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Received: 4 December 2024 | Accepted: 26 February 2026

DOI: 10.1002/pan3.70296

People and Nature

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Visioning ecologically diverse and harmonious futures of Korea in *Good Anthropocene*

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Funding information
UKCEH's National Capability for Global Challenge; North Central Climate Adaptation Science Center

Handling Editor: Caroline Howe

Abstract

1. The Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a buffer between North and South Korea, holds profound historical, cultural and ecological significance, as well as exceptional potential for conservation and transformation. This study explores ecologically diverse and peaceful futures for the Korean Peninsula by envisioning the DMZ as a landscape for harmonious human–nature co-existence.
2. Using the *Nature Futures Framework* (*NFF*) and the *Seeds of Good Anthropocenes* (*SoGA*) approach, we co-developed four 'Living in Harmony with Nature' visions that reflect diverse values and meanings of nature for sustainable and well-being oriented futures in Korea.
3. These visions emphasize balancing human activities with ecological integrity, reimagining the DMZ as a space for peace, restoration and shared stewardship. They express citizens' perspectives on aspirational and inclusive futures, highlighting existing initiatives as levers for change and intersectoral and interdisciplinary collaboration as key enabling conditions.
4. This visioning process demonstrates the role of the science-policy-society interface, diverse stakeholder engagement and integration of history, culture and social cohesion. This paper reflects on the lessons from this process and discusses implications for future scenario development—particularly how a whole-of-society approach can help identify policy options and societal transformations that advance nature–people-positive futures in Korea and beyond.

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[Correction added on 4 April 2026, after first online publication: Affiliation 2 has been added for Laura M. Pereira.]

For affiliations refer to page 1397.

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KEYWORDS
ecological peace, *Good Anthropocenes*, human–nature co-existence, *Nature Futures Framework*, participatory scenario planning, science–policy–society interface, visioning

1 | INTRODUCTION

Understanding how people imagine and negotiate their relationships with nature lies at the heart of sustainability transformations. Human–nature relations are continually reshaped through stories, institutions and the material realities of place (Bennett et al., 2016; IPBES, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2025), however, most government planning envisions the future without the direct engagement of citizens. The science–policy–society interface—where knowledge, governance and public values intersect—has been widely discussed but rarely examined as a lived process of transformation involving society as a whole. This study explores this topic by exploring how participatory visioning can engage citizens as agents of transformation in the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), a landscape where ecological renewal and peacebuilding are deeply intertwined. It addresses the global biodiversity and sustainability goals using plural nature values and participatory methods through a science–policy–society interface to translate global goals into meaningful, citizen-led visions for 'Living in Harmony with Nature'.

1.1 | Geopolitical interplay in the Korean Peninsula and human–nature co-existence in its DMZ

The Korean Peninsula, positioned between China, Russia and Japan, has long been a meeting ground of empires and ideas. Its recorded history dates to the Gojoseon Kingdom in 2333 BCE, and its landscapes have long been continually reshaped by both internal struggles and the ambitions of larger powers (West et al., 2006). From 1910 to 1945, Japanese colonial rule imposed forced assimilation and extensive social and ecological disruption, including the extraction of natural resources and reorganization of agricultural systems (Mason & Lee, 2012).

Following Japan's defeat in the Second World War, the peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel, with Soviet and U.S. forces occupying the north and south respectively (Kim, 2021). As Cold War tensions deepened, these zones hardened into two rival states: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea). The Korean War (1950–1953) was initiated by a northern invasion to unify the peninsula under communist rule, leaving an estimated 1 million military personnel and 2–3 million civilians dead (Chamberlin, 2018; Park, 2010).

The war ended without a peace treaty, establishing instead the DMZ, administered by the United Nations Command's Military Armistice Commission (Kim, 2018). Over time, this narrow strip of land—intended as a barrier to human movement—has become an unintended refuge for biodiversity, where ecosystems have flourished in the absence of direct human disturbance (Kim, 1997). The DMZ today stands as a striking symbol of both division and resilience: A living reminder of how landscapes bear the imprint of conflict yet can also regenerate when left to recover (Brady, 2021). Across the peninsula, the legacies of war, colonization and rapid modernization continue to shape human–nature relations and the pursuit of a more peaceful and ecologically secure future (Kim, 2022).

The DMZ is about 4 km wide (2 km to the north and 2 km to the south of the Military Demarcation Line), and it extends for 250 km from the east to the west of the Korean Peninsula where human access is strictly prohibited with the Joint Security Area (Figure 1). In South Korea, a Civilian Control Zone (CCZ) extends a further 5–20 km zone south of the DMZ where a selected population of Koreans live in villages with farming and tourism activities under military control with limited human access. In the 73 years since the DMZ's creation, limited human activity has allowed diverse species of animals and plants to flourish within the DMZ. Abandoned paddy fields have evolved into wetlands, creating naturally restored terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems (Lim et al., 2022). Today, the DMZ provides habitat for thousands of species that move within and across this border region (Brady, 2021; Kim, 2019) even while these movements are restricted in some areas by landmines, vegetation removal for surveillance and wildfires (Kim & Lee, 2024). The gradual resurgence of nature following the end of the Korean War in 1953 has transformed the DMZ, from a cold war focal point to a site for nature conservation, agriculture, as well as security and nature tourism (Bigley et al., 2010; Chun et al., 2022; Shin, 2005).

In the aftermath of the Korean War, South Korea was among the poorest countries in the world. What followed is often described as the 'Miracle of the Han River' (Doucette & Pak, 2019). Through government-led industrialization and export-oriented growth—sometimes characterized as 'authoritarian developmentalism' (Song, 2020)—South Korea achieved rapid economic transformation. By the 1990s, it had become a highly developed nation with high levels of human development (Kwak & Ryoo, 2024). Today, South Korea ranks as Asia's fourth-largest economy, with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita comparable to that of France, Canada, and Italy, when adjusted for purchasing power (International Monetary Fund, 2025). While this model delivered material prosperity and reshaped political institutions, social structures and cultural identities (Wang & Kim, 2015), it also deepened social inequalities and imposed substantial ecological costs through deforestation, pollution and rapid urbanization (Kim, 2023). In recent decades, South Korea has sought to reconcile economic ambition with environmental responsibility through initiatives such as 'Green Growth' (Kim & Thurbon, 2015), 'Green Détente' (Na, 2022), and 'Net-Zero' commitments (Joo et al., 2023). These efforts reflect an ongoing attempt to redefine development in ways that support both sustainability and peace.

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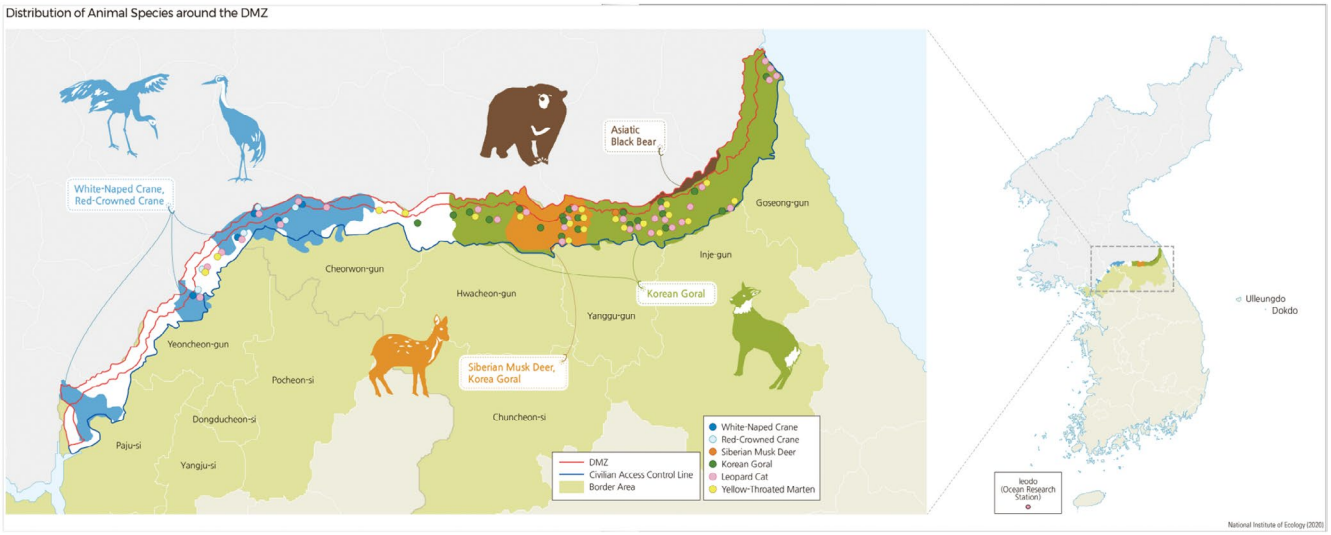

FIGURE 1 Map of the Korean Peninsula with North Korea and South Korea divided by the DMZ with colour highlighted (right) showing restoration of endangered wildlife and animal species (left) around the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ, between the red lines), Civilian Control Zone (CCZ, between the red and blue lines) and the border area (darker green space below the blue line).
Source: The National Atlas of Korea II (NGII, 2020).

