

The Land That War Protected

By Ke Chung Kim
and Edward O. Wilson

The demilitarized zone, a ribbon of land running 155 miles across the entire Korean peninsula, was established in 1953 to separate the two Koreas and diminish hostile confrontation between them.

During the half century following the Korean War, a new kind of peace has descended on the fallow land: its forests and other wild habitats have rebounded luxuriantly, and with them an abundance of wildlife. Rare and endangered animal and plant species, including leopards and possibly tigers, have increased in population. In addition, the demilitarized zone now offers a secure refuge for endangered migratory birds, most notably white-naped and red-crowned cranes and the black-faced spoonbill. Thus the conflict's unforeseen legacy includes the peninsula's largest and best nature preserve. Fenced off, guarded and mined, nearly the entire zone was until recently a place where no human had set foot since Dwight D. Eisenhower was president.

As conditions ease between the two Koreas, the zone offers a superb opportunity to help cement the peace, and at virtually no cost. If set aside as a wildlife park, it will protect in perpetuity a substantial segment of the region's native biodiversity, a benefit for the Korean people and the world at large. It would be a tribute to the country sometimes called Keum-Su-Gang-San, which means "land of embroidered mountains and rivers." And if consecrated as a peace park, it will serve as exactly the right symbol of the political process that brought the two Koreas back together.

In fact, a preserve carved from the demilitarized zone could be the source for replenishing endangered plants and animals lost to development in both North and South. It could also serve as a laboratory to study nature's resilience. In little more than five decades, the natural world has reclaimed an area devastated by war. There is no comparable place on earth.

However, the window of opportunity

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Turn the Korean DMZ into a nature preserve.

for preservation may be closing. In September the two Koreas signed an agreement to build two rail lines and adjacent highways through the zone. Efforts to remove mines have already begun. Roads are likely to follow, and thereafter harm to the environment.

That would be a tremendous loss, particularly because preserving this refuge and promoting ties between the Koreas are not mutually exclusive. All it takes is planning. Routes could be established to avoid endangered species' habitats, wetlands and flyways. Vehicles crossing the zone could be restricted to the least-polluting fuels. Passengers could be prohibited from getting out in the corridor until the area is explored, its species cataloged and its critical habitat protected. Workers could enter the zone only to build the roads and rail, leaving no other permanent structures.

Environmentally sensitive development is not rocket science. It's standard practice in nature preserve planning and in highway construction in

the United States. In southern Florida, for example, underpasses keep roads from interfering with paths used by panthers, black bears and other animals. Canada built underpasses and overpasses for large and small animals to cross the Trans-Canada highway in Banff National Park.

President Kim Dae Jung of South Korea campaigned for a "sunshine" policy of warmer relations with the North. Mr. Kim, who leaves office in January, likely sees the roads and rail as his contribution toward achieving that aim. That could explain why he left environmental concerns out of the planning process and put the military in charge of the project.

But destroying the last chance to restore the beauty of Keum-Su-Gang-San is a high and unnecessary price. A more lasting foundation for peace would be the common North-South enterprise of a nature preserve. The United Nations should encourage and offer assistance to the two Koreas to form a peace park. Our colleagues in the scientific world could be mobilized to help.

It may seem a forlorn hope that an insular nation with a habit of threatening its neighbors with nuclear weapons would cooperate with the international community (and its enemy of 50 years) to preserve nature. But the benefits are great, the costs small and the contribution to our planet invaluable. □

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