

Our Ocean Conference (OOC) 2025 side event

Collaborating for Conservation: Protecting the Yellow Sea's Biodiversity and Ecosystems

Busan, Republic of Korea

30 April 2025

REPORT OF THE SESSION

1. The ESCAP East and North-East Asia Office (ESCAP ENEA), in collaboration with the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP), IUCN Asia-Pacific, the Ramsar Regional Center-East Asia (RRC-EA), and the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF) Korea, organized the side event “*Collaborating for Conservation: Protecting the Yellow Sea's Biodiversity and Ecosystems*” on 30 April 2025 during the 10th Our Ocean Conference in Busan, Republic of Korea. The event emphasized the importance of transboundary and inter-agency cooperation to address shared challenges and to advance biodiversity conservation, migratory species protection, and ecosystem resilience in the Yellow Sea Large Marine Ecoregion.
2. Ms. Jennifer George, Chief Executive of the EAAFP Secretariat, delivered the opening remarks. She emphasized that the Yellow Sea is a highly interconnected and ecologically complex system, requiring collective conservation efforts. She noted that the Yellow Sea is more than scenic coastlines or iconic species—it is a complete ecosystem where microscopic organisms form the foundation of the food web, supporting biodiversity and human prosperity. While acknowledging threats including the depletion of approximately two-thirds of marine resources and escalating pollution, particularly from plastics, she expressed optimism. Ms. George outlined three priority areas for action: (1) expanding and strengthening existing protection networks; (2) broadening comprehensive species protection efforts beyond birds, and (3) conserving coastal areas while enhancing education and outreach for governments and communities. She underscored the importance of integrating scientific knowledge, community wisdom, and policy priorities, framing the Yellow Sea as a model for cooperation across borders, disciplines, and generations.
3. Following the opening remarks, Mr. Riccardo Mesiano, Deputy Head of ESCAP ENEA, moderated the session and invited four speakers to deliver thematic presentations, providing an in-depth overview of progress, challenges, and emerging opportunities related to conservation in the Yellow Sea region.
4. Ms. Xue Bing, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, UNDP-GEF Wetland Office, China, presented the work of the UNDP-GEF Flyway Conversation Project and Yellow Sea Cooperation. She highlighted the inscription of China's Migratory Bird Sanctuaries along the Yellow Sea-Bohai Gulf as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2019 and 2024, which safeguard the world's largest intertidal mudflat system and critical habitats for millions of migratory birds, including 17 threatened species. She explained that China's wetland protection policies aim to

conserve 90% of critical habitats by 2030. She noted that key project achievements include support for policy development, promotion of international exchange, establishment of replication models such as waterbird-friendly farming, and enhanced public awareness. She also identified potential international cooperation opportunities in habitat restoration, invasive species management, capacity building, international exchanges, and EAAFP Sister Sites partnerships.

5. Mr. Seung Chang Bang, Team Leader of World Heritage Promotion Team of Korean Tidal Flats, provided an update on the “Getbol, Korean Tidal Flats” as a UNESCO World Heritage site and its Phase II nomination process. He highlighted the role of the Yellow Sea as a critical bottleneck for migratory waterbirds along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. He noted that the Phase I inscription was achieved in July 2021, while Phase II, submitted in January 2025, seeks to include four additional sites. He emphasized that the tidal flats’ Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) is demonstrated under Criterion X for biodiversity, hosting 207 bird species, 1,430 tidal flat organisms, and that 10 globally threatened bird species that visit the nominated property are known to have more than 1% of their global population supported at the sites.
6. Ms. Young Ran Lee, Founder and CEO of Plan Ocean, focused her presentation on marine mammals in the Yellow Sea, their importance, threats, and conservation efforts. She noted that the Yellow Sea hosts several resident marine mammal species, including the Minke Whale, Spotted Seal, East Asian Finless Porpoise and others. Occasional visitors include Sperm, Sei, and Humpback whales. She recognized marine mammals as critical indicators of ocean health and vital ecological actors through processes like the “whale pump” and “whale falls,” contributing to biodiversity maintenance, climate regulation, and nutrient cycling. She explained how these species face numerous threats including fishing entanglement, bycatch, pollution, ship strikes, biotoxins, climate change, and habitat disruption from development and wind farms. Lastly, she provided conservation recommendations including establishing Marine Protected Areas, collaborative research, sustainable fisheries practices, bycatch mitigation technologies, vessel speed reduction, noise reduction, monitoring programmes, and educational initiatives to create a regional network of protected areas for these sentinel species.
7. Ms. Lin Ruijuan, Assistant Professor of the Third Institute of Oceanography, Ministry of Natural Resources, focused on the identification and importance of marine ecological corridors for biodiversity conservation. She emphasized that while protected areas are essential for conservation, they are no longer sufficient alone. She pointed out that ecological corridors that maintain connectivity between protected areas are crucial for ecosystem resilience and mitigating climate change impacts. She highlighted that marine ecological corridor research lags significantly behind terrestrial research, with only 219 articles published on marine corridors compared to 4,602 on ecological corridors generally. She then explained how, to address this gap, China’s Ministry of Natural Resources has approved six guidelines for identifying different types of marine corridors. She noted that the research team conducted pilot studies in five marine areas across China using a systematic workflow for corridor identification that includes data collection, species selection, spatial boundary identification, and field surveys. She concluded with a call for international collaboration to develop global technical guidelines for marine ecological corridor identification and preservation.

