

The Exquisite Corpses of Nature and History: The Case of the Korean DMZ

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Environmental protection in the Korean DMZ is purely accidental. In 1953, no one gave a thought to protecting wildlife when a temporary truce halted the fighting there. Instead, North and South Korea and their respective allies wanted only to end the human savagery that had killed 10 percent of the peninsula's civilian population and resulted in military casualties numbering, on one side, 900,000 Chinese and 520,000 North Korean troops, and, on the other, 400,000 United Nations troops.¹ The war began on 25 June 1950 when North Korea backed by the Soviet Union and the Chinese invaded South Korea in an attempt to reunify the nation, a nation divided in the last days of World War II. The 1953 truce, still in effect today, created a narrow no-man's land roughly along the 38th parallel where no army is supposed to go. Although called the Demilitarized Zone or DMZ, this thin ribbon of territory is decidedly militarized. As the American GIs there say, "there ain't no D in the DMZ."² Unlike every other inch of dry land on the planet besides Antarctica, the Korean DMZ falls outside the control of any single military or any single nation. It is truly a no-man's land. Reckless human violence has necessitated the evacuation of all human beings, and the unintended result is a zone left free for other species. Although the consequences of the continued low-grade war have been tragic for

humans, other creatures have flourished because of our relative absence.

Two aspects of this situation fascinate me: the accidental nature of this area's ecological salvation and the difficulties historians face as we try to represent this accidental quality. While making meaning out of the chaos of human history has always been difficult, the addition of physical forces, vast amounts of time, and the activities of non-human species magnify the complexity of our disciplinary enterprise, stretching it perhaps beyond recognition. In this essay, I will look first at the DMZ fauna and the human actions (and non-actions) that produced this "treasure house of ecosystems."³ Then, I will consider the sheer randomness of the natural and political forces that have come together over the past sixty years to save a few creatures and a bit of land from devastation on a peninsula in northeast Asia and how that randomness challenges the separation of history from nature, a separation that in many ways undergirds the discipline. Oddities abound on all levels, material and abstract.

Animals

Let me begin with the Amur goral (*Naemorhedus caudatus raddeanus*).



Amur Goral. Courtesy Hall L. Healey

The goral is sort of like a goat and sort of like an antelope. Referred to as a “fossil animal,” it retains many characteristics found in its distant ancestors. Not much is known about these rare creatures, although in 2002 a team of Italian and South Korean scientists (from Trento and Gangwon provinces, respectively) began a three year study. Apparently your average Amur Goral spends most of its time curled up on a mountain ledge, nibbling on snow-covered twigs, conserving energy under its heavy brown coat. In the near future, this snow will likely disappear except from the highest peaks due to global warming.⁴ The goral observes the world and its little group of 15 to 30 similarly engaged companions from under short, backwards-curving horns. This lack of dynamism may not make for exciting video footage, but given the million or so landmines in the Korean DMZ, inactivity is surely an advantage.



Amur Goral in Springtime

During warmer seasons, the Amur Goral, weighing between 25 and 40 kilograms (55 and 88 lbs.), treads (gingerly, one hopes, given the explosives) down the slopes of the DMZ’s high mountains to graze on foliage and acorns, and, more peculiarly, to drink seawater. Another oddity is that female gorals have four functional breasts, unlike the females in related species and despite having no more than two offspring at a time. In short, these animals’ peculiarities underscore the sheer contingency of the evolutionary process, a creature that is the product of no one’s imagination, no one’s design, and continues to exist by sheer good luck.⁵

As an aside, it might be pointed out that the gorals’ behavior is not nearly as peculiar (and much more benign) than that of its principal enemy, human beings, who like to eat their fetuses for their alleged medicinal benefits. Indeed, along with habitat loss, the biggest danger to the few goral outside the DMZ is poaching. The gluttony for goral fetuses is a real threat to this species where females give birth to only one or two kids a year after a long, 230 day gestation period. Current estimates of the long-tailed Amur Goral population in the DMZ and a few other areas in northeast Asia puts the number at about 700 to 800, making this odd creature officially endangered as are many of the fifty-some mammals there

including the Asian Black Bear.



Asiatic Black Bear. Courtesy Hall L. Healey

However, South Korea has awarded the goral its own stamp and commemorative coin.⁶

Unlike the goral with its limited range, many of the DMZ's birds are migratory, carving out vast territories while still dependent on the DMZ.



White Cranes

Only fifteen species of crane remain worldwide. For three of them, the Korean DMZ is essential to their survival, providing winter

habitat and resting areas, and for several others very important. Taken together, migratory bird species create a different template for organizing the landscape, one that defies human territorial markers and stretches from the South Pole to the North, their frail existence dependent on dozens of human governmental entities.⁷ While the cries of birds in the early morning are still rich enough to awe ornithologists, human encroachment has already emptied former habitats outside the DMZ, forcing the birds into smaller areas within it.



