

# Peace, Conservation & Capitalism in the Korean DMZ: Critiquing the Proposal for a DMZ Peace Park

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## Research Question

- In what ways does peace park theory help us understand the types of political dynamics and economic interests behind rebranding the DMZ?
- What challenges do these insights pose for a DMZ Peace Park?

## The DMZ Peace Park Proposal

What?

Theoretical transboundary protected area (TBA) within DMZ

Why?

More peaceful SK–NK relations  
Protection of precious ecosystems  
Shared research, tourism revenues

How?

Cooperative scientific research  
Joint conservation & ecotourism  
“Politically neutral” cooperation

## Peace Park Discourse in South Korea

From 1970s

Debates in SK about ‘peaceful use’ of DMZ.

1990s

Peace park model theorised for managing border regions with histories of conflict.

1990s–2009

International NGOs increasingly promote idea of peace park in DMZ.

2010–present

Notion of DMZ Peace Park appears more often in SK political discourse.

## Theoretical Insights: The Politics of Peace Parks

- Peace parks reinforce or rebrand politically sensitive narratives that are often attached to border regions with histories of conflict.
- Peace parks are expected to raise revenues through tourism, and thus conservation is accompanied by developmental pressures.
- We may better understand the political, economic, and ecological challenges of a DMZ Peace Park by interpreting:
  - 1 The political dynamics of rebranding the DMZ
  - 2 Dynamics of peace, conservation, and DMZ region development

## 1 Rebranding the DMZ and South Korean Soft Power

- SK governments and DMZ Forum are rebranding DMZ as a peace zone, and its ecosystems as a relic of pan-Korean heritage.
- NK media claims it is impossible to conceive DMZ as a peace zone, and SK’s talk of peace is disingenuous.
- If so, then why does SK promote the peace narrative?
- SK accumulates international credibility by exporting DMZ peace zone narrative and aligning with universalised values of ‘peace’, in contrast to the more ‘hostile’ NK.
- DMZ rebranding less about brokering peace with NK, and more about affirming SK cultural soft power.

## 2 ‘Selling Peace’: Development Dynamics in the DMZ Region

- Provincial-level DMZ policy fundamentally developmentalist.
- Gangwon Province: highest priority is economic revitalisation, and peace discourse and economic strategy are collinear.
- ‘Peace’ and ‘conservation’ viewed in terms of profit potential: transformed into packageable, consumable tourism experiences for domestic and international tourist markets.
- Peace dilemma: provincial DMZ policies are not focused upon making peace with NK, but ‘selling’ peace to tourists.
- Conservation dilemma: harm from infrastructure development; new precedent for industries encroaching on environmentally sensitive areas and the few remaining undeveloped lands in SK.

## Conclusions

- Nothing is politically neutral about the DMZ, or a DMZ Peace Park.
- DMZ rebranding through peace and conservation discourses may help affirm SK soft power internationally, and justify developmentalist policies domestically.
- ‘Peace’ and ‘conservation’ as commercial products are prioritised over genuine peace and conservation efforts.

## Implications

- Scholars should be more critical of how discourses of peace and conservation are used, and the interests belied by peace-washing and green-washing.
- Future research should analyse other DMZ ‘peace’ and ‘conservation’ projects in light of the political and economic interests in which the DMZ region is embedded.

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