

Korean DMZ A Sanctuary For Birds

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CHORWON, South Korea — The birds don't stop for checkpoints. They flap their wings heedlessly over the earthen embankments, trenches, tank barriers and land mines that define the forbidding frontier between the two Koreas and head straight for the demilitarized zone.

In that no man's land, migrating birds have found a unique avian paradise.

The 150-mile-long, 2½-mile-wide strip severing the peninsula is a favored winter residence for much of the world's population of rare red-crown and white-naped cranes. They are joined by kestrels, geese and black vultures as well as mammals such as Chinese roe deer and an occasional black bear.

Some surveys suggest the presence of endangered Siberian tigers or Amur leopards, although the evidence is about as credible as a sighting of the Loch Ness monster.

Seizing on legends about the exotic flora and fauna of the DMZ, many South Koreans hope that the infamous strip will become better known for its magnificent wildlife than for its associations with war. Last month, the Korea National Tourism Organization announced plans for an eco-tourism district next to the zone.

"The natural habitat for these species has been so damaged elsewhere that they all come here. We have birds coming from Siberia and Manchuria, from Japan and Australia," said Kim Kwi Gon, a professor

of environmental planning at Seoul National University, who is promoting tourism in what he calls the "international biodiversity belt."

The DMZ is one of the few swaths of the Korean peninsula that have been spared the ravages of the last half-century — a time capsule, as it were, of Korea's unspoiled environment.

"After a war that killed millions of people, about the only good thing to come out is this sanctuary for wildlife," said Ke Chung Kim, a professor at the Center for BioDiversity Research at Penn State University.

At least initially, tourists would not be allowed into the DMZ — notwithstanding the half-century that has elapsed since the end of the Korean War, it is still strictly off-limits — but they would enter a civilian-controlled area just to the south where access is now limited mostly to agricultural workers.

The DMZ already attracts about 3 million tourists each year, but they are mostly fascinated by what is widely billed as the most heavily fortified frontier in the world and the last Cold War border.

Under the proposal, the first destination to be developed for tourism is Chorwon, about 60 miles northeast of Seoul, smack in the middle of the peninsula. On a peak known as Ice Cream Mountain, where the landscape was said to be littered with corpses at the end of the war, tourism officials want to build an observatory for bird watching.

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