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SANCTUARY: FOR NATURE AND THE DEAD

PRESERVING THE KOREAN DEMILITARIZED ZONE

BY WILLIAM B. SHORE

Excerpted from the November/December 2004 WORLD WATCH magazine

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South Korean soldiers stand guard at a gate to the DMZ in Paju, north of Seoul.

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The Cold War briefly grew hot between 1950 and 1953, when the center of the Korean peninsula was devastated by savage conflict. An invading North Korea, backed by Communist Russia and China, was resisted by South Korea, supported by the United

Nations with mainly U.S. troops. The war was halted by a truce—there is still no peace treaty—and a no-man’s land was created to keep the enemy troops apart. That heavily mined and closely watched strip of land is the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). For 51 years, humans have been kept out of most of it.

Korea’s DMZ is the sacred resting place of soldiers and other war victims. Korean people have paid dearly and the DMZ memorializes that tragedy. Preserving the DMZ as a special place is therefore spiritually important.

Moreover, it is equally important environmentally. Excluding humans from the DMZ has allowed an unexpected and extraordinary experiment with nature to unfold. In this four-kilometer-wide corridor, stretching 250 kilometers across the peninsula, wild habitats have luxuriantly rebounded from war’s destruction. The fallow land on the western section has reverted to thick prairie and shrubs. Rich green forests adorn the eastern mountain ranges. Endangered and rare plant and animal species have found homes



Pay per view: South Korean kids on a field trip to the DMZ line up to see North Korea through binoculars.



Red-crowned cranes are sacred to Koreans North and South.

FOR NATURE AND THE DEAD

there. Wildlife is plentiful; people have seen Asian black bears, leopards, musk deer, Amur goral (a kind of goat-antelope), and spotted seals. Some think there are Siberian tigers. According to George Archibald of the International Crane Foundation, rare cranes have returned to the DMZ; perhaps half of the world's 2,000 red-crowned cranes, as well as almost-as-rare white-naped cranes, spend time in the DMZ. Of the 1,000 black-faced spoonbills in the world, 90 percent breed in the DMZ. Crested ibis once lived there and can be re-introduced from China, where the flock has grown to several hundred. About 1,000 black vultures, and probably some Tristram's woodpeckers, also live in the DMZ. The white stork, which has died out in Japan, survives in Korea.

Protection of these migratory birds affects more countries than the Koreas. One expert recently wrote that "with the possibility of reunification between the Koreas, the DMZ may be the most important conservation issue throughout Asia. The potential loss of critical habitat to many endangered species that have become dependent on this habitat poses a great threat."

For ecosystem experts, the DMZ offers a unique lab-

oratory to study nature's self-reclamation. For the Koreas, it offers the last opportunity to re-establish biodiversity in their lands. Both nations have largely been indifferent to their ecosystems, extirpating many species that persist in the DMZ. Though experts have not had access to the DMZ proper, they have found enough evidence to estimate that the DMZ and the partially pro-



A sign praising North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il stands near an army observation post at the DMZ.

Kim Kyung-Hoon/REUTERS © 2003



A North Korean soldier stands guard at the construction site for a new road and railway.

