

# Chapter 15

## The Korea DMZ: From a Red Zone to a Deeper Shade of Green

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**Abstract** The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that has divided the Korean peninsula since 1953 is in fact one of the most highly militarized borders in the world, and continues to be a line of tension between North and South Korea. Crossing the peninsula from East to West, the linear enclave represents a cross section of Korean landscapes and cuts through a variety of ecosystems and topographies from the sacred mountain of Keumsangang to the delta of the Han and Imjin Rivers. Embodying the dichotomy of the boundary as the ‘space of the worst and the best’, the DMZ has been described as a Garden of Eden, a Walled-off Paradise, or an Involuntary Park, in reference to the untamed nature that has developed within the cease-fire lines and in the adjacent military areas. The de-territorializing forces of war – destruction, deforestation, mining, human loss – have also engendered the re-territorializations of nature, transforming the DMZ into a precious reserve of biodiversity in the rapidly expanding and urbanizing context of the Korean Peninsula. These valuable ecosystems have been confirmed by an international coalition of scientists, activists and peace-builders, who all agree that a future reconciliation between the two Koreas would undoubtedly threaten the fragile ecosystems and endangered species of the DMZ. This chapter advocates the importance of recognizing and planning the DMZ as a specific and singular territory – through

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a series of prereunification strategies – ensuring that future reunification scenarios will respect the natural balance of the site, and developing an ecological matrix as the foundation for future development and conservation plans.

**Keywords** Buffer zones • No-man’s land • Peace-building • Environmental cooperation • Third landscapes

## **Korea: A Divided Peninsula**

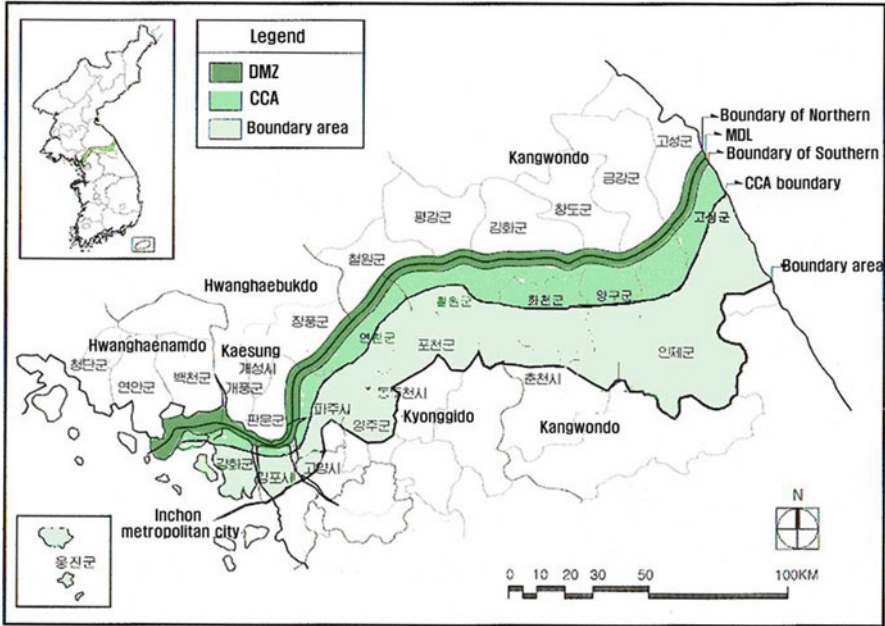
Since the 1953 Armistice Agreement, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) has cut across the Korean peninsula, inscribing a physical rift and a psychological wound in the landscape and its people. Extending for 2 km on either side of the Military Demarcation Line between the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea and the Republic of South Korea, the buffer zone stretches for 248 km along the 38th parallel, covering 600 square miles. This geopolitical fault line disconnects geographies, ecosystems, networks and societies, and reflects the divergent political ideologies and economic systems on both sides. The linear enclave represents a cross-section of Korean landscapes and cuts through a variety of ecosystems and topographies, crossing the peninsula from East to West, from the sacred mountain of Keumsangang to the delta of the Han and Imjin Rivers, traversing five rivers and many ecosystems.