8. The Panel Discussions and Interactive Dialogue were moderated by Mr. Olivier Chassot, Senior Programme Officer of Protected, Conserved and Heritage Areas, IUCN Asia Regional Office, who welcomed and introduced the panelists from each organization. The discussions called for stronger regional coordination, better alignment with global frameworks, and empowering local actors. The panel provided further insights into bridging science and policy, expanding MPAs, Flyway Network Sites, and cautiously re-engaging the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).
9. Mr. Young Nam Kim, Team Head of the Marine Protected Area Management Team, Korea Marine Environment Management Corporation (KOEM), noted that ROK has designated numerous MPAs, but successful management and conservation depend heavily on local capacity and governance. He explained that when a protected site is handed from national agencies to local authorities, it is all about the people, as technical skills, funding, and community buy-in often take years to develop. He highlighted that small experimental MPAs can grow in scope only if managers and stakeholders are convinced of their value. He underscored that strengthening site-level management through training, incentives or co-management is as important as the formal act of creating reserves.
10. Ms. Seongbo Kim, Network Officer, RRC-EA, emphasized the importance of consistency, continuity, sustainability, and flexibility as key factors for conservation, and the need to revisit existing work plans and stakeholder platforms. She recalled the 2020-2022 Yellow Sea Conservation Action Plan, asserting that it was a useful blueprint for coordinating cross-border efforts, and suggested that now is the right time to review which action items remain valid, identify who can implement them, and plug any gaps. She noted that in practice, this means mapping out which government ministries, NGOs and communities are already doing what in each subregion, so that future projects build on ongoing work rather than duplicating it. She stated that moving forward will require listening to each other and aligning activities, not starting from scratch.
11. Ms. Yoon Kyung Lee, Deputy Chief Executive (Strategic Operations) of EAAFP emphasized that migratory birds see the Yellow Sea as a single ecological system, transcending national borders. While China, ROK, and DPRK host 41 Flyway Network Sites, true conservation impact comes from strengthening ecological, institutional, and human connections across these sites. She mentioned the Yellow River Delta festival in China as an example where cultural celebration of birds fosters both local and international engagement. Through joint efforts like Species Action Plans and knowledge exchange, the EAAFP promotes connectivity as a foundation for shared values and a model of effective transboundary conservation in the Yellow Sea region.
12. Mr. Bernhard Seliger, Representative of Hanns Seidel Foundation Korea, spoke candidly about the critical issues that currently most YS projects include only China and ROK, still leaving out the Yellow Sea's third coastal nation, DPRK. He argued that true transboundary conservation will not succeed without DPRK participation. To make engagement more palatable, he suggested using multilateral frameworks rather than direct bilateral initiatives. For example, a joint mechanism that involves international bodies could open a channel that DPRK feels comfortable joining. He also recalled early efforts, including regional tidal-flat conservation networks and working groups where NGOs like WWF and Hong Kong

Birdwatchers helped break the ice. He proposed reviving and expanding these coalitions to include scientific and NGO partners from outside the region. He suggested the idea is to give DPRK a stake in collaborative MPAs or migratory bird monitoring without making it a purely DPRK-ROK dialogue. He added that if successful, such broad coalitions could create cover for DPRK scientists and officials to attend meetings and share data, while building trust among all Yellow Sea stakeholders.

