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How to cite:

Kim, Eleana. "The Flight of Cranes: Militarized Nature at the North Korea–South Korea Border." In: "Asian Environments: Connections across Borders, Landscapes, and Times," edited by Ursula Münster, Shiho Satsuka, and Gunnel Cederlöf, *RCC Perspectives* 2014, no. 3, 65–70.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

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### **The Flight of Cranes: Militarized Nature at the North Korea–South Korea border**

The Korean demilitarized zone (DMZ), a 4-kilometer-wide, 250-kilometer-long buffer area that divides North and South Korea is, despite its name, the most heavily militarized border in the world, with more than a million soldiers on either side and a million landmines within it. Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the DMZ has represented a scar of war and national division. Yet in the context of global climate change and mass species extinction, this “no-man’s-land” has been attracting intense interest in South Korea and internationally in the last few years as an ecologically exceptional space of “nature’s restoration.” In light of evidence that the DMZ area, which contains the adjacent Civilian Control Zone (CCZ), hosts more than 13 percent of all species on the Korean peninsula, including 106 rare and endangered species, efforts to preserve the DMZ area’s environment and to capitalize on its associations with nature and biodiversity have intensified on the southern side of the border. South Korean state- and market-based sustainable development projects promote the DMZ as the “Peace and Life Zone,” or PLZ, framing the DMZ’s ecology as “pure nature” (life) or as politically transcendent (peace). In contrast, my ethnographic research approaches the DMZ as a “natural-cultural contact zone” (Helmreich and Kirskey 2010)—constituted by multiple practices, politics, and social relations among scientists, policy makers, local residents, ecologists, environmentalists, tourists, as well as plants, birds, mammals, and other elements of landscape—to explore how a militarized “no-man’s-land” is being refigured as a space of unique ecological value.

That the DMZ, a space of political and military exception, is now being framed as a site of ecological exception illuminates similar processes across the planet (cf. Masco 2004). At a moment in which “nature” is being subsumed by capital in ever more intensified ways, the isolation of space by states in the name of national or global security is increasingly converging with issues of habitat conservation and biodiversity preservation (e.g., Lachman et al. 2007). In the case of the Korean DMZ, the most heavily militarized border in the world maintains peace on the peninsula through the production of an untraversable territory where rare and endangered species dwell in the midst of an estimated one million landmines. Rather than considering spaces like the DMZ to be

“ironic” juxtapositions of a purified “nature” coexisting with or symbolically overcoming the human propensity for war, I argue that these are hybrid naturalcultural spaces that emerge out of interlinked processes of global capitalism and militarization. In the following case, I focus on how state infrastructures of spatial control and restricted human crossing generate new “natures” that are deeply political and enmeshed in evolving relations among humans and nonhumans.

### **Migratory Crane Village**

In February 2012, an ice-fishing tournament took place at the T’ogyo Reservoir in Yangji village, Cheolwon County, a few kilometers from the border with North Korea. Yangji village is located within the Civilian Control Zone, a highly restricted agricultural and residential area that borders the southern edge of the Korean DMZ and is also the winter habitat for a number of endangered migratory bird species that live in the DMZ area between October and March. The most iconic and rare species found there is the red-crowned crane (*Grus japonensis*), which travels six hundred miles every year along the East Asian–Australasian Flyway from its breeding habitats in northeastern Russia to wintering sites in southeastern China and the Korean border area. More than one-third of the declining global population of 2,800 red-crowned cranes winter in the DMZ area, in Cheolwon and the neighboring Yeoncheon County, a fact that enhances the region’s exoticism. Yangji village is the main destination for cranes and other endangered birds and thus also refers to itself as “Migratory Bird Village.” It holds special stewardship over these precious species because of the adjacent T’ogyo Reservoir as well as the Hant’ang River and hot springs that serve as the birds’ primary resting areas. Hundreds of red-crowned cranes, along with the slightly less endangered white-naped crane and the least endangered white-fronted goose, sleep on the reservoir from early evening until daybreak. When they wake, the birds fly south of the reservoir to feed on leftover grains in the fields and rice paddies of Yangji and other farming villages that populate the CCZ in the Cheolwon plain.

There is a long history of cranes’ cultural significance in East Asia because of their majestic beauty and because their habits and social practices are easily anthropomorphized. This, combined with their endangered status and winter stopovers in the

DMZ area, has made their conservation particularly appealing to bird lovers, national and local governments, and everyday citizens. The endangered cranes are enrolled as main characters in the state's symbolic resignification of the DMZ as the PLZ because they literally transcend geopolitical borders, providing hope for the surmounting of the ideological differences that separate North and South.

The T'ogyo Reservoir itself reveals the history of antagonisms between the two Koreas—it was constructed by the South Korean state in 1976 in response to the North's blocking of tributaries from Bongnae Lake, which cut off the water supply to agricultural villages in the South. Indeed, conflicts over water continue between North and South Korea, as two major rivers flow south across the border, and the unannounced opening of dams in the North have led to sudden flooding and deaths in the south. Access to the reservoir is tightly controlled by the South Korean military for reasons of national security and to protect against environmental pollution, and has thus always been off limits to civilians.