Birds in Flight in the Togyo Reservoir, Cheorwon County, CCZ. Courtesy Hall L. Healy

The Black-faced Spoonbill is less charismatic than the cranes.



Black-Faced Spoonbills

It does not symbolize longevity, monogamy, spirituality, nobility, or good fortune as its more elegant cousins do, but it is an endearing creature nonetheless. Like the cranes, the spoonbill also creates a transnational flyway from the wintering sites in Taiwan, Vietnam, and the New Territories of Hong Kong to the DMZ.⁸ Their favorite Korean islets are Yudo and Yodo on the western side of the peninsula. The valiantly optimistic Korean biologist, Dr. Lee Kisup, reports a slight increase in numbers of breeding pairs on these islets from one hundred in 2003 to three hundred in 2006. Alas, these couples did not all raise chicks. Even Lee dims his optimism to report that of the 104 pairs on the islet of Yudo, none produced offspring in 2006, though no one knows the reason why.⁹

The watery domains of marine species complement the birds' airy territories in defying human boundaries.



Brown-Spotted Seal

The endangered brown spotted seals seem, although it is not certain, to traverse the Yellow Sea spending the spring, summer, and autumn feeding along the west coast of the DMZ and returning in winter to their breeding grounds in China in October. Likewise, whale migration maps a vast area of ocean, also regardless of national borders, but reliant on the feeding grounds along the DMZ's eastern coast. The

Korea-Okhotsk Gray Whale has now been designated a "Natural Monument" by the Cultural Heritage Administration of South Korea, an official procedure redounding in ironies: the irony of a mobile, living monument (monuments being generally understood as fixed markers reifying dead glories); the irony of a natural species claimed as cultural heritage; and, finally, the irony of the South Korean government declaring dominion over a species whose very name indicates its transnational existence between Korean and Russia. But irony aside, the DMZ for marine animals as for land dwellers and migratory birds is crucial to survival.

According to one reckoning, the DMZ shelters in one way or another 52 species of mammals, 201 of birds, 28 of amphibian and reptiles, 100 of fresh water fish plus uncounted ocean species, 602 species of insects, 282 species of mushrooms and other fungi, and 1597 taxa of vascular plants.¹⁰ Telling the story of their activities and place in the world, their emergence as species and the delicate balance that supports their continued existence is surely crucial to understanding the value of the DMZ, but is telling this story the work of historians? If so, what does it do to our ideas of agency when the agents are non-human, of time when it involves millennia, and of place when the territories spill beyond and above human borders? I will return to these questions, but let me briefly consider the political history of the DMZ, a story well within the traditions of the discipline.

Land

The Korean DMZ is only four kilometers wide and 250 kilometers long, bisecting the peninsula along the thirty-eighth parallel. On one side is impoverished, secretive North Korea (the DPRK or Democratic People's Republic of Korea). On the other side is South Korea (the ROK or the Republic of Korea), a modern industrial state with the world's eleventh

largest economy. Immediately south of the DMZ's border is an area called the Civilian Control Zone or the CCZ (sometimes referred to as the Civilian Control Area or CCA) which is currently 10 to 20 kilometers wide.¹¹



Looking North across the CCZ. Courtesy Hall L. Healy

No one is permitted to live in the CCZ for security reasons, but farmers are allowed to enter to plant crops and harvest them. They then leave the gleanings to migratory birds, especially cranes, who flourish in the deserted fields.

Apparently, the line dividing the peninsula was quite casually drawn. Certainly it was drawn without reference to biodiversity.



Map of Korean Peninsula

On the night of August 10, 1945, as Soviet forces finally entered the war against imperial Japan, two young colonels, Dean Rusk and Charles H. Bonesteel, were told to partition the peninsula, carving out U.S. and U.S.S.R. zones of occupation. Without particular knowledge of Korea or even a precise map, Rusk and Bonesteel sliced it like a birthday cake, leaving the capital in the south and pushing in the knife a tad further north than they actually believed would be acceptable to the Soviets. In the event, the Soviets made no objections and halted at the agreed upon line.¹² In 1950, things changed. North Korean leader Kim Il Sung persuaded Stalin to support his invasion of South Korea. When the horrific fighting played itself out in exhaustion, the Armistice Agreement of July 27 1953 established the DMZ pretty much along the same 38th parallel where the original partition ran.



Alfred Eisenstaedt. The 38th Parallel, 1953

In its early days, it was hardly more than a slab of plywood across the road. Today, it is heavily fortified.