13. Ms. Mi-Jin Lee, Research Associate at ESCAP East and North-East Asia, shared ESCAP's work through the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC), including natural conservation and biodiversity efforts among six member countries. She drew on successful experiences in terrestrial species conservation across China, Mongolia and the Russian Federation, and highlighted the potential to extend such intergovernmental cooperation to the Yellow Sea. She also emphasized that aligning conservation in the Yellow Sea with broader global frameworks is both timely and achievable. She noted that both China and ROK are already demonstrating leadership, as previously shared by presenters, China has expanded protected areas and secured new World Heritage sites in the Yellow Sea while ROK is advancing wetland restoration and protected area expansion. With growing recognition of the Yellow Sea's ecological value and its role in climate resilience, she highlighted the opportunity to better integrate regional conservation with global climate and biodiversity agendas, contributing meaningfully to SDG targets (SDGs 13 and 14) and supporting ocean-based climate actions.
14. In the second round of interventions, Ms. Yoon Kyung Lee from EAAFP emphasized EAAFP's role in uniting diverse stakeholders to strengthen conservation of the Yellow Sea through collaboration, with a special focus on empowering local leadership and engagement of site managers. She proposed concrete actions, including a Mayors' Round Table and a joint workshop for Flyway Site managers at the upcoming World Coastal Forum in September 2025, to foster joint monitoring and sister site partnerships. She also emphasized the importance of aligning efforts with development partners like UNDP, ADB, and ESCAP to ensure continuity and regional coordination. Acknowledging the successful organization of the international Getbol symposium in Korea last year, she called for continued multi-stakeholder engagement going forward. Underscoring the need for coordination among the existing networks in the YS region, she reaffirmed EAAFP's commitment to connecting partners and sustaining cooperation for a healthy Yellow Sea ecosystem.
15. Ms. Mi-Jin Lee emphasized that the challenge in the Yellow Sea region is not the lack of initiatives but the need for better coordination and collaboration among existing frameworks. She shared that a regional MPA network discussion involving nine marine environmental organizations in East Asia had recently identified joint activities through close consultations. She suggested that applying a similar approach in North-East Asia could help avoid duplication and enhance synergies. Lastly, she expressed NEASPEC's interest in engaging more actively with the Yellow Sea Working Group and other partners to better align efforts and address gaps.
16. Ms. Seongbo Kim discussed the challenges in bridging science and policy, especially in such a large and complex area as the Yellow Sea. She recommended formalizing a regular science-policy dialogue platform where technical inputs from different stakeholders can feed directly into policy discussions. She stressed that to strengthen institutional linkages among regional

and global platforms, regular interaction is essential to understand and monitor planned or ongoing activities, what's happening and how we can collaborate across the Yellow Sea.

17. Mr. Bernhard Seliger noted a communication gap and emphasized the need for better cross-organizational communication. He also mentioned the need for specific, practical starting points for trilateral cooperation, arguing that small but visible action could help DPRK recognize shared resources and build grassroots momentum, but would require political will. He shared an idea of inviting DPRK to the Yellow River Delta Festival in China to start off. He acknowledged the reality of donor fatigue and the difficulty of engaging with DPRK. However, on second thought, he argued it may be very timely as changing global circumstances might lead countries to reassess their interests, so he encouraged the group to stay optimistic and keep preparing concrete ideas, so they are ready when opportunities for renewed cooperation arise.
18. Mr. Young Nam Kim shared that while a previously planned joint monitoring programme with DPRK stalled, he sees new openings for regional cooperation. He proposed an idea of implementing joint monitoring with DPRK.
19. In his closing remarks, Mr. Riccardo Mesiano thanked the panelists for their insightful contributions, noting that the discussion helped everyone better understand the Yellow Sea's opportunities and challenges. He emphasized the importance of moving forward as a network and community, calling for practical and pragmatic next steps, such as organizing a follow-up workshop where practitioners can meet again to map out concrete actions.

Annex 1. Overview of the Side Event

Objectives

- Highlight the ecological importance of the Yellow Sea and the growing need for enhanced collaborative conservation efforts
- Facilitate transboundary cooperation along the Yellow Sea by promoting joint conservation efforts and knowledge exchange among key entities such as national governments, international and regional organizations, research institutions, NGOs, and on-the-ground practitioners
- Explore practical approaches to improving MPA management, protecting migratory species and their habitats, and enhancing wetland conservation

Expected Outcomes

- Strengthened engagement of local, national, and regional stakeholders in the Yellow Sea region to sustain mid- to long-term conservation efforts, fostering continuous collaboration and policy coherence
- Identification of key actions to enhance the MPA network, Flyway Site Network, and wetland protection through joint efforts on migratory species conservation
- A draft proposal for a collaborative project on Yellow Sea conservation, aligned with existing initiatives and institutional capacities.