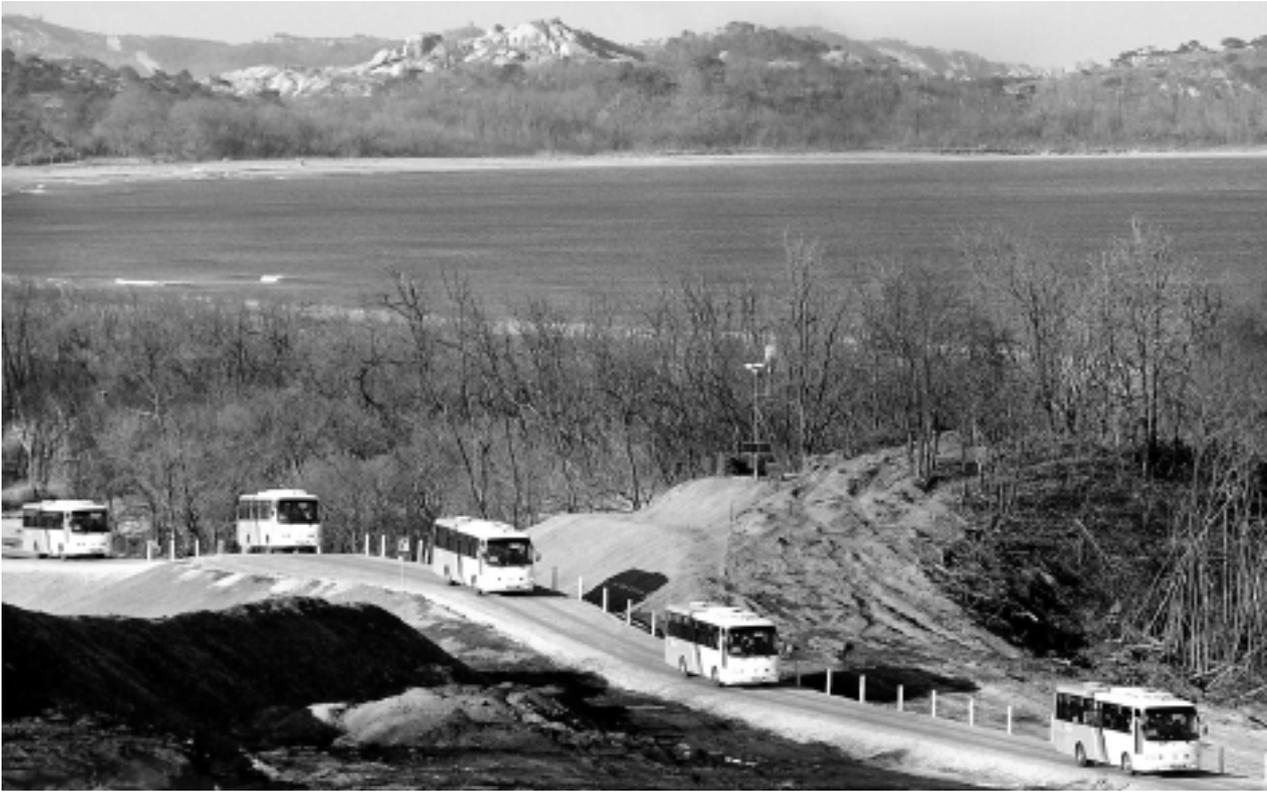


tected adjacent land (the Civilian Control Zone, or CCZ, a farm belt kept partially open as a defense measure) host 52 mammal species, 201 bird species, 28 amphibian reptiles, 67 inland fish species, and 1,194 plant species. Some of them are globally significant, some globally rare and endangered—like the cranes. These can be the reservoir to re-establish lost species north and south.

Apart from species protection, the DMZ and its adjacent CCZ offer startling beauty. Five rivers traverse the DMZ, a vital resource for the future of all Koreans. Mountains range from 700 meters to over 1,600 meters in height. Forests include deciduous and coniferous trees, protecting watersheds that empty into the Yellow Sea to the west. There are lakes, lagoons, sand dunes, mudflats, and wetlands.

The DMZ also is an important source of water and clean air. There is a startling contrast in air quality between the Zone and the rest of the country. Increasing numbers of South Koreans want to roll back the air and water pollution that rapid industrialization has created, and there is strong citizen support for preserving the DMZ as a place of pure water and pure air.

This unique and remarkable nature refuge has been preserved because the two Koreas are still at war; armed soldiers still patrol on both sides and mines threaten invaders. But what will happen when the 51-year-old armistice becomes a peace pact? Then the restless and



North Korean tourist buses take a new highway across the DMZ into South Korea.

opportunistic forces of economic development seem likely to stake their claims to this “unused” land.

That time seems imminent. Despite the U.S.-North Korean standoff over North Korea’s claim to have nuclear weapons, the two Koreas have taken many steps together that affect the DMZ and will lead toward agreement on what will happen there. Two rail lines and two highways are already being re-built through the corridor. Buses run on one of the roads to Mt. Keumgang in North Korea, where a South Korean-built resort receives tourists from the south. (Ironically, this next-to-last Communist country in the world has allowed Hyundai, a global corporation, to control tourism in its glorious national park.) Automobiles will soon be allowed on the roads through the DMZ. Along the eastern highway, North Korean farmers have planted crops in the DMZ and houses have been built. The Zone is also threatened with heavy rail traffic, as rail can carry freight through the DMZ at far lower cost and higher speeds than competing ocean freight. With further North-South reconciliation, there is a possibility of greatly increased shipping on the Han River through the DMZ, threatening white-naped crane habitat.

Environmentalists around the world are organizing to protect the DMZ’s ecosystem, to persuade the two governments that there is more value in that than in paving over the DMZ and urbanizing it. But will they have time?

William B. Shore is a senior associate with the Institute for Urban Systems of the City University of New York and secretary of the DMZ Forum, a non-profit organization founded in 1998 to publicize the environmental value and peace-making potential of the DMZ and to promote the preservation of its ecosystem. Readers interested in more information or in contributing to the Forum’s mission may contact its president, Dr. Seung-ho Lee, at seungho.lee@nyu.edu or 516-466-6168.



The endangered Amur goral, a type of goat-antelope. The animals’ main threat is humans, who prize the meat and make medicines from the organs.