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Wildlife thrives in 'the most dangerous place on Earth'

The border between South and North Korea is full of landmines and patrolled by millions of armed soldiers, but it's also home to thousands of flourishing species.



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Alan Weisman visited the DMZ as part of his research for his book 'The World Without Us.' (Photo: Christopher John 55/flickr)

Former President Bill Clinton called the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the 155-mile border between South and North Korea, "the most dangerous place on Earth."

Created in 1953 during armistice negotiations, it's the world's most fortified military border, lined with soldiers, concertina wire and countless landmines.

During a recent visit to the Joint Security Area — the only portion of the DMZ where South and North Korean soldiers stand face-to-face — I signed a declaration acknowledging that my visit would "entail entrance into a hostile area and the possibility of injury or death as a direct result of enemy action."

As a North Korean soldier snapped photos of my tour group, we were instructed not to point or gesture, and an American soldier informed us that North Korea could level the South Korean capital of Seoul in minutes.

Despite the truce, the two countries remain at war.



North Korea as viewed from the Joint Security Area. The three South Korean guards visible (with their backs to the camera) have black belts in martial arts and stand facing North Korea in a modified Tae Kwon Do stance. (Photo: Laura Moss)

Where no man goes, wildlife thrives

But while the DMZ is one of the most dangerous places for humans, it's one of the safest places for wildlife.

The armistice agreement created a buffer zone — more than a mile on either side of the military demarcation line — from which troops and military equipment are

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The DMZ encompasses nearly 400 square miles of protected ecosystems, and the fact that mankind hasn't touched the area in more than 60 years has allowed plant and animal species to flourish.

The DMZ and surrounding area incorporates a variety of landscapes, from mountains to wetlands, and nearly 3,000 species — many which are extinct or endangered elsewhere on the peninsula — thrive there amid the landmines.

Otters, cranes, deer, [Amur leopards](#), Asiatic black bears and thousands of other animals have been spotted roaming the region. There's even evidence of Siberian tigers, a species widely believed to be extinct on the peninsula.

In 1976, the South Korean government even designated one area along the DMZ a national monument after studies determined the region's importance to the survival of white-naped cranes.



However, because no one ventures into the DMZ, much of its biodiversity is speculative. It's primarily based on studies conducted in the Civilian Control Zone, a 10-mile restricted stretch of land along the DMZ's southern boundary.

Rebranding the DMZ

While supporters of a reunified Korea have long promoted the preservation of the DMZ for parks and ecotourism, some areas near the border in South Korea already offer a glimpse of the region's ecological wonders.

South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism collaborated with the Korea Tourism Organization to develop part of the buffer along the military demarcation line into a "Peace and Life Zone" (PLZ).

"The DMZ has been no man's land for decades, making its well-preserved natural surroundings a perfect site for eco-tourism," Park Mee-Ja, a director of the Environment Ministry, [told AFP](#).

According to Visit Korea, "visitors can walk or drive along this 545km-long-course and on special occasions will be able to go right up to the border of the DMZ itself. After decades of seclusion, the PLZ, with its incredible biodiversity and profound history, is awaiting discovery."

There's even a [DMZ Bicycle Tour](#) offered twice a month. Participants don brightly colored vests and pedal through the Civilian Controlled Zone, getting a glimpse of the border between South and North Korea.

Still, the potential for danger seems to be the biggest draw for visitors to the region.

Millions of visitors sign up for DMZ tours so they can trek through infiltration tunnels the communist regime dug beneath the DMZ and visit observatories for a peek at secretive North Korea.



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View of North Korea from South Korea's Dora Observatory (Photo: Laura Moss)

But South Korea hopes it can rebrand border tourism with the PLZ.

"The DMZ has been a place of restriction and high security," Park told [BBC](#). "But by turning this into an ecotourism zone, I think it will change how people see it. Rather than come to see the world's last divided country, in future we hope that more people will come here to experience the wildlife."

Get a closer look at the DMZ in the video below.



Laura Moss writes about a variety of topics with a focus on animals, science, language and culture. But she mostly writes about cats.

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