

## **Public education efforts on the conservation of Black-faced Spoonbills**

Lucia Liu Severinghaus

Institute of Zoology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan

### **INTRODUCTION**

During the International Black-faced Spoonbill Workshop in Beijing in May 1996, participants realized that although we knew several important wintering locations for this highly endangered species, we knew very little about its breeding locations, its migration routes, its staging points, and other possible locations in countries not yet well covered at the time. Participants agreed that it was crucial that we solicit information from local residents as widely as possible. To accomplish this goal, public education efforts would be needed to bring people's attention to this species, and to help them identify this species accurately.

In many Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* range states, the values of wetlands are not recognized, thus important Black-faced Spoonbill habitats are subjected to destruction under development pressures. Such is the case in Taiwan where the most important known wintering location of this species at Tseng-wen River Estuary is threatened by the establishment of an industrial park. To preserve this habitat, various types of public education efforts are needed, targeted at arousing the general public awareness on the status of this species, at educating policy makers and the news media about the importance of this species on an international scale, and at convincing the industrialists to move the planned development to a less crucial site.

This report documents what the Chinese Wild Bird Federation (CWBF) worked on in 1997, as well as efforts by other groups of people that promoted general awareness of this species.

### **GOALS AND ACTIONS**

#### **I. To reach the general public internationally**

We decided to produce both a colorful poster and a pamphlet (Fig. 1) in multiple languages for distribution in most of the Black-faced Spoonbill range states. Funding for these efforts was provided by Executive Yuan of the Council of Agriculture of The Republic of China.

##### **A. Poster:**

Since the purpose of the poster was to attract people's attention, we aimed at producing bright and attention-grabbing material. A well-known bird artist, named Mr. Ho Hua-jen, agreed to paint the birds and design the poster. His painting included two Black-faced Spoonbills, one in breeding plumage and another in wintering plumage. The poster asks "Have you seen this bird before?" in English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. The names and addresses of conservation organizations in China, Taiwan, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Hong Kong that are involved in the conservation of this species are given on the poster.

Altogether 5,000 copies of the poster were printed and distributed to the pertinent countries mentioned above.

### **B. Pamphlet:**

The purpose of the pamphlet was to provide more detailed information for people who are interested or who might have seen Black-faced Spoonbills. This pamphlet tries to get across the following points, and it asks people to get in touch should they have some information on this species.

The pamphlet:

- 1) urges people to look for large white birds near their home.
- 2) describes the main morphological characteristics of Black-faced Spoonbills in simple language.
- 3) points out the main differences between Black-faced Spoonbills and similar looking white egret species.
- 4) points out the main differences between Black-faced and Eurasian Spoonbills.
- 5) describes the basic habits of this species in order to help people identify this species.
- 6) describes the known general habitat of this species.
- 7) describes the known breeding habitat, but does not restrict people's search to known habitat.
- 8) describes the known wintering habitat, but does not restrict people's search to known habitat.
- 9) provides the addresses for people to contact in seven countries or locations.



Fig. 1. Pamphlet of Black-faced Spoonbill.

These pamphlets were printed in single language style in Korean, Vietnamese, English, and two versions of Chinese. All together, 20,000 copies were printed and mailed to the conservation organizations in the above-mentioned countries for distribution.

## **II. Education efforts in Taiwan:**

In addition to the CWBF and the Tainan Wild Bird Society, many government and private organizations have become involved with Black-faced Spoonbill conservation. The more active ones include the Love-your-hometown Foundation headed by Legislator Su Huan-chih elected from Tainan, the Wetland Conservation Union active in southern Taiwan, Chi-gu Coastal Area Protection Association formed by fishermen from the region, Environmental

Protection Union with many scholars as its members, the Black-faced Spoonbill Conservation Center formed by the previous four groups, and the Provincial Endemic Species Research and Conservation Center. The Urban and Regional Planning and Research Institute of National Taiwan University, in cooperation with faculty and graduate students at UC Berkeley in USA have formed an alliance called SAVE, which aims to generate both local and international pressure on the government in order to block the development of the industrial site. At the moment, another group named Black-faced Spoonbill Conservation Society is being formed by young researchers and their friends.