Given all this activity, the DMZ is hardly a sanctuary in the sense of an undisturbed terrain, glorying under the dust of ages. It was farmland for an estimated 5,000 years and is currently full of deserted villages. The bones of tens of thousands of men still lie unburied between the lines, and military hardware litters the ground. Even today, army operations continue; military personnel are killed; and, the unresolved state of hostilities molds and disturbs the ecosystem. Forest fires, for instance, are lit for site clearing, and the North assiduously tunnels under the soil, creating military conduits that could flood South Korea with tens of thousands of North Korean troops in a few hours.¹³ Nevertheless, a tense semi-peace has reigned for almost sixty years inside

the lines drawn by fear.

The semi-peace has preserved geographical features as well as fauna. The land of the DMZ and CCZ can be divided into four geographical zones: (1) the east coast region of lagoons, wetlands, and valleys, (2) the mid-eastern mountains and highland moors, (3) the inland mid-west region of the upper Hantan river watershed and lava plateau, and (4) the west coast hills, salt marshes and islands, each with its own peculiarities.¹⁴ Like the preservation of the animals of the DMZ, the preservation of this landscape is unintentional. Some agents in its creation are non-human physical forces like tectonic plates, water, and wind over eons of time and others are the usual suspects of human history like eager colonels, but neither non-human nor human entities willed the preservation of lagoons, high moors, or free-running rivers.



The DMZ with Barbed Wire. Courtesy of Green Korea United

People and Politics

When we turn from the animals, land, and unintended consequences of Cold War politics to the environmentalists, we shift quite abruptly to the terrain of conscious agency, dedicated activity, and limited time frames. Historians are particularly comfortable here. People make plans to protect the environment; organizations and nations produce publications

and archives; the time frame narrows from millions of years to months. Currently, the interests and concerns of governments, armies, and environmentalists serendipitously coalesce to protect the DMZ from human predation, but this could change overnight as the two countries come to terms. The goal of the conservationists is to turn serendipity into policy. They have a difficult task. An established peace, the rationalization of economic interests, concerns about North Korean poverty, and the imperatives of cultural unity could very well wipe “clean” the DMZ’s biological efflorescence and homogenize its diverse territory into modern grids of suburb and highway. Indeed, very little would stand in the way of this predation. According to the 2005 Yale Environmental Sustainability Index, the two Koreas do not get high marks for environmental stewardship. South Korea ranks 122nd and North Korea is in last place out of the 146 countries studied for their ability to protect their environments over the next several decades.¹⁵

South Korea’s low ranking is surprising given the vibrant environmental movement that sprang up as part of the democratization movement of the 1980s. By 2004, about half of the 24,000 registered NGOs in South Korea were environmental groups.¹⁶ However, according to South Korean sociologist Lee Hongkyun, the population’s seemingly high-level of environmental awareness is undercut by their inadequate recognition of the need to change their own behavior. Instead, South Koreans revel in increasing rates of personal consumption, while blaming environmental degradation on corporations and government policies catering to the very consumption they desire. As Lee puts it, South “Korean society seeks growth and expansion of the private space rather than preservation of shared space, i.e. the environment. They are unwilling to restrict the expansion of the private space in order to preserve shared space.”¹⁷ As for North Korea, its autarkic ideology of self-reliance

(*juche*) does not appear to encompass a self-sustaining environment. Immediately after the war, through ruthless exploitation of mineral resources and forests, its economy soared. For the first twenty-five postwar years, North Korea was far richer than South Korea. Now both the economy and the environment are devastated.¹⁸ As Peter Hayes has noted recently, the degradation of the North Korean environment has accelerated since the early 1990s with the total forested area falling by roughly one-third over 15 years.¹⁹ It appears that neither mindless growth nor dire poverty has spurred heightened concern for resource conservation.

Today, cooperation between the Koreas grows by fits and starts with bad environmental consequences for the DMZ. Already overland highways and railways traverse the DMZ and promote “reconciliation, economic cooperation, and cultural and tourist exchanges”²⁰ The South Korean Hyundai Corporation in partnership with the North Korean government has built an industrial park within sight of the DMZ.²¹ The Diamond Mountain resort, located just north of the DMZ, has hosted upwards of 1.9 million visitors, most of them South Korean, since opening in 1998.



Tour buses moving through the DMZ

These visits were suspended in July 2008 when a North Korean guard shot in the back and killed a middle-aged tourist as she walked down the beach.²² And yet, as of 2009, there were no systematic studies of the DMZ's ecological resources. Time for a comprehensive evaluation of the area's biodiversity is running out since South Korean scientists already report that "the DMZ and neighboring CCA have been damaged to the extent that significant wetland and forested areas have been lost."²³ Compared with the evolutionary time frame required to produce a "fossil animal" like the Amur Goral, the temporal scale of the actions required to preserve the peninsula's biodiversity are but a blink of the eye.