The DMZ has also been a focal area for conservation efforts for decades with ecological environmental surveys monitoring flora and fauna and ecosystems (Bak et al., 2023), payment for ecosystem service scheme expanding to compensate residents who contribute to ecosystem conservation (Lee & Oh, 2021), and systemic preparation for the preservation of the DMZ (Hwang et al., 2019; Lim, 2024). However, despite repeated scientific and political efforts to designate the entire DMZ as a biosphere reserve or peace park, these initiatives have not yet succeeded (Benton-Short, 2020; Brady, 2008, 2021) due to challenging inter-Korean relations within the global geopolitical context and geophysical constraints of landmines in this area.

This has led to the development of a broader, scientist-led discussion in South Korea about the future of people and nature in the broader region to the south of the DMZ. With a general lack of foresight exercises in government planning that meaningfully engage citizens, the literature remains limited in examining how interfacing science, policy and society can catalyse transformative change. Moreover, there is an absence of future visions that integrate nature, people, their relationships, livelihoods, preferences and aspirations—particularly in (post)conflict or geopolitically sensitive regions. Protecting the DMZ's ecological and historical value requires new visions for the peninsula's future that engage citizens and stakeholders whose lives, history and future are intertwined with this landscape, and that these visions can help build peace in different ways.

This raises pressing policy-relevant societal and research questions: *How do citizens in (post)conflict zones or divided nations, such as Korea, envision their futures? What aspirations do residents of these areas hold for peace, security, co-existence and ecological renewal? And how can these visions inform policy and decision-making through interfaces that bridge science, policy and society?*

Building on Korea's history of colonization, division and recovery, such participatory visioning must centre the perspectives of South Korean citizens, particularly those living near the DMZ, while also considering opportunities for inter-Korean cooperation and peacebuilding through nature stewardship (Olsson & Moore, 2024; Rist et al., 2024). This paper examines how participatory visioning can engage citizens as agents of transformation in a geopolitically sensitive landscape, and how structured approaches to envisioning desirable futures can connect local aspirations with national policy and global goals through the science–policy–society interface. In doing so, it connects the goal of achieving the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD's) goal of 'Living in Harmony with Nature' with the complex landscape of Korea's DMZ. The study tests how participatory methods that articulate alternative futures can serve as a process for enabling dialogue between citizens, scientists and policymakers, to imagine more inclusive and desirable pathways towards ecologically diverse and harmonious futures.

1.2 | Visioning preferable futures with citizens through a science–policy–society interface

Futures approaches such as scenario and vision development, help people think systematically and constructively about uncertainty and contested possibilities (Cork et al., 2023; Lazurko et al., 2023). They are particularly valuable for exploring the complex interactions between human and natural systems (Hichert et al., 2021; Kuiper et al., 2024). In biodiversity science, futures studies argue that developing shared ideas, images, and narratives can reveal achievable pathways towards desirable futures (Durán et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023). Yet, most future-oriented planning still occurs within governments or expert communities, often excluding citizens or producing abstract visions detached from lived realities (Gouache, 2022). At the same time, society faces interlinked crises—climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution—that demand collective efforts to bridge science, policy and

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society in co-creating transformative futures (IPBES, 2019; McElwee et al., 2025; O'Brien et al., 2025).

In South Korea, the provinces of Gyeonggi and Gangwon border the DMZ and have hosted a range of initiatives to explore its ecological and social potential. Since the establishment of the Bridge of Freedom at Imjingak over the Imjin River, the area has seen the creation of observatories, museums and peace parks commemorating the past while envisioning shared futures. In 2023, Gyeonggi Province launched the 'DMZ OPEN Festival' to develop new prospects for the peace and future of the DMZ by reconnecting the region to the history and foundation of the Three Kingdom Dynasty (57 BCE–668 AD). Through exhibitions, concerts and marathons held within the CCZ (Figure 1), the festival invites citizens to experience the DMZ as a space to walk, feel and think (Shim et al., 2023).

As part of this festival, the *2023 EcoPeace Forum* (19–22 September 2023) convened national and international experts, policymakers, practitioners and citizens to discuss the current state and futures of the DMZ. The Forum created a rare science–policy–society interface where diverse perspectives of ecology and peace could be openly explored. A science–policy–society interface can be an institutional arrangement that connects scientific knowledge systems, policymaking processes, and societal actors to exchange information, shape research agendas, deliberate on evidence and apply knowledge in decision-making.

During the *2023 EcoPeace Forum*, a visioning process was introduced to co-create plausible and preferable futures for the Korean DMZ. This process integrated global biodiversity policy and science frameworks with local and national perspectives. The 2050 Vision of 'Living in Harmony with Nature' of the CBD provided a foundation for examining how the Global Biodiversity Framework could be realized in Korea, recognizing both the nation's rich biodiversity and the anthropogenic pressures it faces (CBD Secretariat, 2022).

This visioning combined two approaches. First, the *Nature Futures Framework* (NFF), a new scenario modelling framework developed by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), was used to position three complementary and intertwined value perspectives on nature to develop desirable future visions (IPBES, 2023; Pereira et al., 2020). The three nature values include intrinsic values that embrace nature for its own right to thrive (*Nature for Nature*), instrumental values that recognize diverse benefits nature provides to people (*Nature for Society*), and cultural values that nature and people co-create through the history of co-existence (*Nature as Culture/One with Nature*). These perspectives helped participants imagine desirable futures centred on human–nature relationships. Second, to enhance local relevance and realism, the *Seeds of Good Anthropocenes* (SoGA) approach was employed. SoGA identifies and builds on existing initiatives, called 'seeds', that have the potential to foster sustainability and transformation (Bennett et al., 2016). Building futures based on existing local initiatives enhances realism and plausibility, while also connecting futures to the local context (Hamann et al., 2020; Preiser et al., 2024; Raudsepp-Hearne et al., 2020).

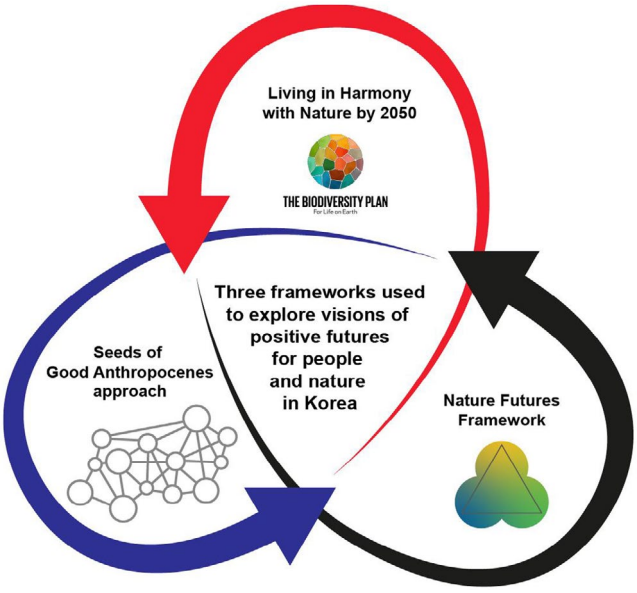

FIGURE 2 Frameworks used in visioning nature and people-positive future visions of Korea. The *Nature Futures Framework*'s diverse value perspectives on nature were converged with local and globally relevant *Seeds of Good Anthropocene* on existing sustainability initiatives to envision and elaborate the 2050 'Living in Harmony with Nature' vision of the Convention on Biological Diversity (Graphical design by Andy Sier/UKCEH).

The integrative use of global policy (CBD), science–policy (IPBES NFF), and science–society (SoGA) frameworks, combined with futures design methods, was anticipated to systematically and effectively bridge science, policy, and society in visioning diverse futures (Figure 2). The CBD 2050 Vision offered an overarching global goal for nature and people with a policy anchor, the NFF provided a scientific framework for viewing human–nature relationship inclusively, and the SoGA's inductive approach brought in societal voices. Together, these created a dynamic interface where global policy was connected to local context and aspirations.