## **The DMZ: A Highly Militarized Red Zone and a Deep Green Garden of Eden**

The DMZ is considered as one of the most dangerous and highly militarized borders in the world. This bright red zone is also a deep shade of green.<sup>1</sup> Embodying the dichotomy of the boundary as the ‘space of the worst and the best’, the DMZ has been described as a Garden of Eden, a Walled-off Paradise, or an Involuntary Park, in reference to the untamed nature that has developed within the cease-fire lines and in the adjacent military areas. The de-territorializing forces of war – destruction, deforestation, mining, human loss, – have also engendered the re-territorializations of nature, transforming the DMZ into a precious reserve of biodiversity in the rapidly expanding and urbanizing context of the Korean Peninsula. As an example, one-third of all red-crowned cranes, the world’s rarest crane species, depend on the DMZ’s wetlands and nearby agricultural fields while

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<sup>1</sup>The authors make reference to Deep Ecology, a holistic philosophy that emphasizes the importance of the ecosystem and natural processes. See Naess and Rothenberg (1990). See also Sessions (1995).



**Fig. 15.1** Map of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) showing the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) and the civilian control areas (Represented for the Republic of Korea only) (Map: Kwi-Gon Kim)

migrating. These positive developments have been confirmed by an international coalition of scientists, activists and peace-builders, and research has identified over 1,200 plant, 50 mammal, 80 fish, and hundreds of bird species, many of which are on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of endangered species (Kim and Cho 2005, Fig. 15.1).

### An Ecological Matrix for a Future Landscape of Memory

A future reconciliation between the two Koreas would undoubtedly threaten the fragile ecosystems and endangered species of the DMZ, as a result of disruptions to the landscape brought about by construction and other development linking the North and the South. This is why it is important that the DMZ be recognized and planned as a specific and singular territory – ensuring that future scenarios will respect the natural balance of the site – through a series of pre-unification strategies that will establish an ecological matrix as the foundation for future plans.

Future visions for the DMZ integrate historical and memorial sites relating to the recent and more distant pasts of the peninsula, including the unexcavated site of

Gungye's Kingdom, Korea's first capital city and a highly symbolic locus for a unified Korea, as well as sites of commemoration to the many Korean and international victims of the Korean War and Cold War. The five rivers that cross the boundary as well as the wetlands enclaved in the DMZ will be integrated into landscape and environmental planning to form the backbone of a conservation scheme for the DMZ. Ecotourism and organic farming projects will ensure sustainable economic activities compatible with nature preservation and ecosystem conservation. The patrol path that runs along the entire length of the DMZ will become the connector of all these landscapes, creating a Memory and Nature Trail for bicycles, pedestrians and low impact vehicles (Grichting 2009).

### **Wetlands and Sacred Cranes: A Joint Project for Conservation in the DMZ**

Research conducted in the DMZ has confirmed the ecological values of this red zone. Today, a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations are working on the project to transform the DMZ into a natural Peace Park, attempting to reunite the two countries along what is left of their common natural heritage and to ensure that future scenarios will respect the natural balance of the site.

We have founded the DMZ International Research Institute to conduct demonstration projects between North and South Korea. Our first project attempts to bring together the two Koreas to designate a wetland as a UNESCO Transboundary Man and Biosphere Reserve (Fig. 15.2).

Wetlands provide habitat for endangered migratory bird species, such as the red-crowned and white-naped cranes. The crane has both a biological and cultural importance within Asia; it is considered a sacred bird of peace that is accompanied



**Fig. 15.2** Wetland in the DMZ (Photo: Kwi-Gon Kim)



**Fig. 15.3** White-naped cranes in the Korean DMZ Civilian Control Area – Cholwon Plains (Photo: Anna Grichting 2009)

by prosperity and friendship. Therefore it could become an important flagship species and a symbol of peace for both North and South Koreans (Fig. 15.3).

This greening in the red zone project, based on scientific research and institutional collaborations, could become a prototype for further scientific and cultural collaborations in the DMZ. Our vision is that it will result in a common landscape of memory and biodiversity that helps foster reconciliation and reunification of a once divided Korean peninsula.

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