The most concerted organized effort to forestall

ecological destruction is the called the DMZ Forum, founded in 1998 by Korean-American scientists, Dr. Ke Chung Kim and Dr. Seung Ho Lee. The DMZ Forum takes a three-pronged approach: conservation, sustainable agriculture, and economic growth. It aims to turn the DMZ into a nature reserve under the auspices of UNESCO, while coping with the economic trauma bound to occur were the two disparate systems of North and South to integrate further. German reunification, it will be remembered, was hampered by the lack of economic parity, but East Germany's economy was at least a third the size of West Germany's whereas North Korea's economy is estimated to be only about one thirtieth the size of South Korea's. If this statistic is even approximately correct, reunification would be economically harrowing and the pressure to develop every possible resource would immediately menace the creatures of the DMZ.



Hall L. Healy, President DMZ Forum

The DMZ Coalition, an offshoot of the DMZ Forum, offers itself as an umbrella organization for everyone interested in protecting Korea's unique resources. Its hodge-podge of about thirty individuals and organizations comes from all over the world, but, mindful of Korean national pride and prerogatives, the DMZ Coalition aims to place itself at the service of the Korean people, aiding rather than directing their conservation efforts. As a group, DMZ

Coalition members are almost as diverse as the flora and fauna they want to protect. Four South Korean organizations have joined, including a government research institute and the municipal government of Hwacheon, a county abutting the DMZ.

American members include the current President of the DMZ Forum, L. Hall Healy, various universities—Harvard, Tufts, and Syracuse—and NGOs including the Sierra Club and the National Resources Defense Council. Ted Turner, the media mogul, is also a member of the Coalition and is generous in his support. The International Crane Foundation headquartered in Baraboo, Wisconsin participates enthusiastically. One of its co-founders, George Archibald, saw the last Crested Ibis in South Korea in the late 1970s. Japanese ministries have not yet shown an interest despite the fact that Red-Crowned Cranes are so beloved in Japan. However, several Japanese individuals and non-governmental organizations belong to the DMZ Coalition. The Coalition has even drawn members from South Africa’s Peace Parks group, the world’s foremost implementer of transboundary nature reserves. In short, the people and organizations in the DMZ Coalition come from many walks of life, many countries, and many callings. Through fortuitous circumstances, these quirky groups cohere in finding the DMZ a vital place.

But for all their efforts, the environmentalists, as compared with the military, have done nothing as yet toward saving the DMZ’s biodiversity.²⁴ The paradox is that the preservation of these creatures and landscapes has so far rested not with mindful economic development nor with environmental activists but with armies. As long as North Korea does not carry out its threats to turn South Korea into a “sea of fire” or a “heap of ashes,” cold animosity preserves biodiversity. The dreadful truth is that the salvation of countless non-humans lies in human hostility. The absence of

our species means the presence of others. From the perspective of the goral, internecine human hatred looks a lot like love.

But, my focus so far on environmental groups and the military standoff is insufficient. A more global view is necessary to truly understand the pressures weighing on the tiny strip of land between the Koreas. These pressures transcend national boundaries, transnational organizations, and human will, just as do the migrating spoonbills. China, Russia, Japan and the United States are included in the Six Party Talks, but those nations are only part of the weight. The multiplication of the human species from 1.6 billion in 1900 to over 6.6 billion impinges on this tiny strip of land. The fate of the approximately 3,000 non-human species in the DMZ is tied to that of the other species threatened with extinction around the planet, where The International Union for Conservation of Nature estimates that 40 percent of all organisms are currently endangered. The greenhouse gases that sweep over the peninsula come from thousands of miles away; the Korean peninsula lies within warming oceans; the planet spins in an uncomprehending cosmos. In one sense, every entity, living and non-living, has impact. In one sense, all the universe impinges on this fragile landscape.

History: Problems of Agency and Narrative

What are historians to make of all these marvelously idiosyncratic animals, geographical forms, individuals, non-state, state, and multinational organizations? The numbers multiply almost to infinity like the bodhisattva of an esoteric mandala, the past, present and future, the human and the non-human, sentient beings and non-biological energies. Who are the agents of this history when purposeless evolutionary pressures, instinctual responses, casual acts, and passionate deliberations all shape the narrative? Where does this history take place

with so many territories mapped by so many different creatures and physical forces? What is the time frame when eons of evolution and yesterday's diplomatic initiatives both matter? What does it suggest to us when the narratives are so radically at odds? After all, the DMZ is a comedy of errors from the point of view of the gorals; a sixty-year tragedy from the point of view of the Koreans; a necessary evil from the perspective of American policy; an emblem of U.S. failure in the eyes of historian Bruce Cumings; a triumph for cranes; and, from the point of view of geology and physics, just another set of circumstances best conveyed without narrative tropes. Can a history encompass all this and yet remain a history? Environmental history's multiplication and transformation of central tools of the discipline--agency and narrative--threaten the discipline's very foundations, and many environmental historians do not realize how radical this challenge is.