The visioning process generated a set of plural and positive visions of how nature in the DMZ might be revived, how people and ecosystems might interact and how culture could continue to evolve through co-existence and innovation across the Korean Peninsula. This paper presents the new visions for the Korean Peninsula based on citizens' individual and collective perspectives on alternative and preferred futures with the DMZ as a symbolic place for harmonious co-existence of nature and people. The paper also reflects on the meaning of these visions and the participatory methods used to produce them.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Overview of visioning process

The Visioning Workshop at the *2023 EcoPeace Forum* convened research institutes, government agencies, civil society organizations and citizen networks as catalysts for societal transformation through

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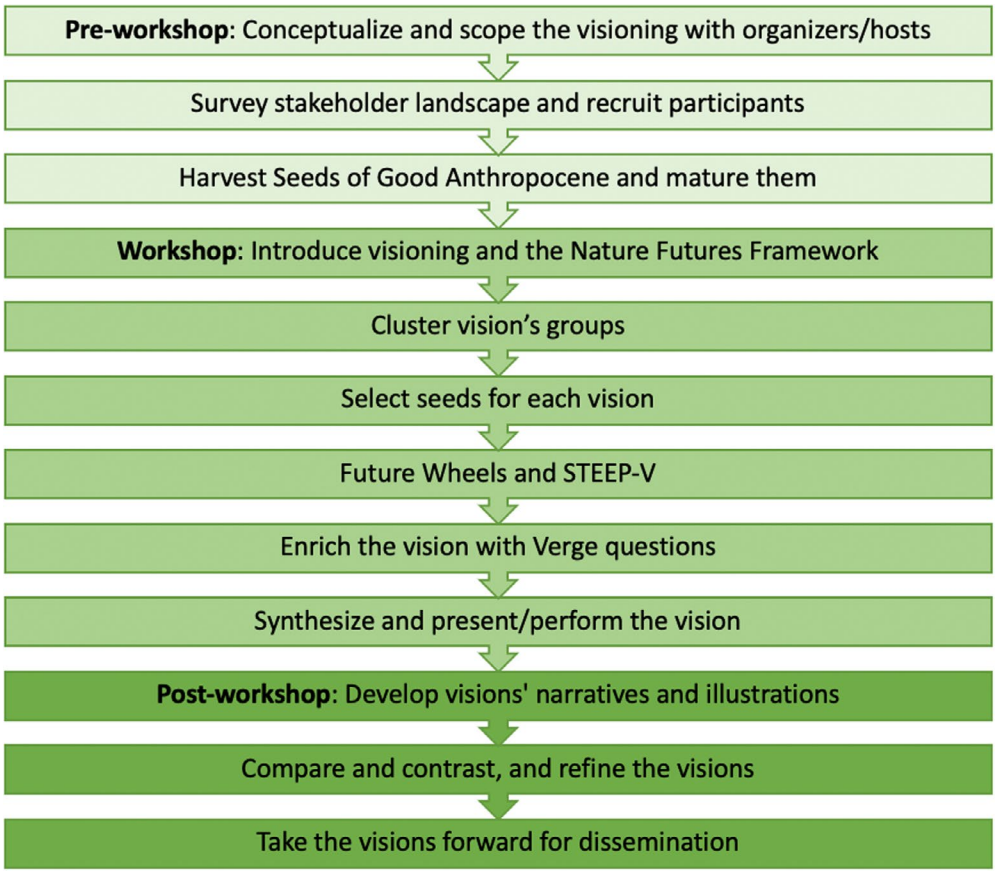

FIGURE 3 Overview of visioning process from design to dissemination.

co-learning, co-design and co-creation. Participants identified small- to large-scale initiatives that could serve as building blocks to nature and people-positive futures. The visioning process combined a day-long in-person workshop with pre- and post-workshop activities (Figure 3).

The process began with conceptualizing and scoping to ensure alignment with—and contribution to—the aims of the EcoPeace Forum, in collaboration with Gyeonggi Province, the coordinating agency of the 'DMZ Open Festival'. The workshop programme drew on international experiences with participatory futures methods (Durán et al., 2023; IPBES, 2023; Pereira et al., 2020) and was adapted for the Korean context and cultural setting. Facilitated by a team of national and international experts from diverse research domains, the visioning process was centred on human–nature relationships and the theme of 'Living in Harmony with Nature', encouraging participant engagement and creativity within the structure of the NFF.

2.2 | Pre-workshop preparation

Participants are crucial contributors to visioning workshops as their ideas, values and norms shape the discourse and visions. Hence, the organizing committee of the EcoPeace Forum and a subset of the visioning workshop facilitation team sought out participants that were interested in positive societal changes or were working in related occupations. By the nature of the 'DMZ Open Festival', the recruitment of participants was open and publicized broadly. A call was disseminated through the host institute on the 'DMZ Open Festival' website to recruit participants across sectors, disciplines and regions in Korea, and also across the networks and institutions known to have interested stakeholders. There were no participants from North Korea, because at the time of the workshop, neither diplomats nor government representatives were allowed to leave North Korea, let alone visit South Korea.

Prospective participants were asked to complete a short application form that elicited their motivations for participating in the workshop (Question 1), factors that could play a key role in creating a co-existence paradigm for nature and people in the DMZ (Question 2), and the contribution of potential seeds for the visioning exercises (Question 3). As the recruitment resulted in the number of participants expected for the workshop and all 23 applicants had demonstrated proven potential for their contribution, they were all invited to attend the visioning workshop (see Section 3.1). This participant group was joined by nine facilitators, four artists and four writers, whose diverse expertise helped integrate creative and analytical perspectives throughout the process.

Many participants in the workshop were employed in nature conservation but from diverse sectors including academia,

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FIGURE 4 Skeleton scenario narratives were built using (a) matured seeds positioned in the NFF triangle, (b) future wheels on each seed (yellow) with first- (blue) and second-order (pink) implications, (c) clashing the three future wheels to identify conflicts and synergies across the three seeds, (d) discussing Verge questions to enrich the vision and (e) creative performances of the visions by participants. *Photo credits: HyeJin Kim*.

government research institutions, international organizations and subnational environmental networks. Other participants were from startups/entrepreneurship, media, education, law, press and the arts (see Supporting Information SI). The academic fields of participants were varied including ecology, statistics, sociology, spatial planning, urban architecture and health, while their age ranged from young adults to retired elderly, with the majority in their 20s–50s. This provided an opportunity to develop future visions that are inclusive of disciplinary backgrounds and generations with different historical, cultural and relational values.

Building on participants' ideas and suggestions about potential 'seeds' of human–nature co-existence in the DMZ, the facilitation team expanded and refined a seed bank to guide the workshop. This involved thinking broadly across societal domains to identify initiatives that have effectively strengthened environmental awareness and practice at both community and systems levels—for example, through local action, innovation or policy change. Regional and global initiatives, such as the degrowth movement, were also included to explore cross-scale connections and interactions.

The 'seeds' in SoGA were complemented by the STEEP-V framework to serve two purposes: to elicit input from participants and to ensure sufficient diversity among seeds across the dimensions of Social, Technological, Ecological, Economic, Political and Values (Glenn & Gordon, 2009). As in the original SoGA approach, this involved selecting representative seeds within each category and identifying complementary ones to enrich the collective seed set (Raudsepp-Hearne et al., 2020).

The facilitation team then envisioned how these seeds might look if they were to 'mature' by 2050—if their ideas and practices had become mainstream in Korean society (see Supporting Information SII). Although seed maturation can be done together with participants to more fully consider the diversity of mature states, limited time of this day-long workshop focused on other activities. Each of the matured seeds was then posted on the wall within the NFF triangle (Figure 4a),

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positioned according to its balance across the three nature value perspectives—*Nature for Nature*, *Nature for Society* and *Nature as Culture*.

2.3 | Workshop process and methods

The visioning workshop started with the introduction of the visioning process and various frameworks and key concepts (see Supporting Information SIII for the programme). Through a facilitated exercise, participants reflected on their personal experiences and perspectives on nature, positioning themselves in the NFF triangle (see Rana et al., 2020). Following an established method for organizing vision groups (Rana et al., 2020; Schmitt et al., 2025), participants located near one another in the triangle were formed into four groups that shared similar views on human–nature relationships. Each group then selected three 'matured seeds' from those displayed on the wall, where matured seeds were mapped with NFF values assigned in the NFF triangle (Figure 4a). The seeds represented different themes or societal domains, and the groups selected seeds near the group's position in the NFF triangle (Supporting Information SII). This ensured that the group could develop visions consistent with their own value perspectives rather than having them predetermined by the facilitation team (see Section 3.2 for the final list of seeds for vision groups). The subsequent exercises (e.g. Future Wheels, STEEP, Verge) built upon these chosen seeds, imagining the future where small sustainable initiatives of today were successfully scaled up and mainstreamed in Korean society.

The four groups each developed their visions through a sequence of facilitated exercises based on a shortened version of the Manoa Mash-up method used in the SoGA project (Preiser et al., 2024; Raudsepp-Hearne et al., 2020). First, each group identified the first- and second-order implications of each of the matured seeds to create three *Future Wheels* (Glenn & Gordon, 2009) (Figure 4b). In doing so, groups considered implications of mainstreamed seeds from Science, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political and Values domains following the *STEEP-V* framework (An et al., 2020). Applying this framework ensured that the visions were comprehensive and could be consistently compared across groups. Each group then 'clashed' the three Future Wheels, identifying synergies and conflicts across the wheels as a step towards their integration into a single group vision (Pereira et al., 2020) (Figure 4c).

