Wildlife-spotting in the DMZ

CONSERVATION

IF THE THAWING OF relations between the two Koreas continues, the world may be able to visit the 1,000sqkm strip of land separating them: the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ. Thanks to decades of political separatism and heavily militarised borders, this has become one of the best preserved Asian landscapes, thriving with rare and endangered species.

Mountains, marshes, swamps, and prairies have allowed the flora and fauna to flourish since the Korean War ended in 1953 and the four-kilometre-wide strip was established. According to the South Korea's Ministry of Environment, more than 100 endangered and protected species are to be found there. These include musk deer, yellow-throated martens, leopard cats, and red-crowned cranes. There have also been reported sightings of Critically Endangered Amur leopards and Endangered Amur tigers.

Its rich biodiversity had previously prompted South Korea to file an application, unsuccessfully, with UNESCO in 2011 to turn their southern portion of the DMZ into a biosphere reserve.

Since the Koreas' promise to suspend cross-border hostilities last year, both sides have been pulling troops and military equipment out, dismantling guard posts and removing land mines from the DMZ. This has brought closer to reality what *The Korean Times* stated was South Korean President Moon Jae-in's dream of "areas near the Demilitarized Zone [becoming] a wonderful natural legacy once they are designated as natural ecology protection areas."

While no concrete date has been set for opening the strip to civilians, de-mining and excavation of war remains in the area is expected to be completed by the end of October 2019.

PHOTOS: THINKSTOCK.COM

Journey to the ocean's depths

EXPLORATION

SINCE NOVEMBER 2018, the Five Deeps Expedition has been on a journey to reach the bottom of all five of the world's oceans – Atlantic, Southern, Indian, Pacific and Arctic. These will include the lowest known point on the Earth's surface, the Pacific's Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench, at almost 11,000 metres, and will culminate with the Molloy Deep in the Abyssal Zone of the Arctic in August 2019.

The team of eight will be the first humans to reach the bottom of the Java, Puerto Rico and South Sandwich trenches, as well as the Molloy Deep. Getting there entails the use of a titanium alloy submersible called *Limiting Factor* that is designed for extensive, repeated dives to 120% of Full Ocean Depth (FOD), the distance to the deepest known point of the oceans. The expedition should also break the world record set by the 1960s Swiss-designed research bathyscaphe *Trieste* in the Challenger Deep, which made the current deepest dive at approximately 10,915 metres.

Victor Vescovo, creator and sponsor, will be piloting the submersible. His impressive resume includes the Seven Summits – climbing to the highest point on each continent – skiing to both North and South Poles, and experience in piloting fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. He hopes therefore to become the first to have been at both the highest and lowest points of the Earth's surface.

Anything going awry could be deadly, as there's little chance of rescue at such depths. For this reason, the vessel moves no quicker than around 5kph, anything that could potentially become tangled is ejectable and its oxygen tanks will function even in the event of electrical failure.

Accompanying the sub will be a 68-metre research and exploration ship equipped with wet and dry labs and three advanced seafloor landers to monitor and retrieve samples. The expedition's goals include researching possible ancient connections between the oceans through the ensuing genetic differences of their respective species. Also, an echo sounder and multi-beam sonar will map the ocean floor along the way to provide richer, more detailed imagery of the deepest and darkest realms on Earth.

Follow their journey at www.fivedeeps.com