Take, for instance, environmental historian Ted Steinberg. Steinberg argues that if we focus on the natural environment--for example, if we pay attention to the working class's roaming pigs in early-nineteenth century American cities--and take "an ecologically minded and socially sensitive approach," we will understand social networks better and, because of this, we'll be able to put history "back together again."²⁵ As Steinberg sees it, history, like Humpty Dumpty, lies in pieces--political, intellectual, and economic histories, histories of sexuality, class, race, and gender--and all that is required is "the natural world" to make it whole again. Similarly, historian John McNeill writes that "just as history is a seamless web, so in ecology everything is connected to everything else."²⁶ Environmental historians such as Steinberg and McNeill adopt a Unified Theory of Everything. Two difficulties arise. First, the world's supposed "seamlessness" is itself a point of contention, especially among physicists and, for different reasons, among historians, literary theorists, and others concerned with

discursive disjunctions. Second, even if one were to grant the assumption that the universe is a "seamless web," there is no reason to think that our powers of representation will be able to render this totality meaningful. Representation, by its very nature, involves selection, but some environmental historians confuse reality with representation, the object of knowledge with the forms of knowledge.²⁷

In order to recognize environmental history as the challenge that it is, historians must begin, I think, by recognizing the assumptions that founded our discipline. Modern history, institutionalized in the nineteenth century in Europe and elsewhere, came into being as one among many technologies of modernity, arising as human beings began to subdue and master--or so we thought--the environment in unprecedented ways.²⁸ Overcoming nature was the key to giving shape and sense to the object of our investigations as academic historians. History centered on human agency--our thought and our free (though limited) will--and the patterns of development created through the expression of that will in action.²⁹ We relegated nature to the background of human activities not out of casual forgetfulness, but out of the imperative of our discipline. If our discipline's assumptions about the limited importance and force of nature are wrong, as Steinberg, McNeill, and environmental historians argue, then our assumptions about history's meaningfulness may be wrong as well. It is not merely the "arrogance of anthropocentrism" that is being challenged when the environment is taken seriously, but the very prospect of meaning itself. This is a challenge historians should not skirt--and more reflective environmental historians have proposed several ways of coping with it.

Three solutions--all pertinent to our attempt to understand and represent events in the DMZ--present themselves. The first, articulated most compellingly by American environmental historian William Cronon, maintains the

separation between nature and history, between reality and our modes of representation. Cronon recognizes the environment as chaotic, voiceless, formless, and inherently meaningless. Non-human species, mountain ranges, and the universe itself “lack the compelling drama that comes from having a judgeable protagonist. Things in nature usually ‘just happen’,” he tells us, “without raising questions of moral choice.”³⁰ This being the case, environmental historians do not represent the environment as they find it. Instead, Cronon argues, we supply judgeable protagonists by placing “human agents at the center of events,”³¹ even ecological ones; we remain committed “to narrative ways of talking about nature that are anything but ‘natural.’”³² History, even environmental history, requires human agency and narrative. Cronon’s reason for “organizing ecological change into beginnings, middles, and ends—which from the point of view of the universe are fictions, pure and simple” is to create didactic tales, to provide the “moral compass” that is at the heart of story-telling.³³ For Cronon, then, the formal unity of environmental history resides not in the object of its investigation, but in our existential commitment to caring about certain things: ourselves, nature, moral rectitude, meaningful stories. In Wallace Stegner’s phrase, “we see the world through our ‘own human eyes.’”³⁴

Cronon would be the first to acknowledge that human agents have more often operated like blind moles than insightful or rational actors in affecting the earth. He would certainly recognize that no one willed the accidental wonderland of the DMZ or the preservation of the Red-crowned Crane’s migratory route. And yet he would still insist that we tell the story of the DMZ as he tells the story of the American West, not from the perspective of gorals, spoonbills, or seals and not as a set of circumstances emerging in geologic time, but from the human point of view. Even after wrestling with the unnatural nature of history,

he would, I think, still focus this story on accidental Cold War bounty and deliberate preservation efforts. Human beings, even when acting blindly, are still willful and still culpable. For scholars like Cronon, historical meaning arises from crafting the formal storylines that underscore our moral responsibility.

