July 11, 2012

OPEN MEMO TO: All Leadership, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

FROM: Undersigned Environmental/NGO/Academic Leaders

REQUESTING POSTPONEMENT OF IUCN CONVENTION ON JEJU ISLAND, UNLESS MILITARY DESTRUCTION IS ENDED

THE IUCN 2012 WORLD CONSERVATION CONGRESS (WCC), scheduled for September 6-15 at Jungmun Resort on Jeju Island, was apparently planned several years ago by IUCN leadership without full awareness of current circumstances on Jeju—circumstances that display values and behaviors exactly opposite to the historic goals of IUCN.

The IUCN describes the Congress as “the world’s largest and most important conservation event,” aiming “to improve how we manage our natural environment for human, social and economic development.” Nothing could be more diametrically opposed to sustaining those values than the environmental and social assaults now underway only minutes away, along the nearby coastline, and in the traumatized Gangjeong Village. That is where construction has begun on a huge new military base, rapidly devastating a region of rare beauty, vibrant soft-coral reefs, pure freshwater springs, numerous endangered species, and traditional sustainable cultures and villages, and where police actions are brutalizing local populations who attempt to oppose the development.

The undersigned believe it would be massively ironic, contradictory, and scandalous, for the IUCN to ignore the attacks on living nature, and on traditional sustainable culture, that are daily underway a few miles from the scheduled IUCN meeting. Holding a conference in the face of such nearby, ongoing devastation, would destroy the credibility of IUCN, and be an eternal embarrassment for all participants at the meeting.

We therefore insist that the leadership of IUCN demand that the government of South Korea immediately stop this appalling development, remove its military, and free the local population trying to recover the environment and traditional culture that is being actively destroyed. In lieu of that, IUCN should immediately cancel its meeting in Jeju, and reschedule in a timely manner, in another place with values that are aligned with the organization’s mission. Details follow.
Crimes Against Nature

Five years ago, the South Korean government announced that it would begin blasting Gangjeong’s rare lava-rock coastline, the only rocky wetland on Jeju Island, to make way for a new naval base intended to berth South Korean and U.S. Aegis missile-carrying warships, a thinly veiled threat against China. The base project is located 1.7 km away from sacred Beom Islet (Tiger Isle), which is a UNESCO biosphere preserve.

Coastal blasting began in earnest in March 2012, despite continuous passionate protests from local Gangjeong residents. It has already transformed an extraordinary coastline into an ecological disaster area. Uniquely beautiful soft-coral reefs, with very high levels of native biodiversity, extend widely across the area, directly in front of the base project. They are now being aggressively destroyed. Environmentalist and actor Robert Redford recently reported on the 57 four-story-tall caissons poised to drop on miles of soft coral reefs.

The coastline features a single massive Andesite bed rock, with year-round fresh water streams and springs. Bubbling through the lava for millennia, these precious waters have now been contaminated by the dynamiting of the coastline. The blasting and construction are also shattering the rare ecosystem in places where fresh spring water mixes with sea water. The brackish water’s life-giving qualities are recognized by villagers, who call it “grandmother water.”

These places provide unique habitat for many endangered species, including the narrow-mouth toad (Kaloula borealis), which is, ironically, on the IUCN’s critical Red List! Other endangered species threatened by the destruction include the red-foot crab (Sesarma intermedium); the Jeju fresh water shrimp (Caridina denticulate keunbae); and mollusks such as the Gisoogal godong (Clithon retropictus).

Another endangered species doomed by the development, are Jeju’s last 100 Indo-Pacific bottle-nosed dolphins (Tursiops aduncus) which are still visible in island coastal waters.

Crimes Against Humanity

Clearly, this base construction is not only a crime against nature, but a crime against humanity. In a single blow, the base will destroy not just ecosystems and endangered species, but also resilient livelihoods within a thriving traditional village. The reef, the farms and the spring water have provided for the local village for centuries. And yet, the government has razed many acres of tangerine
farms, and removed people from their land and their reefs in order to make room for a military base.

The *Los Angeles Times* has reported: “The new base will subsume the picturesque harbor, and its security perimeter will shut out fishermen and women who for generations have fished for abalone, sea cucumber and brown seaweed.”

One “haenyo” (traditional woman sea diver) says that pollution from the naval base has already turned the clean seawater to gray, threatening the haenys’ livelihoods. “The Naval base will destroy the natural resources. I see cranes and large machinery at the base. I can’t believe it.”

The villagers were recently notified that the government will be seizing more land to build housing for 600 military personnel who, with their families, will outnumber the 1,930 villagers. New businesses will open to service the newcomers: Big box stores will replace village gardens; parking lots will replace farms; bars and prostitution will replace Jeju’s women divers. Gangjeong, as it has miraculously existed for centuries, will be wiped off the face of the Earth.

According to a Jeju newspaper, the base controversy has caused increased suicide rates in Gangjeong. Last year, one villager drank pesticide in a failed attempt to kill himself. He said he couldn’t live with all the destruction.

Finally, this development is also a *crime against democracy*. Ninety-four percent of villagers voted against base construction in a recent referendum, but local wishes are ignored by the Korean government. The mayor of Gangjeong and fellow villagers have hosted numerous press conferences in Jeju City, citing continuing environmental violations by the construction crews. The Navy is never punished. Instead, the government sends hundreds of riot police to arrest protestors every day for holding prayer vigils at the gates to the construction site. They are charged with “obstruction of government activities.” The mayor himself was jailed for three months.

**Our Demand**

The undersigned strongly assert that it would be highly contradictory for the IUCN to ignore such startling social and environmental realities as described above, while it claims to convene global environmental leaders to protect and restore natural systems. If the 2012 World Conservation Conference proceeds as currently planned, it would permanently damage the credibility of IUCN, and be a major embarrassment for all participants. This situation must be faced, and stopped. To participate as if everything is fine will cast a black mark across the conference and all its attendees.
IUCN leadership must immediately demand that the Republic of Korea cease, at once, these unconscionable crimes against the Earth, humanity and democracy. If the government refuses, IUCN should postpone the conference and reschedule at another time and place consistent with IUCN’s urgent mission and stated values. This is the only possible choice consistent with IUCN statements on the prime necessity to act on behalf of survival of the Earth, and culture.

Please kindly respond to this message within one week. (You may write to us by using the “REPLY” button above.) Thank you for your attention.

EMERGENCY ACTION TO SAVE JEJU ISLAND

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