



Bulletin 101/102

Editorial: Declining wader populations – we can all play our part

The conclusion of this year's WSG workshop, reported in this issue, is clear and disconcerting: worldwide, many wader populations are in severe decline. This and the workshop's other conclusions present us, as members of the International Wader Study Group, with several difficult and demanding challenges:

- ❑ Despite the best efforts of many people, especially Wetlands International, our knowledge of the population sizes and trends of many waders is inadequate. No trend data are available for 59% of populations; many population estimates are out of date.
- ❑ The reasons for the declining trends are poorly known. They affect a wide range of species with a variety of migratory strategies using different flyways and different habitats.
- ❑ Declining trends in many long-distance migrants appear to be linked to human interference at major stopover sites. These are often driven by powerful commercial and political forces that are difficult to counter; for example: huge reclamation projects around the Yellow Sea, mechanical shellfish harvesting in the Wadden Sea, over-exploitation of horseshoe crabs in Delaware Bay.
- ❑ Elements of modern intensive agriculture, especially land drainage, the direct and indirect effects of pesticides and over-use of fertilizers, have led to loss and degradation of breeding and non-breeding habitat for many wader species.
- ❑ Wetlands in general and intertidal habitats in particular are subject to an almost continuous process of reclamation and degradation through disturbance, pollution and abuse.

These are but a few examples of the scale of the problems facing the world's waders. How can we respond to matters of such magnitude? Clearly, any adequate response will need extensive resources in terms of funding and research as well as the political will of governments. But there is surely much that we can do, both as individuals and as members of the WSG:

- ❑ We can all count! And that is all we have to do to support Wetland International's programme of population monitoring. Many of us live in or travel to those parts of the world where no regular wader counts take place. We should grasp these opportunities.
- ❑ Most of us are involved in wader research in one way or another and to some extent have opportunities for deciding how we should spend our time. Such decisions can be guided by conservation priorities. Thomas *et al.* in *WSG Bulletin 100* pointed out that there is a tremendous imbalance in the wader species that are chosen for research projects with just ten of the world's 221 waders accounting for nearly half the research effort. Certainly we need to continue investigating well-studied systems to reach a full understanding of ecological processes. However, it will not really help the conservation of the world's waders if we know everything there is to know about the Eurasian Oystercatcher, Northern Lapwing, Red Knot and Dunlin and virtually nothing about anything else!
- ❑ We can all write letters to politicians and support conservation campaigns. We may be cynical about the effect of this, but occasionally those with the power do take notice and much can be achieved.

This reminds me to say: "Have you signed the Saemangeum petition yet? If not, please do so as soon as possible." Saemangeum is a 40,000 ha South Korean mudflat and key wader stopover site that is in imminent danger of total reclamation for farming. By 30 November 2003, nearly 12,000 people from 87 countries had signed the on-line petition against the scheme. Add your name today by going to the Wetlands and Birds of Korea website:

www.wbkenglish.com

Humphrey Sitters