The second group of historians, emphasizing how attenuated human will is once environmental factors are considered, blur the concepts of “agency” and “role” and discount narrative. In a 2008 *American Historical Review* forum, Richard C. Hoffman articulates this second approach arguing that environmental history raises “the possibility of imagining other points of view” besides the human and suggests that narrative unity may be “reductionist.”³⁵ This expanded sense of who plays a historical role suggests that thought and will, the very processes that Cronon and others treat as essential, are merely matters of scale and perspective.³⁶ All animate beings, human and non-human, have historical roles. Environmental historian Brett Walker, for instance, describes the Japanese beetle as stowing “itself away in the root-bundles of a batch of azaleas shipped to Riverton, New Jersey in 1916.” Walker calls it an “advantageous *decision* for the hungry chafers, as they managed to escape several species of predatory flies and wasps not to mention several deadly diseases . . .”³⁷ At first we may balk at the image of insects calculating their best advantage and making decisions, but looking at human history, it is not entirely clear that human calculations have been any more knowing. Just as beetles munched a particularly juicy root that happened to be in transit to a predator-free paradise in America, so too humans marked their territories on the Korean peninsula like wolves wary of mutual destruction and hunkered down in a way that happened to suit gorals. If sheer contingency and unintended consequences move history at least as much if not more than mindful

action—as the DMZ seems to bear out—there is little to differentiate the pullulating mass of human beings from multiplying microbes or the decisions of dictators from the desires of whales. By these lights, every animate being has “agency,” but of such a deracinated kind that “role” becomes the better word. All creatures play these roles not in a unified moral drama, but in various competing stories. With this loss of unitary perspective and unitary narrative comes the loss of moral perspective. Gardeners may talk crossly about invasive species and hate the Japanese beetle, but on what basis are we to discount its triumphant narrative and elevate our own distress?

The third, most radical, group are those historians who forgo a primary concern with animate agency or roles of any kind, moving beyond the biological to look at physical forces. A prime example is historian of fire Stephen Pyne who has tried to combine science and history in practice as well as in conceptualization. In 1990, working in Arizona State’s history department, but researching in conjunction with scientists, Pyne argued optimistically that, “Done right, science and history can combine like epoxy into an unbreakable bond.”³⁸ Today, the epoxied bonds are broken. Arguing that “the sciences and humanities operate very differently,” Pyne has left the history department for the School of Life Sciences and speaks of “Environmental History without Historians.”³⁹ His understanding treats all species (humans included) as epiphenomenal to the physical forces that shape the world. From this vantage, the DMZ is not primarily a political or social arena, nor even a field of biological struggle, but another site of the vast, chaotic clash of energy and matter. Both agency and narrative are discarded.

With this third approach, making our forms of representation match the physical environment, we must forgo the artifice of

stories with beginnings, middles, and ends coalescing around protagonists. This form of representation rejects old narrative strategies and adopts numeric modes. As Annales School historian Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie once argued, “in the long run, even in the more esoteric branches of history, . . . there will always come a moment when the historian . . . will need to start counting: to record frequencies, significant repetitions, or percentages.”⁴⁰ In his view, all history will eventually become quantitative and scientific rather than narrative and anecdotal. Such positivism rarely asks how meaning will arise out of the sheer accumulation of fact without selection or value judgments.⁴¹ Certainly for the DMZ, mere accumulation of data without a moral storyline enfeebles any imperative for us to act one way or the other.

As we stand back from all three of these approaches, we can see that none of them is wrong, none of them belie the truth of occurrences on the Korean peninsula, and yet the insights they provide about what happened and why are not commensurate. They exist on different planes of understanding, presented through different formal mechanisms. What they show is that adding environmental concerns, instead of putting “history back together again” (as Steinberg promises) may well tear the discipline apart which is perhaps why some of our very best historians continue to ignore environmental questions altogether.⁴² Environmental history, such that it is considered at all, is treated as a subspecialty, an additional topic, rather than the epistemological challenge that it is. We need to confront the possibility that with the introduction of nature, our frail construction of coherent stories and our sense of who we are in relation to the past may tumble, and that after the fall, it may not be so easy to put the discipline back together again.

The contingency seen in both the DMZ and in history reminds me of a parlor game invented

by the Surrealists in 1925. The game is called “the exquisite corpse,” a game you may have played as a child. A piece of paper is folded in four parts, and each of the four participants adds an element to a drawing without being able to see what the others have drawn. The result is a concoction of random additions. With luck, the result can be weirdly beautiful, an emanation, according to the surrealists, of the collective unconscious.



One version of the "Exquisite Corpse" (left) by, from top to bottom, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, Joan Miro, and Max Morise.

In this particular version, the exquisite corpse, like the Korean peninsula, has a gun around its middle. The beauty and biological diversity of Korea’s DMZ arose from sheer contingency due to guns. Right now, the DMZ is a paradox, a dead zone fortuitously alive with beauty, an “exquisite corpse” created unintentionally by many forces. The question for environmentalists, governments, militaries, indeed for all of us human and non-human, is

whether it will remain an exquisite corpse or become well and truly dead. The same question, I might argue, also applies to the discipline of history as it confronts the challenge posed by environmental factors. History may also be an exquisite corpse, an accidental marvel of a discipline, one that emerged in conjunction with the nineteenth-century upsurge in human predation on planetary resources. In light of what we now understand about the environment, we need to consider whether the discipline of history can be rejuvenated to meet new environmental imperatives, or, if not rejuvenated, consider how disciplines, like species, may evolve entirely new forms.