To enrich the visions, facilitators then used a range of questions from the *Verge framework* that were adapted to the context of this workshop (Lum, 2014). These questions were designed to more fully imagine how different aspects of a future might manifest, including: (1) worldviews, social values and paradigms; (2) family, business and governance structures; (3) technology, urban design and language; (4) production, efficiency and regulation; (5) consumption patterns and modes of exchange; (6) conflict, rules and norms; and (7) people–nature relationships (see Supporting Information SIII for the full list of questions) (Figure 4d).

Finally, groups synthesized and presented their visions in a plenary session using creative formats that help overcome the 'imagination gap' when exploring aspirational futures (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Pereira et al., 2019). Participants were encouraged to be creative in their performances with a broad latitude (i.e. no constraints or structure) to share their visions in the way that they thought best captured the essence of their discussions (similar to Kuiper et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2020; Schmitt et al., 2025). Presentations took the form of news reporting, theatre, and music and dancing (Figure 4e). The workshop concluded with participants reflecting on the visioning process, comparing and contrasting the visions and sharing the lessons learned.

2.4 | Post-workshop processing

After the workshop, the facilitation team developed full narratives (see Supporting Information SIV) along with narrative summaries and illustrations (see Section 3.3) for the four visions based on the workshop products. These drafts were developed from detailed notes and outputs from the facilitated exercises and were written to capture both the substance and the spirit of the participants' discussions. The draft narratives and illustrations were then refined through an iterative process involving workshop participants, who provided comments and edits. The full narratives were then analysed to validate the internal consistency of each vision and to identify areas of contrast across the visions using a range of socio-economic-ecological domains that align with Korea's sectoral structure and development (see Table 2). A subset of participants also contributed to translating the narratives between English and Korean to ensure accuracy and cultural resonance.

The artists who participated in the workshop completed a series of illustrations based on their on-site sketches and observations, depicting the envisioned future states and key concepts of the four DMZ visions for 2050. The visions were also developed into 11 seeds-based short stories in manga-style illustrations (Peterson, 2024) that were shared along with the narratives among stakeholders at the *2024 EcoPeace Forum*.

This study was conducted in accordance with the research ethics and data protection legislations of the Republic of Korea and the United Kingdom. Prior to participation, all participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedures, and written informed consent was received for the collection, analysis and publication of workshop results. Where applicable, data were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality. Ethical approval and communication procedures were jointly administered by the coordinator of the Korean Nature Futures project (lead author) and the host of the EcoPeace Forum (Gyeonggi Provincial Office), which issued the open call for the event and recruited participants.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Stakeholder composition and their aspirations

In the pre-workshop applications submitted, participants were enthusiastic about joining the workshop and stated they were motivated to learn from the NFF and the process of envisioning

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FIGURE 5 Stakeholder participants and facilitators of the visioning workshop happily posing as tigers, which is a historically and culturally important species that has become extinct in the Korean Peninsula. *Photo credit: 2023 DMZ Open Festival Ecopeace Forum.*

alternative futures (Figure 5). Several sought personal inspirations or a broader vision for life, hoping to contribute meaningfully to society by aligning their values with ecological care so that human and non-human species might coexist equitably. Many emphasized the need to listen to both people and nature at the front lines of the ecological crisis.

Participants reflected on what might enable a paradigm shift towards co-existence in the DMZ, among people and between people and nature. Many expressed a shared sense of the need to restore human–nature connections, viewing the DMZ as a place where co-existence can be experienced, learned and passed on to future generations. Several participants emphasized that such co-existence would not be possible without the active participation of local residents and youth, underscoring the importance of education and awareness building about the DMZ. The DMZ's geopolitical position was widely seen as symbolic—a potential landscape of peace and renewal.

Across applications, participants demonstrated deep commitments to sustainability, social cohesion and living in ways that minimize harm to the environment. Others highlighted the need for a balanced approach between conservation and development. Participants critically reflected on the consequences of rapid economic development, linking it to the climate crisis and lack of public awareness of biodiversity, both of which were seen as barriers to more transformative change in Korea.

3.2 | Korea's SoGAs

The seeds that meet the SoGA concept in Korea were collected in their present state as ideas, practices, institutions or technologies along with similar global ideals to allow local to global cross-scale fertilization and alignment (e.g. zero-waste villages in Korea and global circular economy). These seeds were collected from the workshop participants and facilitators, and they covered broad-ranging societal domains including the environment, economy, technology, agriculture, energy, business, tourism, climate, education and traditions (Table 1; see Supporting Information SII for the full list).

As a result of the exercise in the NFF triangle where participants shared how they associated with a chosen nature value, three of the four vision groups were self-clustered at each of the three NFF value perspectives, with one group located between Nature for Nature and Nature as Culture value perspectives (Figure 6). The *Nature for Nature* vision group chose '30% of the world protected for conservation', 'return of tiger and other large mammals' and 'zero pollution village', focusing on nature's restoration and resilience supporting human well-being. The *Nature for Society* vision group chose 'nature-based climate solutions', 'healthy food and wellbeing with low pollution' and 'low-growth economic model', rooted in environmentally friendly development towards climate mitigation and human well-being. The *Nature as Culture* vision group chose 'the revival of guardian spirit in DMZ', 'nature's benefit from ecotourism' and 'mainstreamed ecological knowledge', which converged strong preservation of nature and culture from history and innovations of today. Finally, the vision group combining *Nature for Nature and Nature as Culture* chose 'most people live in big ecological arcologies', '100% renewable energy-run villages' and 'elephants in the DMZ', which had returning to the past with highly nature-bounded human settlement across the country. While the four visions reflected the chosen nature values, there is a nuanced representation of value perspectives through diverging foci and mechanisms.

3.3 | Vision narratives and illustrations

This section presents summary narratives of each vision that are synthetic and evocative to be accessible and inspiring (see Supporting Information SIV for full narratives). We developed the

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TABLE 1 Example seeds in present state by domain with references that evidence the seed in South Korea.

Domain	Example seeds (references)
Agriculture	Smart farms (Han & Joo, 2022), certification of animal welfare farms (Baek, 2021), certification of agricultural food and seafood (Choi, 2020), no herbicide or pesticide use, and sharing nature's benefits by both humans and nature itself (a long-standing Korean traditional practice)
Community	Zero pollution (Sohn, 2008), zero carbon (Jeong & Byeon, 2012), eco-village (Ryu, 2009), eco-cities (Park et al., 2019), nature-based climate solutions, sustainable architecture (Jung, 2020), rebalance earth and ecological community (Jeong, 2022)
Conservation	Ecological peace park (Oh & Ji, 2021), rewilding (Choi, 2021), ecological corridor (Kim, 2015), restoration of keystone species (Jang, 2024), sanctuaries (Choi & Joo, 2021) and legal personhood designated to nature (Park, 2023)
Economy	Donut economics (Yeo, 2023), degrowth (Lee, 2024), eco-tourism (Kim, 2013), debt for nature, deforestation worker discount and zero waste businesses (Na, 2023)
Education and citizen participation	Urban youth homesteading (Lee et al., 2023), rural experience (Kim et al., 2011), ecology-based awareness and enlightenment activities (Yoon, 2019; Yu & Park, 2015), extinction rebellion movement (Jo, 2021) and citizen science of nature observation (Koh & Ye, 2022)

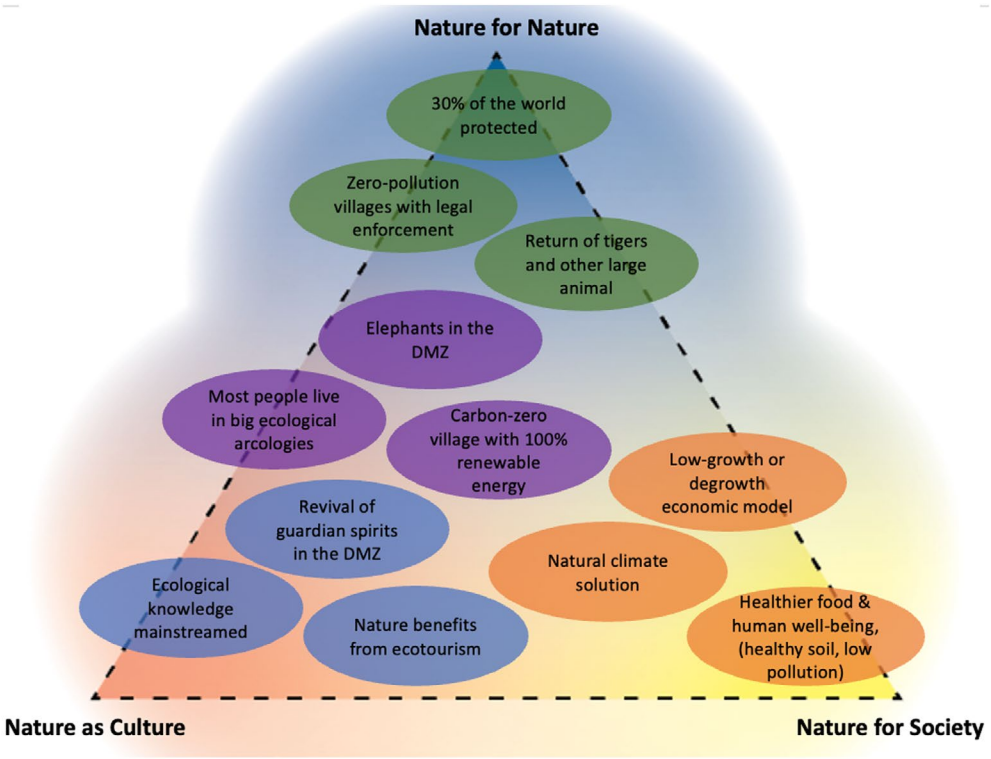

FIGURE 6 Three matured seeds chosen by each vision's group positioned in the NFF triangle: *Nature for Nature* vision (green), *Nature as Culture* vision (blue), *Nature for Society* vision (orange) and *Nature for Nature–Nature as Culture* vision (purple).

vision narratives in both native Korean and English for enhanced dissemination and use.

