Danny Rogers
(Chair of Scientific Committee, Australasian Wader Studies Group)
18 Leonard Crescent
Eltham
Victoria 3095
AUSTRALIA

Email: drogers@melbpc.org.au

5 August 2010

Dear Professors and Faculty Staff

I am writing on behalf of The Australasian Wader Studies Group (AWSG) to express concern about the environmental impact of the tidal flat reclamations involved in construction of the Songdo University Global campus in South Korea. We believe it is important that Stony Brook University should be aware that this is not a "green development", but one that involves the destruction of internationally important shorebird habitats.

The AWSG is a non-government organisation which aims to ensure the future of waders and their habitats in Australia through research and conservation programmes, and to encourage and assist similar programmes in the rest of the East Asian – Australasian Flyway. Our membership, composed largely of both professional and amateur shorebird biologists, is based largely in Australia, but we also have active members in most countries of Australasia and eastern Asia.

Shorebirds (also known as waders) are small to medium sized wetland-dwelling birds in the taxonomic order Charadriiformes, such as plovers, sandpipers, curlews and allies. Many shorebird species are strongly migratory, nesting in arctic or near-arctic latitudes and migrating to Australia for their non-breeding season. Stopover sites in eastern Asia are critical to these species, as it is in these sites that they find the food reserves essential to fuel their migrations. Many shorebird species are highly specialised, and are restricted to tidal flat systems during the migration and non-breeding period.

Over the past thirty years the AWSG has carried out a great deal of research on the shorebirds that occur in Australia in the non-breeding season. Information on this research program can be found on our website (http://www.awsg.org.au/) and publications. Our migration research led to our current appreciation of the enormous importance of the tidal flats of the Yellow Sea to Australian shorebird populations, and we have participated or led a number of field projects in this region. This interest has been stimulated in particular by conservation concerns, as Australia is signatory to number of international conservation agreements to protect shorebirds, yet our long-term population monitoring data in Australia indicates that there have been substantial declines in many of our migratory species, even at sites within Australia that are considered to be pristine.

One of the most important projects we have been involved in, in collaboration with Birds Korea (http://www.birdskorea.org/BK-Startpage.shtml) is the Saemangeum Shorebird Monitoring Program in South Korea. We studied the effects of the large-scale tidal flat reclamation at Saemangeum on shorebird populations. Our results are partially published and can be downloaded from the websites listed above. In short we found that the reclamation of Saemangeum had catastrophic effects on shorebird populations in that site. Moreover, we found that the loss of shorebirds from Saemangeum

could not be attributed to them moving to alternative sites; rather, it caused the death of these birds, leading to detectable declines in global populations and therefore in the number of shorebirds that migrate to Australia.

Saemangeum is one of many tidal flat reclamation projects around the shores of the Yellow Sea. We consider the situation in South Korea to be particularly worrying; nearly all of the tidal flat systems formerly of importance to shorebirds in South Korea have been greatly reduced in area by reclamation projects, and indeed many have been almost completely destroyed; they now support very few shorebirds.

In April-May 2008 we joined Birds Korea in carrying out a complete survey of all the shorebird sites of South Korea. The tidal flats of Songdo proved to be one of the most important remaining shorebird sites in South Korea, and were of international importance to nine shorebird species (five of them listed as threatened or near-threatened by the IUCN), in addition to a globally vulnerable species of gull and a globally endangered species of spoonbill.

All of these species for which Songdo is of internationally important are tidal flat specialists, and they are partially to completely dependent on tidal flats for their survival. They will disappear from Songdo if the remaining tidal flats there are lost. Our Saemangeum experience indicates that most of the displaced birds will be unable to find alternative staging habitats (especially in view of the fact that most shorebird sites near Songdo have already been damaged or destroyed) and will therefore die. We are aware that the development plans for Songdo include the retention of some tidal flats and artificial construction of freshwater wetlands. However, the tiny tidal flat area that will remain will not be large enough to support large shorebird populations, and the created freshwater habitats will not be used by coast-specialised shorebirds.

Songdo has been touted in some quarters as a “green” or “sustainable” development, and we wish to emphasise that this is simply not the case. No matter how carefully developments there are planned, they will be environmentally damaging as they are based on the destruction of vitally important tidal flats. It is therefore most unlikely that they will ever receive legitimate green-building certification. Moreover, South Korea is engaged in many destructive land-engineering projects, almost invariably said by their proponents to be “green” but in reality almost invariably the opposite. Such claims could be given dangerous legitimacy by large international organisations, if they were to accept claims of “green-ness” without making a careful assessment of whether they are becoming involved in a project of sound environmental credentials.

If you would like further information on the conservation values of Songdo on waterbirds, please feel free to get in touch.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Danny I. Rogers
(Chair of Scientific Committee, Australasian Wader Studies Group)