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Notes

¹ Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 9-10.

² Don Oberdorfer, *ibid.*, 2.

³ This phrase is used in Kwi-Gon Kim and Dong-Gil Cho, 'Status and Ecological Resource Value of the Republic of Korea's Demilitarized Zone,' online publication 19 March 2005 © International Consortium of Landscape and Ecological Engineering and Springer-Verlag Tokyo 2005.

⁴ [Gavan MacCormack](#), "The Road to Copenhagen," 13 September 2009 (accessed October 15, 2009)

⁵ Park Grimm, "Distribution and Protection of the Long-tailed Goral in the DMZ and Civilian Control Zone," *DMZ: Biodiversity and Conservation in the DMZ* (Seoul: Korean Environment Institute, conference proceedings, 1006), 49.

⁶ Park Grimm, *ibid.*, 50.

⁷ David S. Wilcove, *No Way Home: The Decline of the World Great Animal Migrations* (Washington: Island Press, 2008) traces bird migration in South and North America, a migration which has the same parallels and perils as the great bird migrations from Australia to Russia.

⁸ Lee Woo-Shine, Wee-Haeng Hur and Shin-Jae Rhim, "Distribution Characteristics of Black-

faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* in Western Coast of South Korea," *Korean Journal of Ecology* 24/4 (2001), 219.

⁹ Lee Kisup, "Importance of DMZ for Breeding Side of Black-Faced Spoonbills," *DMZ: Biodiversity and Conservation in the DMZ* (Seoul: Korean Environment Institute, conference proceedings, 2006), 28.

¹⁰ Joon Hwan Shin, Jong-Hwan Lim, and Jung Hwa Chun, 'Unique Biodiversity and Landscapes of Korea's Demilitarized Zone (DMZ): Overviews,' *International Conference on Korea's DMZ Conservation: Science and Impact Assessment* (Seoul: conference proceedings, 4 June 2007), VI-10-14.

¹¹ The ROK Ministry of Defense has proposed reducing the CCZ by five kilometers. Hall Healy, 'Korean Demilitarized Zone: Peace and Nature Park,' *International Journal on World Peace* 24/4 (December 2007), 72.

¹² In 1896, discussions between Japan and Russia almost resulted in dividing the peninsula, although apparently not at the thirty-eighth or thirty-ninth parallel as many historians have claimed, according to Bruce Cumings, *Korea Place in the Sun* (updated edition) (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 123.

¹³ Don Oberdorfer, *ibid.*, 58.

¹⁴ Joon Hwan Shin, Jong-Hwan Lim, and Jung Hwa Chun, "Unique Biodiversity and Landscapes of Korea's Demilitarized Zone (DMZ): Overviews," *International Conference on Korea DMZ Conservation: Science and Impact Assessment* (Seoul: conference proceedings, 4 June 2007), VI-4.

¹⁵ The 2005 Environmental Sustainability Index was produced by the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy and the Center for International Earth Science Information Network, Columbia University. It integrates seventy-six data sets to measure the ability of nations to protect their environments in the coming years. These findings emphasize the importance of government policy in creating sustainability, and find that there is no direct corollary between economic development and

environmental protection, although civil and political liberties correlate highly with sustainability. [Link](#). (accessed 19 January 2009).

¹⁶ Cho Myung-Rae, 'The Emergence and Evolution of Environmental Discourses in South Korea,' *Korea Journal* 44/3 (Autumn 2004), 139.

¹⁷ Lee Hongkyun, 'Environmental Awareness and Environmental Practice in Korea,' *Korea Journal* 44/3 (Autumn 2004), 178.

¹⁸ Lisa M. Brady, 'Life in the DMZ: Turning a Diplomatic Failure into an Environmental Success,' *Diplomatic History* 32/4 (September 2008), 597.

¹⁹ Peter Hayes, "Unbearable Legacies: The Politics of Environmental Degradation in North Korea," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 41-2-09, October 12th, 2009.

²⁰ Kwi-Gon Kim and Dong-Gil Cho, 'Status and Ecological Resource Value of the Republic of Korea's Demilitarized Zone,' online publication 19 March 2005 © International Consortium of Landscape and Ecological Engineering and Springer-Verlag Tokyo 2005.

²¹ Lisa M. Brady, 'Life in the DMZ: Turning a Diplomatic Failure into an Environmental Success,' *Diplomatic History* 32/4 (September 2008), 609.