3.3.1 | Nature as Culture '*DMZ as Diversified Multiplied Zone*'

The Nature as Culture (NC) vision describes the multifaceted and intertwined aspects of nature and culture, focusing on three main areas: the integration of ecological knowledge into mainstream education, benefits of ecotourism for nature and inspirational branding of the DMZ by reviving its guardian spirits. This includes efforts to transform the DMZ from a mere military boundary into a symbol of eco-cultural joint development based on an independent DMZ joint governance system between North and South Korea. It envisages the DMZ as a space for co-existence between humans and nature that is underpinned by biodiversity, and where the historical preservation of the DMZ serves as a metaphor for returning to nature through embracing culture and arts. It realizes the core values of biodiversity and landscape: 'a space of coexistence where historical preservation and a return to nature are achieved.' This vision is built upon a model of self-governance that is unique to the DMZ, where the occupations of residents reflect the needs and preservation of the region. This autonomous structure enables the introduction of

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Illustration by Artist Sunkyung Im

DMZ self-governance at the political and governance level, along with the enactment of detailed legislation for ecological sustainability and disaster mitigation. Furthermore, such autonomy grants new political power to the DMZ, offering an alternative to traditional political divisions. At the institutional level, strategies are put in place for the utilization and management of the DMZ, including urban planning, transportation systems and biodiversity monitoring. Particularly, establishing ecological connectivity between North and South Korea for wildlife protection in infrastructure and transportation sectors, and building new social infrastructure that considers both nature and people is emphasized.

The importance of securing funding for the future DMZ through methods such as DMZ taxes and environmental, social and governance branding is underscored. This will expand to support DMZ ecological management through multinational cooperation's tax payments and revitalize the local economy by linking it to the ecological welfare point system. This vision revives the role of spiritual guardian of nature through DMZ branding. Branding will drive the spread of 'conservation-centred consumption' in production and consumption, leading to ecotourism and cultural branding, and the development of specialty products based on changes in the DMZ ecosystem. Ecologically positive contributions to the DMZ are incentivized through eco-point and ecological welfare point systems and programmes that recognize different specialities and therefore contributions to ecological resilience in the region. People are highly connected to the DMZ and its nature and explore ways to increase familiarity with it through innovative means such as the DMZ cloud and Metaverse (Bibri, 2022). Society envisions the DMZ space as a hub for cultural exploration and storytelling, creating new narratives that dilute political boundaries. In the fields of information and technology, this approach digitally expands citizens' experiences of the DMZ and facilitates real-time ecological monitoring and data-driven ecological research. This deep-seated connection between nature and culture is fostered from an early age by integrating ecological knowledge into mainstream education and reorganizing curricula to emphasize ecology. Specialized institutions like 'ecology higher education' are established, and ecological education is incentivized through scholarships and field trips. This education approach incorporates field experience and community interaction from early childhood development through university, promoting climate mitigation and adaptation based on cultural practices and traditional knowledge. Education is a crucial tool for fostering a deeper understanding of human–nature relationships and promoting sustainability.

Ecotourism is promoted within the DMZ through branding that restores and reawakens traditional stories of the spiritual guardians of nature. This expands awareness and understanding of the unique nature of the DMZ, embracing academic, economic, ecological and social dimensions of ecotourism. In terms of research and innovation, the focus is on integrating ecological knowledge with cultural studies, enhancing understanding of the DMZ space and establishing a local seed bank for conservation. Ecotourism leads to ecological conservation efforts, stimulating humanistic appreciation for wildlife and alleviating social stress through leisure and educational activities and creating green jobs. Furthermore, in the social and welfare sector, we strengthen welfare systems through ecotourism and cultural exploration and pursue harmonious development with primary industries based on the balance among species. Ultimately, people advocate for approaches that prioritize the preservation of the relationship between humans and nature, fostering sustainable development through ecotourism and institutional innovation. This will evolve towards integrating a culture and education system centred on ecological conservation to protect the DMZ.

3.3.2 | Nature for Society '*Greeting the Cranes (Dooroomi MZ)*'

In the Nature for Society vision, the DMZ becomes a space of opportunity where people and nature exist symbiotically. Maintaining a balance between development and preservation, this vision adopts a holistic approach to sustainability, environmental restoration, healthy food production and economic resilience with social equity, cultural preservation and human well-being for generations to come.



Illustration by Artist Jung-in Park

[Correction added on 11 April 2026, after first online publication: Inline images have been added in this version.]

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As a space rich in historical and political significance, the DMZ is preserved under strict regulations and institutional safeguards that prevent uncontrolled development and damage. It serves as a model for peace and ecological cooperation, jointly promoting afforestation and the restoration of natural habitats at the level of inter-Korean relations. The vision focuses on environmental restoration, healthy food production and a shift towards a low-growth economic model, all of which enable the creation of thriving communities in harmony with nature.

Forest afforestation and land restoration projects enhance ecological resilience and disaster mitigation capabilities by expanding carbon sinks and restoring natural habitats. This not only mitigates climate change but also restores ecosystems and conserves biodiversity. These restoration projects, coupled with ecotourism, revitalize local communities and strengthen the relationship between humans and nature. The vision emphasizes the importance of healthy soils in underpinning human well-being, highlighting the importance of eco-friendly agriculture and smart farming, the adoption of which enhances agricultural productivity while minimizing environmental impact. The biodiversity of plant genetic resources is secured by cultivating diverse native plants adapted to the ecosystem in a semi-wild state on farms in the DMZ. The production and consumption paradigm is shifting away from materialism towards prioritizing quality of life and ecological balance. As methods that reduce monoculture farming and introduce diverse crops are adopted, the economic transition to a low-growth model that prioritizes quality over infinite consumption and development. By emphasizing leisure time, efficient communication and a society where processes are valued over results, a foundation is established for a more balanced and sustainable approach to economic growth.

Governance is reoriented to reflect these priorities. Ecological and environmental laws are elevated within the legal hierarchy to provide a stable institutional foundation for sustainability. Decision-making becomes more inclusive and democratic, resolving conflicts between human and ecological needs through transparent procedures that respect community values and individual rights.

Advanced information technology fosters symbiotic connections between people and nature. Through information and communications technology-assisted smart farms, eco-friendly agriculture, ecotourism and adoption of innovative technology, rural communities thrive while preserving natural heritage and fostering a deeper connection with nature. This vision of wise, eco-friendly and sustainable communities is to create a complex cultural environment integrating education, tourism and experiential activities, thereby enhancing citizens' mental well-being and establishing the regional identity of 'healthy rurality' as a cultural asset.

3.3.3 | Nature for Nature '*Dancing With Tigers*'

In the Nature for Nature vision, the DMZ has transformed into a beacon of hope, a space for ecological peace. The entire DMZ is recognized as the world's first ecological legal entity, prioritizing the rights of all living species in the DMZ. This metamorphosis was achieved through three environmental goals: recovery of large mammals, 30% expansion of protected areas globally and zero-pollution villages. Multinational consensus around conservation is achieved through effective articulation and communication of the shared goals and benefits of large mammal conservation facilitated by the 'Northeast Asia International Cooperation for Tiger Conservation' Asian black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*) have been successfully restored in both Koreas and now travel unrestricted through the DMZ's ecological corridor. In the early stages of identifying priority sites for conservation in the northeast Asian region, the DMZ was selected as a core conservation zone, prompting the establishment and expansion of protected areas that now form a regional network of interconnected ecological corridors. The expansion of global protected areas was complemented by comprehensive policies that protect and restore endangered species, with nature granted legal rights equivalent to humans. Through this process, the DMZ established itself as a politically, culturally and socially neutral hub for exchange, serving as a testing ground for improving inter-Korean relations and fostering international cooperation.