The case of the reservoir exemplifies how the political ecology of the division and the well-being of the cranes are deeply interlinked. Modernization processes on both sides of the border and resultant ecological pressures have likewise affected the centuries-long adaptation of cranes to human activities. Most notably, around the time of the North Korean famine in the mid-1990s, the numbers of migratory birds, including white-naped and red-crowned cranes, began increasing in Cheolwon. Farmers had mixed reactions, but many were encouraged by ornithologists and ecologists to leave the straw after the harvest so that the birds could glean the leftover rice grains. Although these programs have been largely successful, with over 95 percent of migrating cranes coming regularly to the border area, experts are concerned about multiplying threats to the cranes' habitats and safety. Risks include power lines, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and the reduction of feeding and resting areas as seasonal rice paddies are replaced with year-round greenhouses for specialty produce like bell peppers and blueberries. Moreover, buildings and infrastructures have been built in anticipation of a boom in ecotourism to the area, meaning cement-tile parking lots have covered over former wetlands, and paved roads divide up the territory and invite more vehicular traffic (Yoo et al. 2011).

### **Auspices of Endangerment**

An ice-fishing tournament on the T'ogyo Reservoir provoked outrage from South Korean environmental groups, who accused the Ministry of Environment of “dereliction of duty to protect endangered species,” as one press release announced. They claimed that the T'ogyo Reservoir, a habitat for the endangered red-crowned crane, would be “destroyed” by the ice-fishing competition. In response, the mayor of Cheolwon and the event organizers delayed the start of the competition by one hour, from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m., to allow time for the birds to get up and head out for the day. The activists and ecologists were still vigilant, believing that the competition would inevitably lead to deleterious effects on the cranes and their habitat. Outfitted with recording equipment, they arrived at the reservoir that morning at 7 a.m. to document evidence of the disruptive and damaging effects of the event. They counted the birds using powerful scopes, noting their species by size and color, and recording the direction of their flight.

Although most of the birds had left by 8:30, there were still a few stragglers remaining when the gates were opened for the fishing participants. A total of nine hundred people participated in the tournament, and they used large picks and even gasoline-powered saws to carve out holes in the ice. The activists noted that not all the birds had left by the time the people arrived, and recorded the sounds and measured the decibel levels of the machinery, which was supposed to have been banned by the organizers.

Competing interpretations of the birds' behavior were apparent among actors of different political persuasions. Local politicians insisted that the birds would not be disturbed, whereas environmentalists insisted that their well-being was being sacrificed for tourism income. Persistent tensions between local residents and urban environmental activists were also rekindled around this controversy. Mr. Chung, a rice farmer and head of the Crane Protection Association of Yangji village, asserted his lay expertise as someone who monitors the birds on a regular basis. He underscored the fact that the cranes don't always use the same area for resting, and that there is considerable variation in their movements, depending upon possible predators. Moreover, they hadn't used the reservoir as a resting area for many years, and they usually departed by 7 a.m. He was particularly annoyed that “outsiders” and activists assumed that the villagers were ignorantly “harming nature.” Encouraged by the central and local governments to align their interests with eco-tourism development as a way to en-

sure their own survival, Mr. Chung and other residents of the economically stagnant border-area villages supported the ice-fishing tournament as part of a broader effort to enliven the local economy and the social life of the community, especially during the slow winter months after the harvest season.



Birds in flight at the DMZ zone, 2012. (Courtesy of the author.)

In this and other controversies over crane habitats along the border, observations of birds' behaviors are invariably interpreted in political terms in which there are only two possibilities—that the birds are being negatively affected, or that they are not being affected at all. Whether the birds appeared or did not, and whether they flew in one direction or another, were interpretive moments for the activists who literally used them as auspices (from the ancient divination practice of reading flight patterns of birds). Rather than divining the fate of human lives, however, activists read their flight patterns as signs of inauspicious avian futures, connoting stress, threat, and possibly even death and extinction. These were, however, rather presentist interpretations. These cranes, in fact, have exhibited rather remarkable adaptations to the conditions of the national division. After all, they had adapted to utilizing the reservoir as a habitat in response to famine conditions in North Korea and hospitable feeding programs in Yangji village.

The DMZ exemplifies the contemporary convergence of environmental protection and militarized “no-man’s-lands,” drawing attention to how infrastructures of the milita-

rized border become naturalized such that multiple actors with heterogeneous interests can construe the DMZ as ecologically “pure” and a man-made reservoir can be framed as a space of nature that must be protected and preserved. Yet, as I have shown, rather than a pristine space of nature’s return, the DMZ is a hybrid landscape marked by political antagonism, water wars, man-made lakes, state-aggravated famine, global-warming-induced floods, and avian flyways. Like other militarized spaces framed as ecologically valuable, the DMZ must be viewed as a naturalcultural borderland that emerges out of multispecies encounters and relations of contestation, cooperation, and adaptation.

Birds are often viewed as important indicator species that can signal environmental change or ecosystem health. In this paper, I suggest that we can think of cranes as indicator species of naturalcultural borderlands, and as actors that engender new political ecologies and social relations. State narratives interpret their lines of flight as hopeful symbols of political transcendence, but these cranes also generate and reveal other lines of difference, creating social conflict, troubling human perception and rationality, and introducing doubt and indeterminacy into narratives of “nature” and human exceptionalism.

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