#### **A. Working with the news media**

Due to the fact that Tsengwen Estuary is the most important wintering site for Black-faced Spoonbills and that it is threatened by large industrial development spearheaded by powerful companies, anything related to the species or the site has news value. This controversy may have turned out to be the best asset for this species in terms of public education programs. The arrival, departure, and movements of the Black-faced Spoonbills have frequently appeared as news on both televisions and newspapers. A great many general topic magazines have printed introductory articles about this species, along with colored photos of the birds. At least three full-length television documentaries have been produced by independent producers, detailing facts about the birds themselves and about the controversy concerning this species and industrial development. CWBF and Tainan Wild Bird Society have cooperated and provided information whenever requested.

#### **B. Tourism Attraction**

News coverage like that mentioned above has made the Black-faced Spoonbill the best known species of bird in Taiwan. Because they are easy to see throughout the wintering season, many tour companies have made Tsengwen Estuary a stop for their tour buses to allow tourists from other parts of Taiwan a view of the birds. Local people living near Tsengwen Estuary have developed other types of tours, including a tour of the lagoon by rafts or outboard motorboats, during which they might approach roosting egrets at close range and view the Black-faced Spoonbill from a different angle than from the shore. Several groups previously mentioned produced brochures or booklets on Black-faced Spoonbills, as well as T-shirts and tote bags bill-boarding Black-faced Spoonbill in words or via pictures. Some tour companies have also produced their own brochures and pamphlets, in order to attract tourists and to provide some information. Many local people have opened up food stalls near where the Black-faced Spoonbills roost.

#### **C. Lobbying against industrial development**

1) The Love-your-hometown Foundation may have more political power than the other groups because of its connection to legislators. Legislator Su's office reports the status and activities concerning the Black-faced Spoonbills regularly in their monthly newsletters. It has also held press conferences and informal public hearings on the industrial plan in the Legislative Yuan.

2) Professors at UC Berkeley active in SAVE asked their students to produce sculptures of

Black-faced Spoonbills as part of their homework assignments. These sculptures were shipped to Taipei for an exhibition. At this time, a press conference was held simultaneously in Taipei and in Berkeley, connected via satellite so people could hear what was happening simultaneously on each side. In Taipei, students of National Taiwan University also put on a play in which they acted out the plight of the Black-faced Spoonbills facing the threat of losing their wintering site. The entire event was heavily covered by the news media.

3) An international conference titled "Sustainable environment: an ecological perspective" was organized by SAVE in Taipei on 26 May 1997. An important goal of this conference was the conservation of the lagoon and the Black-faced Spoonbills. A statement was prepared at the conference proposing an alternative plan for the development of the lagoon, and the establishment of a Black-faced Spoonbill Protected Area. Efforts were made to present the statement directly to President Li Teng-hui of ROC. Although President Li did not receive this group, the statement was printed in the newspapers for the general public to read.

### CONCLUSIONS

Since the meeting in Beijing, progress has been made both internationally and in Taiwan to promote public awareness and attract public participation in the conservation of Black-faced Spoonbills. Whether these efforts are fruitful internationally remain to be evaluated at a later date, because experiences show that it usually takes a long time with repeated explanations before the public becomes interested. In Taiwan, educational and promotional efforts are apparently quite successful. Black-faced Spoonbills are already the best known species. The general public is interested in seeing this species as a tourist attraction. Local people are already benefiting from its presence by way of tourist consumption. This last point should help convince the public that conservation can also bring profit to people by way of eco-tourism.

Future efforts at education in Taiwan would be to focus on channeling the enthusiastic but diverse local groups into offering properly planned and coordinated tourist education programs. Commercial tour plans and tour group behavior could also be properly monitored and managed with the help of education programs.