Illustration by Artist Jihyung Kim

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The formation of a conservation-centred ecological environment and the realization of an inclusive society operated as the DMZ's core philosophy, enabling people and nature to coexist even within a space separated from each other. This comprehensive conservation effort transformed the DMZ and surrounding areas, which became the cornerstone of an environment-friendly socio-economic system for local communities. These positive changes from the restoration of the DMZ's environment, with cleaner air, water and soil, contribute to the eradication of diseases and health problems. Restoring nature enhances human well-being and positively impacts human settlements by creating a sustainable ecological environment. Instead of exploiting nature to obtain agricultural products, practices like eco-friendly farming and foraging are revived, and movements to protect nature and revitalization. The communities in the DMZ thrive on revitalized economies. Economic opportunities, such as ecotourism, attract eco-friendly investment groups and boost sustainable trade activities related to biodiversity, climate change and pollution. Corporate investment in pristine areas and the promotion of low-carbon businesses foster the understanding that nature's progress is synonymous with corporate progress, creating a virtuous cycle. Robust research and development of new technologies support the creation of pollution-free villages and low-carbon infrastructure. Digital monitoring of ecological environments and disaster response technology enhance the climate resilience and safety of the DMZ.

Settlements are designed to harmonize with the landscape, emphasizing population density, energy efficiency and climate resilience. Infrastructure uses natural materials that blend well with the surrounding landscape. New transportation infrastructure such as drone-based public transit minimizes its impact on the natural environment, unlike existing transportation infrastructure, thereby respecting the interrelationships among species and achieving harmony with the natural landscape. The expansion of protected areas safeguards the health and integrity of the entire DMZ's social-ecological system. Without pollution, restored habitats, vast protected areas, and benefits to nature and people are manifold. Once endangered species, such as tigers, now thrive and contribute to building resilient ecosystems.

Healthier communities have led to lower healthcare costs, while nature-based economies now sustain and revitalize local livelihoods, fostering a vibrant eco-culture across the region. These gains have made the DMZ the centre for domestic and international exchanges on ecology and peace. From an educational and communication perspective, it provides the foundation for international communications and ecological management through a series of processes that accumulate ecological knowledge and digital networks. The DMZ has emerged as a model for the transformative power of nature-centred human stewardship.

3.3.4 | Nature for Nature–Nature as Culture '*A Future Village Restored for All Species*'

In this Nature for Nature and Nature as Culture infused future, Korea had undergone a remarkable transformation into a harmonious and ecologically conscious society. The once-divided DMZ now stands as a symbol of environmental rejuvenation, where endangered species like the Fairy pitta and elephants roam freely in the DMZ. The DMZ serves as an ecological living space realizing the harmonious co-existence of humans and nature, where nature serves for nature's sake while simultaneously acquiring cultural symbolism. The air is filled with the sounds of birds and animals, and the lush forests intertwine with the urban landscape, creating a serene and balanced environment. The government has embraced a holistic approach to conservation, expanding protected areas along the border and actively restoring ecosystems. This promotes stability in inter-Korean relations and international cooperation while providing a foundation for reducing labour and social status conflicts among members of society and expanding cultural leisure. Ecovillages cover the landscape across the country, where people live in harmony with nature, embracing the benefits of biodiversity and sustainable practices. Self-sustaining eco-villages and nationwide eco-architecture promote a core philosophy that realizes nature-friendly living and strives for an altruistic society. Carbon-zero villages powered by renewable energy are the norm, and payments for ecosystem services ensure the well-being of the environment and local communities. This preference for decentralized living spreads within cities and creates smaller, nature-friendly communities.



Illustration by Artist Ahyoung Won

Architectural innovations, such as wildlife migration corridors, prevent the collision of urban life with the natural world. Urban architecture that incorporates wildlife corridors and decentralized low-rise buildings secures green infrastructure and biodiversity. The laughter of people echoes through calm and green cityscapes, where the movement of heat and energy is optimized, making the cities sustainable and pleasant places to live. Urban natural landscapes, such as ecological corridors within cities, enhance human well-being and mental health, while nature-based education helps people develop ecological sensitivity. Lifelong environmental education throughout the country and field trips to the DMZ promote a deep connection with nature, reducing stress, anxiety, depression and violence in society. Research on sustainable architecture, energy sources and

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invasive species control has become a core task in education and communication, particularly in nature-related fields education fosters citizens' ecological senses and contributes to a populace that values time, happiness and a low-growth economy. The demand for green jobs and the expansion of renewable energy industries reduces youth unemployment and increases volunteerism in older generations that live longer and healthier. In this transformed society, economic sustainability is intertwined with ecological preservation. A circular economy has been established that utilizes technology to prevent ecosystem destruction and promote efficient energy consumption. The carbon neutrality card symbolizes responsible citizenship, encouraging public services to reduce carbon emissions and moderate competition in the private sector.

Decision-making power has shifted beyond government and institutions to the grassroots level. Citizens actively engage in conservation efforts, demanding more from their government and supporting businesses that align with their ecological values. Consumer preferences prioritizing nature conservation and the development of eco-friendly businesses align with grassroots democracy and strengthen citizens' support for well-being values. The transformation takes place to create a caring society with diminished inequality as mutual understanding and selflessness replace fierce competition in society. Korea has become a society where citizens' voices are heard, and politicians and businesses adapt to the changing preferences and demands. People live more like nature, embracing symbiotic relationships and activating grassroots democracy. Artificial intelligence (AI) and robots are used as tools for enhancing the quality of life, reducing labour deficit and minimizing social conflict. In this future Korea, the journey towards a sustainable and harmonious co-existence with nature is a reality built on ecological awareness, compassion and a shared commitment to the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants.

Using a series of established methodologies in the futuring discipline enhanced participants' ability to understand, engage and build up their visions. Interactive and discussion-oriented exercises facilitated by knowledgeable and experienced experts created a welcoming and safe space for the visioning. Locally contextualizing the frameworks with concrete examples that participants could relate to enhanced understanding. In this respect, both nature's values and local seeds were instrumental in broadening the horizon and diversifying building blocks with initiatives that participants could imagine mainstreaming in their future space. Combining local seeds with global seeds also helped connect the regional scales and align the initiatives that can synergize and progress the world towards shared visions.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study contributes to ongoing debates on how societies can navigate transformations towards more just and sustainable relationships with nature. In the growing literature on transformations to sustainability (O'Brien et al., 2025; Westley et al., 2013), visioning exercises are increasingly recognized as tools that link imagination with action by allowing diverse actors to articulate and negotiate plural values of nature. By applying integrative frameworks that connect global policy goals, scientific understanding and participatory practice within a geopolitically sensitive setting, this study provides a novel test of how the science–policy–society interface can operate under conditions of political constraint.

4.1 | Comparison of four Korean Nature Futures visions and geopolitical implications

The four visions imagine the future of the Korean Peninsula (South Korea in particular) where existing local initiatives scale up to become mainstream and contribute to maintaining an ecologically diverse, sustainable and thriving DMZ. Peacekeeping emerged as a pre-condition to these visions as our futures focused on peaceful co-existence of people and nature in the DMZ. Given the geopolitical dependence of peacekeeping and peacebuilding, the visioning of DMZ accounted for the readiness of South Korea in the changing global environment. With these overall goals, the visions present both distinct and nuanced characteristics of the three value perspectives on nature. Despite predefined commonalities and differences associated with normative assumptions, distinctive features emerged that are unique to Korean society (Table 2).

The theme that is recurring the most among the four visions is a strong call for rewilding, with the DMZ as a focal zone for restoring natural ecosystems and anchoring mitigation and adaptation to climate change in the Korean Peninsula. Similarly, all four visions also recognize biodiversity as an important value of the DMZ. The DMZ is described as a space where humans and many non-human species live in symbiosis and where ecological connections between species can be more explicitly illustrated and considered based on ecological knowledge. Integrating and balancing nature conservation and socio-economic needs of local communities can present challenges, but the visions also illustrate how this may be achievable in diverse forms and mechanisms.

Across visions, local communities play a central and leading role in stewarding and benefiting from the DMZ's ecological state and resources. There is unanimous agreement that the future of the DMZ will enhance local livelihoods and well-being, underscoring the importance of community engagement in conservation efforts and decision-making processes. Furthermore, each vision acknowledges the DMZ's unique capacity as a significant educational and restorative space (Kim et al., 2005), enhancing ecological literacy and social cohesion. All visions emphasize the long history of overcoming conflicts in the DMZ with its potential as a space for fostering deeper connections between humans and the natural world. Developing sustainable ecotourism and educational programmes with hospitable engagement of local communities is anticipated to reduce conflicts and hardships of the residents in the border area (Lee & Maeng, 2012). Promoting traditional ecological living with profound spatial, historical and cultural connections to the area is

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TABLE 2 Comparison of four visions with common and specific features across domains of relevance to the Korean system (see Supporting Information SV for the Korean version).