Programme

Time	Agenda
14:30-14:40	Opening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening remarks: Ms. Jennifer George, Chief Executive, East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership Secretariat (EAAFP) • Introduction of the session: Mr. Riccardo Mesiano, Deputy Head, ESCAP East and North-East Asia <p>Group photo</p>
14:40-15:20	Presentations <p>Moderator: Mr. Riccardo Mesiano, Deputy Head, ESCAP East and North-East Asia</p> <p>Speakers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms. Xue Bing, Monitoring and evaluation officer, UNDP-GEF Wetland Office, China • Mr. Seung Chang Bang, Team leader, Word Heritage Promotion Team of Korean Tidal Flats • Ms. Young Ran Lee, Founder and CEO, Plan Ocean

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ms. Lin Ruijuan, Assistant Professor, Third Institute of Oceanography, Ministry of Natural Resources China
15:20-15:55	<p>Panel Discussions and Interactive Dialogue</p> <p>Moderator: Mr. Olivier Chassot, Senior Programme Officer, Protected, Conserved and Heritage Areas, IUCN Asia Regional Office</p> <p>Panelists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mr. Young Nam Kim, Team head, Marine Protected Area Management Team, Korea Marine Environment Management Corporation Mr. Bernhard Seliger, Representative, Hanns Seidel Foundation Korea Ms. Yoon Kyung Lee, Deputy Chief Executive (Strategic Operations), EAAFP Ms. Seongbo Kim, Network Officer, Ramsar Regional Center East Asia Ms. Mi-Jin Lee, Research Associate, ESCAP East and North-East Asia
15:55-16:00	<p>Wrap-up / Closing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closing remarks: Mr. Riccardo Mesiano, Deputy Head, ESCAP East and North-East Asia Office

Annex 2. Main Recommendations and Action Points

1. Strengthen Transboundary and Inter-Agency Cooperation

- Expand protection networks and cross-border conservation initiatives.
- Promote broader species conservation beyond migratory birds.
- Facilitate regional collaboration through multilateral frameworks and inclusive coordination mechanisms.

2. Advance Ecosystem Resilience and Biodiversity Conservation

- Develop marine ecological corridors to enhance connectivity and ecosystem resilience.
- Strengthen Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and site-level management capacities.
- Increase public awareness and educational initiatives.

3. Enhance Science-Policy Integration

- Establish a formal science-policy dialogue platform to integrate technical insights into decision-making.
- Improve alignment with global climate and biodiversity frameworks.

4. Empower Local Stakeholders and Governance

- Provide training, incentives, and co-management support to build local capacity for MPAs.
- Engage mayors and Flyway Network Site managers in conservation actions for the Yellow Sea

5. Promote International Cooperation and Technical Exchange

- Expand partnerships for habitat restoration and species protection.
- Encourage joint research, monitoring, and exchange programmes among Yellow Sea countries.

6. Expand Transboundary Cooperation

- Encourage DPRK's participation in Yellow Sea conservation through multilateral frameworks instead of direct bilateral initiatives.
- Revive and expand regional coalitions to include scientific and NGO partners beyond China and ROK.
- Explore joint mechanisms to engage DPRK in migratory bird monitoring and collaborative MPAs.

7. Align Regional Efforts with Global Agendas

- Integrate Yellow Sea conservation into broader climate and biodiversity frameworks, supporting SDGs 13 and 14.
- Leverage China's and ROK's leadership in expanding protected areas and wetland restoration to enhance international collaboration.

8. Strengthen Stakeholder Engagement and Local Leadership

- Organize a Mayors' Round Table and a joint workshop at the World Coastal Forum in September 2025 to foster site-level cooperation.
- Ensure engagement of development partners like UNDP, ADB, and ESCAP to enhance continuity in conservation efforts and explore synergies with the existing coordination framework such as EAAFP to enhance continuity in conservation efforts.

9. Improve Coordination Among Existing Frameworks

- Enhance synergy among conservation organizations through joint planning, aligning Flyway and marine initiatives, and avoiding duplication of efforts.
- Strengthen regional MPA networks and align activities across marine environmental organizations in East Asia.

10. Bridge Science and Policy

- Establish a formal science-policy dialogue platform for integrating technical insights into policy decisions.
- Foster regular interaction among scientific, governmental, and intergovernmental platforms.

11. Enhance Cross-Organizational Communication

- Identify practical starting points for trilateral cooperation, such as inviting DPRK to international conservation events like the Yellow River Delta Festival.
- Prepare actionable ideas for renewed engagement in anticipation of changing geopolitical conditions.

12. Advance Joint Monitoring Efforts

- Reassess and potentially reactivate stalled joint monitoring programmes with DPRK.
- Promote data-sharing and collaborative research among Yellow Sea countries.

13. Define Next Steps for Implementation

- Organize a follow-up workshop for Flyway and MPA site managers and practitioners to develop concrete action plans.
- Ensure continued engagement and collaboration through structured regional networks.