
NGOs' CHALLENGING FOR ECOTOURISM THROUGH MARINE CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES IN KOREA

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Through the UN conference on Environment and Development in 1992 at Rio, it was widely recognized that we should take practical actions to achieve a sustainable development and to conserve our global environment. Since the Rio Declaration, NGOs were the first to initiate a range of conservation actions for the environment in Korea. On the contrary, it has cost a considerable time for the Korean government to establish conservation policies rather than development-oriented policies. It was 5 years after the Rio Declaration when the Korean government joined the global conventions on bio-diversity and wetland, and established the national biodiversity strategy (Republic of Korea, 1998). Despite of a rather steady change in government's policy, NGOs have been actively involved in practical actions to conserve the environment of Korea.

During the 1990s, there was also a switch in public awareness of, and government policies for, marine environment. Since a dike was built to create Shihwa Lake for reclamation in 1994, it had become one of the most serious environmental issues in Korea. On the other hand, the Korean government joined the Ramsar Convention (the Wetlands Convention) in 1997, and environmental concerns for coastal wetlands especially tidal flats have been growing among the general public and policy makers. The growth of environmental awareness of marine conservation has reached the peak through 'the Year of Ocean' in 1998. The Korean government also established 'The Wetland Conservation Act' and 'The Coastal Management Act' in 1999, which could provide a legislative system for marine conservation. However, it was NGOs including environmental groups that have made a significant contribution to marine conservation in Korea. A number of NGOs in Gangwha Island, Geum River Estuary, Suncheon Bay, Shihwa Lake area, brackish lakes area in Gangwondo's Coast, Jeju Island and Semangeum area have initiated a range of conservation actions against

land reclamation and other development projects. For instance, since 1995, Gangwha Island People's Network (GIPN) has made a great deal of effort to conserve tidal flats of Gangwha Island against landfill projects, a construction plan of an electric power plant, and other development pressure. GIPN has also proposed a sustainable development plan for Gangwha Island.

However, NGOs have repeated trial and error in their conservation actions, due to a lack of information or expertise and different approaches to management issues. In particular, NGOs often had a feud with local people in regard to conservation issues in a local area. In this context, 'ecotourism' has become to be recognized as either an alternative to solve local issues or a desirable option for sustainable development and marine conservation in many local areas, because of its potential benefits for a local society and environment. It has often believed that ecotourism could minimize conflicts between conservation groups and local societies. Therefore, many NGOs have developed and provided ecotourism programs in coastal areas. For instance, over 3,000 students and adults participated in ecotourism activities in Gangwha tidal flats provided by GIPN in 1998. GIPN also published a guidebook for migratory birds watching, and the number of participants in ecotourism activities increased up to 5,000 visitors in 1999. GIPN also developed an eco-guide training program for local people in 2000.

Another example of NGOs' ecotourism activities is the tidal flat eco-camp program provided by Gunsan YMCA since 1997. The program aims to increase visitors' awareness of marine conservation issues and their understanding of tidal flat ecosystems. In 2001, a total of 2,084 visitors participated in this eco-camp program at Mohang tidal flat in the Beonsan Bando National Park. In addition, Gunsan YMCA has initiated the 'Napo migratory birds eco-village project'. Since 1999, more than 5,000 visitors participated in migratory birds watching programs provided by the Napo eco-village. The Gunsan branch of the Bird Conservation Society of Korea manages a visitor center for water bird watching and has a group of eco-guides consisting of local housewives. Over 100,000 visitors visited this center during last one year.

The NGOs in Shihwa Lake region, Ansan, Siheung and Hwasung cities have held spontaneous and sporadic protest actions against the developments related to environmental issues since 1995. The "Hwasung-Siheung-Ansan Citizens Coalition for Shihwa, a Lake of Hope (Shihwa NGO)" was established in 1999 to realize the need for establishing a more consolidated organization, which can serve as the unified voice of Shihwa Lake region. It became a genuine local NGO with a

mission focusing on Shihwa Lake. A citizens' proposal on Shihwa as a lake of hope had been formulated through countless consultation at various meeting (Je, 2001). One of the recommendations in the proposal is the creation of an eco-park on reclaimed land instead of industrial complexes. The objects of the idea on eco-park shall be conservation of wild life and geological and cultural heritages in Shihwa Lake area and enhancement of ecotourism to show economic values of these local resources. At present over five million people visit this region annually. It is guessed that at least one tenth of them is related to marine education and ecotourism activities. They may strongly support the idea on eco-park.

It is worth noting that ecotourism activities initiated by NGOs have significantly contributed to increasing people's environmental awareness and conserving coastal and marine environment. NGOs have also played an important role in developing educational programs on marine environment in coastal areas. However, in practice, NGOs have met a lot of difficulties to achieve a sustainable development through ecotourism activities. There is a need for NGOs to develop various ecotourism programs with an educational component, to minimize visitor's impact on the environment, and to involve local community in ecotourism activities. It is suggested that NGOs should establish new action strategies to achieve a genuine ecotourism in major coastal areas of Korea.

The first national ecotourism forum titled "Forum for the Ecotourism Development Strategy of Korea in Commemoration of the International Year of Ecotourism 2002" was held in Jeju Island during 17-19 April 2002. Over 200 participants from more than 50 NGOs, 30 Governments, 5 industries and 30 experts and guides joined in the forum. The forum decided two important issues – making a national report for the Ecotourism Summit will be held in May in Canada and establishment of the Ecotourism Society of Korea (tentative name). The year 2002 should be a turning point from initial stage to development stage in ecotourism of Korea. The NGOs have made a big contribution to ecotourism as well as nature conservation especially in the initial stage.

(This note is revised from the note "Roles of NGOs on Ecotourism through Marine Conservation Activities" presented at the 1st APEC ocean-related ministries meeting in April 2002.)

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