



4K **WILD KOREA**

2 × 50 min. Written and directed by James Reed

4K, 5.1 and Stereo Executive producers: Martin Mészáros, Sabine Holzer



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In 2018, the eyes of the world turn to Pyeongchang, South Korea, for the Winter Olympics. For thousands of years Korea was known for its staggering natural beauty. Now it is better known for its decades of conflict.

But beyond the battle scars and the fortifications there is a land of stunning natural beauty and remarkable wildlife. Lush wetlands and mudflats; soaring mountains and turbulent seas; habitats where the beautiful goshawk, the bottleneck dolphin and the curious raccoon dog thrive alongside Korea's traditional people as they have for many thousands of years.

EP01: VOICES OF NATURE

For thousands of years, Korea was known for its staggering natural beauty. Now it is better known for its decades of conflict. This is what defines North and South Korea to the outside world today, but beyond the battle scars and the fortifications, there is another side to this troubled peninsula. South Korea still boasts areas of great wilderness with intriguing animals, some of which share extraordinary relationships with humankind. It is in these connections, rather than in division, that we truly see Korea.

At the southernmost tip we follow a pod of Pacific bottlenose dolphins through the volcanic islands of Jeju. They click at each other as they encounter a human at depth. But the dolphins know this diver well—they have shared the ocean with the Haenyeo, or 'Sea Women' for thousands of years. We travel onwards to the isolated island of Marado where three generations of sea women are preparing for an important dive. Today is the start of the conch season and these women will work hard, whatever the weather, to maximise their catch.

In the grounds of an ancient palace on the mainland, a raccoon dog family takes advantage of a rare event. Just once every five years, hundreds of cicada nymphs emerge from gestation below ground, providing an easy feast for the raccoon dogs as they voraciously fill their bellies. Those that escape their jaws make for the safety of the trees where they metamorphose into their flying form.

On the mudflats of Suncheon Bay we find a habitat that is neither land nor sea. Only recently has the ecological value of mudflats been recognised. A staggering 50% of the Earth's oxygen is produced by phytoplankton—microscopic algae—that are found here in great abundance. That is why the mudflats are known locally as 'The Lungs of the Earth'. Plankton is far from the only lifeform here. The mud of the bay is rich in nutrients and supports one of the most diverse ecosystems on the peninsula. Here, we follow the story of a young mudskipper; he has just emerged for his first mating season but his journey to find love is paved with obstacles ...

In the mountainous forests of central South Korea, Park Yong Soon, a traditional falconer, reveals an intimate relationship with a very special goshawk. He caught her from the wild—as is the tradition in Korea—and is building a bond with her. She is a magnificent hunter, able to manoeuvre with great agility through the forest in pursuit of prey. But the falconer knows their relationship may be short-lived. In Korea, a bird of prey is free to return to the wild whenever it chooses.

From swarms of fireflies and Baikal teal, to giant-footed birds and fish-eating spiders, Korea is home to unique and extraordinary wildlife; and to some equally extraordinary people. At 94 years old, Wal Soo Rae is not only the oldest living Haenyeo, but the oldest diver anywhere in the world. We are treated to an amazing event when Wal Soo Rae free dives for what could be the very last time. She may be hanging up her mask and fins, but her way traditional way of life will continue for many years to come.

EP 02: BEYOND BORDERS

All of Korea was once an ancient mountain kingdom. It is now a land divided by conflict—and a very dangerous border. Here, where North meets South, in a region isolated from the outside world for sixty-five years, there has been



an extraordinary resurgence of life. The Korean demilitarised zone is now one of the wildest and most pristine wildlife habitats in Asia.

Episode 2 begins in the capital city, Seoul. A thriving metropolis of twenty-five million people known not only for its prosperity, but for its proximity to North Korea. We see this advanced yet vulnerable city through the eyes of a 19 year-old free runner called Rae. Like all young men in Korea, Rae must serve in the army but now he is free. He runs through city streets and out into the open to observe a divided land. Seoul on one side and the mountains of the DMZ on the other.

The narrow strip of land between North and South Korea has become a veritable Eden for wildlife and is by far the richest habitat on the peninsula. Devastated by one of the fiercest conflicts of the twentieth century, this whole area was destroyed, scorched and lifeless. But this, and the subsequent absence of humans, provided a fertile bed from which new life could flourish.

Cranes, a symbol of peace in Korea, were among the first birds to return to the DMZ, flying across the barbed wire fences that keep the human populations apart. Now the DMZ is a migration hotspot for one of the world's largest populations of the rare red-crowned crane and is thus one of the most important sites for migrating birds anywhere in Asia.

A small population of wild boar survived the war and has now taken over as the dominant species in the DMZ. Typically nocturnal, the DMZ boars roam in large numbers during the day gorging on snakes and, sometimes, on each other.

The boar population is only one of many to experience extraordinary rates of growth inside the DMZ. Huge communities of crabs have spread throughout swamps shaped by old trenches and bomb craters. Thriving societies of bees and hornets fight deadly battles that have been playing out here for thousands of years, while alien-looking spoonbills have conquered the pristine islands off shore.

The DMZ is filled with rare creatures thriving in the most unlikely wildlife reserve on the planet. There are even a number of unconfirmed sightings of one of the rarest and most beautiful animals—the Amur leopard. Only sixty remain in the world, but it is possible that a population of these leopards resides in the mountains of the DMZ.

What is certain is that a critical habitat exists between the two Koreas. Despite political differences, North and South have a shared natural history—proof of the resilience of nature and its ability to transcend human conflict.



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www.terramater.com

Terra Mater Factual Studios GmbH, Wambachergasse 2, 1130 Vienna/Austria,
phone +43-1-87003-0, fax +43-1-87003-27609, office@terramater.at