

## ***The Yellow Sea: A Window onto the Anthropocene***

How can we conserve nature when there is nothing ‘natural’ left? As we enter the Anthropocene, an era where humans are the dominant force, transforming every corner of the earth, this question haunts us. It is both an epistemological and an ontological question whether we interpret the Anthropocene as a revelatory moment of recognizing the inseparability of nature and society, or as a point of reference in the Earth’s geologic timeline that marks a significant transformation of nature from the past (Mansfield, 2018). Whether ahistorical or historical, it alarms us that the Anthropocene pushes nature conservation into this dilemma. This problem compels us to fundamentally re-think our relations with nature.

*The Yellow Sea: A Window onto the Anthropocene* is a critical study of conservation-development entanglements that seeks to answer this question. Using an Anthropocene lens to theorize a hybrid world of assemblages rather than the dualistic one of modernity (Lorimer 2015), this research reconstructs the modern history of nature conservation in the Yellow Sea, a shallow gulf shared by China, North Korea, and South Korea, and weaves the history into the emergent paradoxes that Yellow Sea conservation faces today. The Yellow Sea, occupying a mere 0.1% of the world’s oceans but producing more than 10% of global seafood, is one of the most intensely exploited seas in the world. With over half of its intertidal wetlands subject to reclamation, it experienced substantial socioecological changes over the past century. As such, I posit the Yellow Sea as a frontier of the Anthropocene. The situation it is facing foreshadows what is to come in many parts of Asia and beyond.

This research examines the entangled processes through which humans and non-humans have transformed the Yellow Sea’s biology, landscapes, and imaginaries since the mid-20th century until today. Specifically, I excavate these ‘layers of the Anthropocene’ centered on three themes: a) intertidal wetlands subject to a series of interventions including reclamation, preservation, and sustainable use, b) local fishers and conservation practitioners whose histories and practices illuminate that natures do not preexist modernization, and c) sea cucumbers, corals, and cordgrass as pioneers exposing old contradictions and bringing new challenges in Yellow Sea conservation. It employs mixed methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observations, and discourse analysis.

This research reveals that the absence of scientifically-verifiable ‘pristine nature’ has shaped Yellow Sea conservation into an inherently political practice. While having been overshadowed by the ‘imposed’ modern ideals of nature (Neumann 1998), embracing such realities, I argue, have the potential to create spaces to imagine alternative futures in the age of crisis. Vitalizing the entangled politics of conservation, I contend, opens a new way of protecting non-natural natures in the Anthropocene.