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As the DMZ turns 65, a call for Korean peace through conservation (commentary)

Commentary by Russell A. Mittermeier and Michael I. Crowther on 24 August 2018

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- *As relations in the Korean Peninsula improve, there is now an opportunity to establish the DMZ as a globally significant natural site and cultural venue.*
- *Imagine the enduring symbol of hope and collaboration that the DMZ would represent: A shared commitment to a wondrous and sustainable future for generations of people and wildlife to come.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the authors, not necessarily Mongabay.*

As the world continues to watch the high-stakes diplomacy that is unfolding between North Korea, South Korea, and their key allies, there's been wide speculation about the many outcomes that could result from talks of peace. One that has not yet been widely mentioned is the opportunity for the permanent ecological protection of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) — the de facto border between the two nations that just turned 65 years old.

This expanse of mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, and coastlines is just two-and-a-half miles wide by 160 miles long — roughly the size of Rocky Mountain National Park, or one-third the size of the U.S. state of Rhode Island — and because it's been off-limits for nearly 70 years, it is surely the most pristine, intact parcel of natural habitat left on the Korean Peninsula.

Long viewed as an untouchable border between two hostile nations, the DMZ has become an accidental paradise for plants and animals. Its 400 square miles have been largely unmarred by human activities since the 1950s, providing refuge for some 90 threatened or endangered species, including some that are found nowhere else on the planet. It's likely that this area also contains many species new to science, as well as important migratory animals that transit the area.

As relations in the Korean Peninsula improve, there is now an opportunity to establish the DMZ as a globally significant natural site and cultural venue. South Korea has already demonstrated a commitment to conservation by hosting the 2012 IUCN World Conservation Congress and serving as the global headquarters of the Green Climate Fund. It's likely that North Korea has similar interests after observing the economic and diplomatic advantages of conservation: the country recently was admitted to leading global groups such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, and the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP).

But if peace results from ongoing conciliatory efforts, the floodgates will open for ideas to develop the DMZ. Some will look to introduce industry or commercial farming, while others might seek to urbanize the area. A more beneficial long-term strategy is to protect this unique natural habitat by recognizing it as a combined natural and cultural World Heritage Site. As such, the DMZ would immediately attract tourists from around the world, enabling the two countries to showcase a rich Korean legacy while providing a sustainable economic return.

Good models for sustainable ecotourism can be found around the world. The Virunga volcanoes in Rwanda provide a great example of what's possible. There, ecotourists pay $1,500 for gorilla trekking permits that allow them to hike through the landscapes and view the great apes for just one hour each day. And there are huge additional benefits to hotels, restaurants, transportation systems, guide services, and all the other activities and amenities associated with hubs of tourism. That means more dollars in the pockets of local communities and residents and stronger support for health, education, and other social programs.

Simply put, conservation pays, and countries that are partnering to protect threatened species, such as Costa Rica, Tanzania, and Kenya, are reaping the rewards. If North and South Korea can reach a shared ecological vision for the DMZ, they can yield new sources of revenue by tapping into people's desire to commune with wildlife in wild places.

Fortunately, there is promising conservation work already underway in the DMZ. Our colleague and winner of the 2006 Indianapolis Prize, Dr. George Archibald, and his team at the International Crane Foundation (ICF), have made significant strides in collaborating with officials from North and South Korea to protect highly endangered species of cranes, which depend on neighboring food sources and roost in the DMZ because of its open, quiet natural spaces that are devoid of the human footprint. Cranes have long been recognized as an international symbol of peace, and are iconic in the cultures of both Koreas. Once peace between the Koreas becomes a reality, preserving their natural habitat will become even more important.

The time is now to get in front of the development pressure that's sure to come from peace on the Korean Peninsula. By building a coalition of Koreans, Americans, and leading conservation scientists, we can make a strong case for the transformation of the DMZ — once one of the most perilous areas on the planet — into a World Heritage Site. Imagine the enduring symbol of hope and collaboration that the DMZ would represent: A shared commitment to a wondrous and sustainable future for generations of people and wildlife to come.

Reconciliation is far from guaranteed, but the goodwill gestures underway indicate that leaders are at least open to discussions about how they can work together. The economic and ecological benefits of conservation and ecotourism provide fertile ground for partnership. And wouldn't it be a wonderful feather in the caps of all the leaders involved if they could add this permanent contribution to the world as part of their shared legacy?

Hooded crane adult and chick. The International Crane Foundation has worked with officials from both North and South Korea to protect endangered species of cranes. Photo by Ted Thousand.

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