Domains	Common features across visions	Divergent features across visions	Nature as Culture (NaC)
3 Seeds			1. Revival of Guardian spirits in DMZ 2. Ecological knowledge is mainstream 3. Nature benefits from Ecotourism
Core philosophy	Harmony between human activities and nature for ecological conservation	Form and style of human–nature co-existence	Integration of ecological knowledge with cultural and educational systems
Governance	Localized and decentralized democratic governance that are cooperative and inclusive	Type of governance and scale at control/coordination	DMZ autonomy, legislation to sustain the ecological environment and minimize disasters
Social structure	Community engagement and well-being focused, valuing and protecting ecosystems and nature	Level of inequality or conflict and how they are mitigated	Minimized economic inequality, Eco (welfare) point system
Population and human settlement	Sustainable rural communities reversing the trend of rural depopulation and aging	Type and area of residence	Integration of diverse stakeholders, ecosystem-based business mobilizing human settlement
Economy	Circular, low-growth, and well-being economy that is sustainable and environmentally friendly	Focus industries and mode of operation	National ecosystem-based economy (e.g. tourism, harvests), harmonious development of primary industries
Businesses	Increase sustainable, clean businesses, contribute to systemic change in the labour force	Focus of investment and mode of operation	Ecotourism, businesses and tax payments by multinational corporations
Production and consumption	Localized, recycling, reduction, sustainable production and consumption	Type of production and level of consumption	Conservation-driven, ecotourism and cultural branding, ecosystem change-based speciality products
Infrastructure and transportation	Reduced environmental impact, landscapes in harmony with nature	Styles and materials for infrastructure, consideration of nature protection	Social infrastructure that considers nature and humans
Information and technology	Environmental monitoring enhancing sustainable living and quality of life, ecological education	Focus of IT development	Promote familiarity with the DMZ space through the DMZ Cloud and Metaverse cyber space
Research and innovation	New developments that support both ecological and social well-being	Area of focus and investment	Combining ecological knowledge and cultural tradition, better understanding of DMZ, regional seed banks for conservation
Education and communication	Raised awareness of ecological issues, creating a deeper connection between people and nature	Focus, modes, principles	Field visits, diverse teaching methods, community interaction from early childhood to university
Climate mitigation and adaptation	Stabilizes natural ecosystems to minimize disasters and to increase climate change resilience	Type of approaches knowledge and technology	Climate adaptation based on cultural practices and traditional knowledge, application of ecological management technologies
Biodiversity, nature, land/seascapes	Strengthens ecological connectivity, ecological management based on symbiosis and balance between constituent species	Area, form, and mechanisms of protection and restoration	Historical preservation and return of nature, ecological connections between North and South for wildlife conservation, wider integration of culture and education for unclassified ecological conservation
Pollution (air, water, soil/chemical, noise, light, plastic, etc.)	Cleaner air, water, soil composition, reduced noise, light and plastic pollution	Mechanisms for pollution reduction as co-benefits	Ecological monitoring makes efficient detection and control of pollution
Societal and human well-being	Participation in decision-making and reconnecting with nature, sustainable living	Modes of enhancing social cohesion and well-being	Nature- and tradition-based innovation builds new communities closing generational gap
Inter-Korean relations	Peacekeeping, friendly exchanges, and cooperative ecological conservation	Form of governance and region of focus	Joint autonomous governance of DMZ Joint ecological and cultural innovation
Emphasis of human and nature relations	Human–nature		Human–nature

[Correction added on 4 April 2026, after first online publication: The heading 'Domains' has been added to the first column of Table 2.].

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Nature for Society (NfS)	Nature for Nature (NfN)	Nature for Nature and Nature as Culture
1. Nature-based climate solution 2. Healthier food & human well-being 3. Low-growth or degrowth economic model	1. 30% of world protected 2. Return of tiger and other large animals 3. Carbon neutral, zero-pollution villages	1. Most people live in big ecological arcologies 2. Elephants in DMZ 3. Villages run on 100% renewable energy
Balance of social progress with environmental restoration	Conservation-focused resilient ecosystems, inclusive society	Harmonious co-existence of humans and nature, altruistic society
Legalization of ecological and environmental laws	Support for multinational cooperation on biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration and climate mitigation	Grassroots democracy rooted on diversity, support for citizen's values and preference for nature conservation and well-being
Ecological living environments, rural community building, sustainable community development	DMZ as a centre for politically, culturally and socially neutral exchange, active environmental groups	Minimized conflict in labour and social status, expanded cultural space
Rural economic revitalization by young generations, smart and eco-friendly farming	Human settlements separated from the expansion of protected areas for large mammals	Archology (ecological architecture) across the country, self-sustaining ecovillages
Shift from consumption of services, ideas, and content to revitalized agriculture	Ecotourism, low-carbon enterprises, trade centred on biodiversity conservation by multinational corporates	Increased jobs in renewable energy industries, income generation based on conservation
Smart farms and eco-friendly agriculture, transition to artisan corporate culture	Investment in retaining nature intact, corporate development centres on nature	Respecting consumer preferences for nature protection, development of eco-friendly companies
Reduced materialism, revitalization of native crops, eco-friendly agriculture, reduced monocultures	Reduced waste, restored food webs, eco-friendly agriculture with reduced pesticide use	Low consumption, carbon neutrality cards, mandatory solar panels and recycling
Eco-friendly living/ecotherapy, prioritizing the preservation of biodiversity	Living infrastructure that considers climate resilience and natural landscapes, natural materials, public transport using drone technology	Green infrastructure, urban architecture with wildlife corridors, decentralized low-rise buildings preventing wildlife collision, solar panels on infrastructure
Breakthrough in communication with nature using AI and IT technologies, recycling technology	Digital monitoring of the environment to enhance proactive response to ecological changes and disasters	Technology to prevent ecosystem destruction and improve quality of life, enhance carbon capture, energy efficiency
Carbon capture research, native agricultural products, pollinator population recovery research	International cooperation in conservation science, clean energy and infrastructure research	Sustainable architecture and renewable energy, decentralized living, invasive alien species control
Nonverbal experience, communication with nature, positive use of spiritual culture and cultural devices	Utilizes digital and international networks, species-specific knowledge	Lifelong environmental education, humble attitude towards areas beyond human control and comprehension
Expansion of carbon sinks through reforestation and land restoration, introducing nature-based disaster mitigation technologies	Habitat restoration, enhancing climate change capacity through complementarity between species, digital climate change and environmental management systems	Ecosystem-based comprehensive climate adaptation measures
Creating natural habitat and ecological dynamics, protecting endangered areas as green infrastructure (e.g. wetlands)	Expansion of protected areas for key mammal restoration, Baekdudaegan ecological corridors, regional network of small ecosystems	Expansion of biosphere reserves, ecosystem restoration with herbivore species, ecosystem/food web management and protection
Improved and sustainable land use and agricultural practices, reduced use of pesticides and herbicides	Construction of buildings using natural materials (e.g. wood and earth), achieving zero pollution	Improved ecological corridors in the city, soundscapes in harmony with nature reducing pollution (e.g. air, noise)
Improving mental health through integrated access to ecotherapy, cultural/recreational space, urban forests, and community-based living	Reducing health risks by restoring nature, reduced healthcare costs	Improving well-being through ecological sensitivity enhanced with nature-based education, improving mental health by reducing inequality and competition
Cooperation on DMZ forest diversification and natural habitat restoration	Joint management of the Baekdudaegan Ecological Corridor through inter-Korean cooperation	Autonomous management of the DMZ and CCZ as an expanded ecological conservation area
Human–human, human–nature	Human–human, human–nature, nature–nature	Human–nature, nature–nature

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seen as key to fostering a harmonious co-existence of nature and people (Jeong et al., 2019).

Different value representations across the visions present different forms of human–nature interactions, economic models, governance systems, autonomy of citizens and the use of technology and innovation (Table 2). The 'Nature as Culture' and 'Nature for Society' visions integrate human activities with ecological stewardship via ecosystem-based settlement and businesses, and ecological living in rural communities, respectively. In contrast, the 'Nature for Nature' vision spares space for nature to reduce human pressure and allows key ecological processes to take place at large spatial extents. The 'Nature for Nature-Nature as Culture' vision integrates nature across the country with most people living in arcologies, large self-sustaining architectural complexes designed to minimize impact on ecosystems.

The motivation for economic transformation varies among the visions, with 'Nature for Nature', 'Nature for Society' and 'Nature for Nature-Nature as Culture' envisioning a low-growth model focused on quality of life and enhanced livelihood (Kim, 2014). All four visions support a variety of smaller scale, community-oriented and fair-profit-based businesses that are to varying degrees connected to government, cities and large corporations for more inclusive and equitable futures for all (Aghion et al., 2022). Governance and autonomy within the DMZ also vary among the visions, from an autonomous ministry for the governance of the DMZ in 'Nature as Culture', grassroots and local community-driven governance in 'Nature for Nature-Nature as Culture', to collaborative multi-stakeholder governance that involves both national governments and international bodies in 'Nature for Nature'. These variations present diverse options that are possible in the future governance of the DMZ.