²² Tours to the Diamond Mountain were suspended in July 2008 by the South Korea's Unification Ministry when Park Wang-ja was killed by a North Korean soldier when she walked into a fenced-off military zone near the resort in the early morning of July 11, 2008. Choe Sang-Hun, "South Korea to heed North on quick exit from resort" *International Herald Tribune* 11 August 2008.

²³ Kwi-Gon Kim and Dong-Gil Cho, 'Status and Ecological Resource Value of the Republic of Korea's Demilitarized Zone,' online publication 19 March 2005 © International Consortium of Landscape and Ecological Engineering and Springer-Verlag Tokyo 2005.

²⁴ Choe Sang-Hun, 'N. Korea Scraps Accords with South,' *New York Times* 30 January 2009 [here](#).

²⁵ Ted Steinberg, 'Down to Earth: Nature,

Agency, and Power in History,' *American Historical Review*, 107/ 3 (June 2002), 798-820.

²⁶ J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000), 20.

²⁷ Other scholars have also noted environmental history's relative lack of self-reflection and engagement with theoretical issues, most especially in the social sciences. Sörlin Sverker and Paul Warde, 'The Problem with The Problem of Environmental History: A Re-reading of the Field,' *Environmental History* 12/1 (January 2007), paragraph 28. [Link](#). (accessed 30 January 2009)

²⁸ The first chair of history was founded at the University of Berlin in 1810. France followed suit in 1812, and England, belatedly, joined the movement with Oxford's Regis Professorship of History in 1866. It was not until 1875 that English undergraduates could read for a degree in historical studies. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973) 136. In Japan, Tokyo Imperial University invited a German historian, Ludwig Riess, to hold the first chair of history, meaning non-Japanese history, in 1887. Two years later, in 1889, a department of Japanese history was established. See Jiro Numata, 'Shigeno Yasutsugu and the Modern Tokyo Tradition of Historical Writing,' in W.G. Beasley and E.G. Pulleyblank, eds., *Historians of China and Japan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 278.

²⁹ One of the earliest articulations of history in this sense can be found in a charming essay by Jean Bodin, *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566): "Of History, that is, the true narration of things, there are three kinds: human, natural, and divine. . . . In accordance with these divisions arise history's three accepted manifestations - - it is probable, inevitable, and holy - - and the same number of virtues are associated with it, that is to say, prudence, knowledge, and faith." After many recondite elaborations, Bodin places his bets on

human history and probability. The agents historians should focus on are human. Historical narratives in tracing the wisdom or folly of human choices will accord neither with the inevitable script of natural necessity nor the providential randomness of miraculous intervention. Instead of knowledge or faith, says Bodin, historians end up with a prudent grasp of probabilities. History, importantly, is the territory of limited free will. Jean Bodin, *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History translated by Beatrice Reynolds*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1945), 15.

³⁰ William Cronon, 'A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,' *The Journal of American History* 78/4 (March 1992), 1368.

³¹ Cronon, *ibid.*, 1375.

³² Cronon, *ibid.*, 1367.

³³ Cronon, *ibid.*, 1375.

³⁴ Quoted in Nancy Langston, 'AHR Conversation: Environmental Historians and Environmental Crisis,' *American Historical Review* 113/5 (December 2008), 1441.

³⁵ Richard C. Hoffman, 'AHR Conversation: Environmental Historians and Environmental Crisis,' *American Historical Review* 113/5 (December 2008), 1442 and 1446.

³⁶ The transformation in agency and the redefinition of human and animal is happening not only in historical research but in law and society more generally. Spain passed a limited bill of rights for primates in July 2008. [Link](#).

³⁷ Brett L. Walker, "Animals and the Intimacy of History," unpublished paper. [emphasis mine] I am grateful to Professor Walker for permission to quote from his paper.

³⁸ Stephen J. Pyne, 'Firestick History,' *The Journal of American History* 76/4 (March 1990), 1139.

³⁹ Steve Pyne, 'Environmental History without Historians,' *Environmental History* 10 (January 2005), 72.

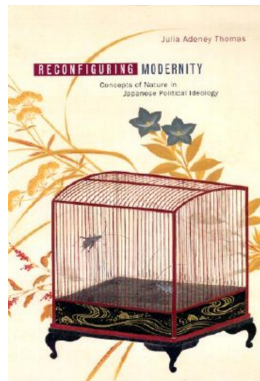
⁴⁰ E. LeRoy Ladurie, *The Territory of the Historian*, translated by Ben and Sian Reynolds (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 15.

⁴¹ E. H. Carr examines and excoriates this view

in Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 13-20.

⁴² See, for instance, Geoff Eley's magnificent examination of historical practice in the late twentieth century. Not only does Eley not mention environmental history (despite a photograph of a Great Blue Heron on the

dedication page) as he traces the major debates in the field, those responding to his book in a special forum of the *American Historical Review* did not consider this a problematic omission. Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).



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