenty of unused landfill in Okinawa; it is unlikely that there will be demand for the land or that a resort here will be profitable even if it is built. The idea of using a high-quality natural wetland as a dump for dredge spoil has also attracted strong censure, but construction started in October 2002. Since then, although more species of endangered seagrass and rare shellfish have been discovered on the site, the landfill is progressing as planned.



Awase

NAKAIKEMI

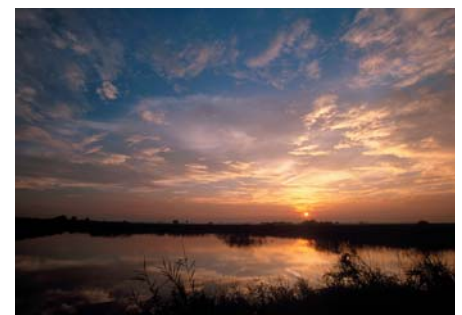
Located southeast of Tsuruga City in Fukui prefecture, Nakaikemi is only 25 hectares in extent, but has peat layers 40 meters deep that record 100,000 years of history. It has a rich wetland ecosystem where 132 species of birds, including endangered species, over 270 species of plants and 1,372 species of insects have been observed. The plan by Osaka Gas to construct a liquid natural gas (LNG) storage facility at Nakaikemi was cancelled in the spring of 2002, and the developer donated 82 hectares of land, including the 25 hectares of Nakaikemi, to Tsuruga City in the spring of 2005. However, the local authorities still have no clear plan for protecting the site, and prospects for Ramsar Listing are presently obscure.



Nakaikemi

WATARASE

At 3,300 hectares, Watarase is the largest flood-control "artificial backwater" wetland in Japan. It has the second largest expanse of reed marsh after Kushiro Marsh (Japan's first Ramsar site) and the country's greatest abundance of overwintering raptors such as Marsh Harrier and Northern Harrier. It is managed by the national Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, which finished constructing one reservoir in 1988 and proposed to build another (270 hectares) in the area of marsh most untouched by development. Because of this area's importance as habitat for wetland vegetation and the Marsh Harrier, local citizens mounted a persistent conservation campaign, and in April 2002 the reservoir construction plan was cancelled. However, in April 2003, the ministry's local River Bureau expressed the view that there still remained problems with the area's capacity to absorb flood runoff. Future conservation of the site in its present form has thus become unpredictable, and efforts to nominate the site for the List are not progressing well.



Watarase



Watarase

One Hundred Ramsar Sites by CoP16!

Japan's new additions to the List bring its number of Ramsar sites up to 33, but many important wetlands that should be on the List are not. Japan's number and area of Ramsar sites have been small compared to other industrialized countries with advanced wetland conservation policies, and so Japan needs to continue actively adding wetlands to the List. Also, due to a lack of wetland conservation legislation, Japan has no system of protected areas specifically for wetlands other than Ramsar site designation. Thus, increasing the number of Ramsar sites is indispensable for protecting Japan's wetlands.

In relation to Fujimae tidal flat, added to the List at CoP8, the "Ise-Mikawa Bay Forum" has been organized and has started working on protection of wetlands in the entire basin of rivers that flow into Mikawa Bay and Ise Bay, location of Fujimae. This Ramsar site-based network aims to protect the non-listed wetlands in the river basin of the Listed wetland, while maintaining an active awareness of the relationships among them.

This method should be applied by adding to the List 100 important wetlands, 20% of the "500 Important Wetlands of Japan," an information wetland inventory compiled by the Ministry of the Environment in 2001, and systematically pursuing conservation of the other wetlands in the river basins of these Ramsar sites. With this Ramsar site-centered river basin network concept in mind, JAWAN has called for the designation of 100 Japanese wetlands to the List by CoP16 in 2026.



Kushiro



Notsuke



Yanami

Looking towards CoP10

One of the wetlands to be added to the List at CoP9 is Kabukuri-numa: this site includes both a restored marsh and the rice paddies surrounding it that are used by White-fronted Goose and Bean Goose as feeding and resting grounds. The high value thus accorded under the Convention to the diverse ecosystems of rice paddies managed by humans for agriculture over long periods of time marks a conceptual milestone particularly significant for Japan and the other wet rice agriculture-based countries of East Asia. There appears to be a significant possibility that CoP10 in 2008 might be held in Asia; further consideration might be given to the value of rice paddies and other wetlands particular to East Asia at this CoP, and implementation of the wise use concept in the 21st century viewed from a fresh angle.

We also hope that this will help Japan, Korea and China embark on a path that will lead them to abandon their large-scale landfill of tidal flat wetlands and begin wetland restoration, increase further their number of Ramsar sites, and build a network of internationally important wetlands.

Our hope is that as many people as possible become aware of the Ramsar Convention as a living entity in the midst of where land interacts with water and humans interact with nature.