Technology and education are integrated into the visions with varying beliefs about the role of innovation and traditional knowledge in achieving ecological and societal goals. All visions embrace new technological solutions for ecosystem monitoring and sustainable living, but how technology is used and who manages it is different. While local knowledge and experience-based ecological education contribute to learning and living in harmony with nature in 'Nature for Nature-Nature as Culture' and 'Nature as Culture' visions, the use of smart technology and AI is also highlighted in a variety of forms in enhancing the monitoring and management of nature and its benefits and security to people in 'Nature for Nature' and 'Nature for Society' visions.

The inter-Korean cooperation becomes important in enabling envisaged visions for conservation and restoration. In 'Nature as Culture', an autonomous joint governance system is established in the DMZ for ecological conservation and cultural innovation while 'Nature for Nature' requires inter-Korean joint management of the ecological corridor opening the border along the Baekdudaegan mountain range. 'Nature for Society' and 'Nature for Nature-Nature as Culture' visions also benefit from inter-Korean exchange for cooperative restoration founded on ecological principles and by expanding large ecological conservation areas in and around the DMZ and CCZ. These varied forms of inter-Korean cooperation present diverse approaches to rebuilding nature and people relations in a divided nation.

The peninsula's geopolitical division shaped both the process and content of the visions. With the main focus of visioning on human–nature relationships, and peaceful co-existence with reduced security concerns considered as pre-conditions to the future of the Korean Peninsula, the conflict and tension between the two sides of Korea was neither considered centrally in the visioning process nor presented explicitly in the visions. Further, despite relevance and importance, given logistical constraints, these visions only reflect the worldviews of South Koreans as North Koreans did not partake in the workshop. Hence, while the visions refer to the 'Korean Peninsula', they only present the aspirations of South Korea. Recognizing this limitation is essential for future phases of visioning if the DMZ is to become a genuine space for reimagining co-existence between people and nature across the Korean Peninsula.

At the same time, these constraints revealed how citizen-led visioning can open new possibilities for peaceful co-existence even amid political division. The DMZ's paradoxical status as both a militarized boundary and an ecological refuge shows how spaces of exclusion can foster imagination and renewal. Within such tension, the science–policy–society interface becomes less institutional and more cultural—sustained through dialogue, symbolism and creative practice. Visioning can be a way to decolonize the mind and prevailing development logics (Ansari et al., 2023). In this spirit, the combination of the NFF and the SoGA approach helped participants articulate novel and plausible pathways for people and nature in Korea.

4.2 | Transformative potential of nature–people relationship-centred visions in the Korean Peninsula

It is well established that articulating visions of aspirational futures has transformative potential to disrupt the status quo and catalyse the emergence of co-imagined futures (O'Brien et al., 2025). Undertaking a nature–people focused visioning process in the DMZ allowed for this potential to emerge desirable visions with a unique context for contributing to new imaginaries of what could happen even within the geopolitical conflict context (Oomen et al., 2022). The DMZ holds potential for ecological transformations in various ways, including high biodiversity, intact ecosystems, ecological restoration history and key areas for ecological connectivity (e.g. habitats for endangered species, such as migratory bird red-crowned cranes [*Grus japonensis*], Amur tigers [*Panthera tigris*] and Asian black bears). Furthermore, small initiatives and movements such as eco-villages, cooperatives and nature-based schools have been growing as alternative systems over the last decades (Park & Kim, 2022). These communities of practices enhance the awareness and informed decisions around biodiversity, climate change and sustainable living. Korea has experienced how sustainability initiatives can be scaled up through collaboration between civil society

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and government in building social cohesion and cultivating communal values. These conditions of the Korean Peninsula provide a potential for synergistic upscaling of existing seeds towards preferred nature–people-positive futures.

Today, certain areas of the Korean DMZ are designated as biosphere reserves in the Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB). Despite this designation, continued monitoring and stringent oversight remain critical to ensure conservation efficacy. Recent events such as the mass mortality of wild gorals (*Naemorhedus caudatus*) following the installation of extensive barriers in response to the African Swine Fever (ASF) outbreak highlight the pressing needs for robust institutional mechanisms to safeguard biodiversity in the DMZ (Kim, 2019; Yoon & Choi, 2023). Further, varied mechanisms of rewilding with proper design and management can present unprecedented potential for ecological restoration to build biodiversity and climate resilience in the Korean Peninsula and the broader Asian region (Stark et al., 2025; Svenning, 2020). Therefore, conservation and development planning needs to carefully consider strategies and tools that can assess and mitigate potential risks from the design stage (Bull et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2021), such as through geospatial data and statistical analyses that informed the successful reintroduction and management of the Asiatic black bear in Mt. Jiri (Kim et al., 2018). Further, the zoning approach of the UNESCO's MAB programme may align well with how the NFF recognizes diverse values underpinning different protection and management forms of conservation. The MAB's core area, strictly protecting nature aligns with the 'Nature for Nature' perspective, while the MAB's buffer zone — allowing research, monitoring and education — and MAB's transition area — fostering sociocultural and ecologically sustainable economic and human activities — resonating with nuanced representations of 'Nature for Society' and 'Nature as Culture' perspectives respectively (Park & Yeom, 2023). Spatial planning and prioritization of core, buffer and transition areas based on biodiversity and nature's diverse values can foster a more sustainable and equitable co-existence of people and nature within and around the DMZ through community-led management with government and technological support (Moon, 2021).

Today, one of the greatest threats to human security in Korea is climate change, which has resulted in frequent landslides, wildfires, floods and heatwaves in both cities and rural areas, as well as the northern movement of food sources on land and in the ocean. Hence, tackling climate-related risks and nature-related risks through synergistic interventions will be key to sustainable and efficient transformation, as exemplified in the visions. With Korea's financial, technological and scientific advancements and capacity, it can enable a national transformation towards an energy-efficient and carbon-neutral society (Kim et al., 2021). However, a zero-carbon scenario is not likely achievable without a substantial reduction in energy consumption both within and outside the country, with improved efficiency and sustainability of renewable energy production and use (Han & Min, 2022). Furthermore, technological solutions need to consider socio-economic requirements and implications as people without access to public services, particularly those marginalized and vulnerable, are more likely to be affected by climate change and nature crises (Chung & Kim, 2024). Hence, a broad range of complex intertwined risks needs to be better assessed and forecasted to respond with readiness to support the populations exposed to different risks (Simpson et al., 2021).

The deployment of renewable energy technologies and climate change mitigation practices, while essential for long-term environmental sustainability, also comes with ecological consequences (Kim et al., 2024). The installation and operation of solar panels and wind turbines can disrupt wildlife habitats through noise, vibrations, obstructions and habitat loss (Kim et al., 2024). Hence, careful environmental impact assessments and design are essential to minimize these disturbances and to ensure responsible development of infrastructure. In afforestation practices, aging timber removal and reforestation require careful evaluation of their ecological consequences. Felling trees for replanting can significantly disrupt established ecosystems and displace wildlife populations (Song, 2018). Therefore, impact assessment on dynamic changes in the vegetation and wildlife communities is essential, including the extent of displacement and potential migration of species. Ultimately, achieving human co-existence with wildlife requires acknowledging trade-offs — a degree of compromise to achieve desired goals. It necessitates an ethical discourse on the extent of responsibility the humanity bears on maintaining ecological integrity. An open discussion is needed to better understand and address the inherent trade-offs between conservation and development into the far future from inter-generational and inter-species perspectives. This means that the impact of human progress and prosperity does not come at the price of the livelihood and security of future generations. These visions offer the first impetus towards that direction.

Integrating and enhancing ecological understanding and diverse values of nature in educational programmes across disciplinary practices and generations is crucial for cultivating a citizenry that prioritizes communal well-being beyond individual well-being (Park, 2021). Such education can foster a sense of responsibility, equipping people to become active participants in safeguarding Planet Earth. Creating an inter-generational learning environment that acknowledges the historical, ecological and cultural significance of natural ecosystems, such as the DMZ, through storytelling and evidence on relational as well as instrumental benefits of nature, will help create a sense of shared ownership rooted in identity (Pascual et al., 2023). Ultimately, the key to lasting ecological stewardship is in citizens' enhanced environmental awareness practiced in everyday life (Hong, 2023). By engaging in conservation, educational and cultural practices within and through the DMZ, Korean society may increase its potential to catalyse transformations that go beyond the boundaries of this conflicted yet special area of the nation.

While nature- and people-centred visioning of the DMZ has signalled new and different ways of perceiving and imagining futures, these innovative and inspirational efforts require domestic laws and institutional regulations to support their implementation.

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South Korea's legal system has yet to evolve to address the complex geopolitical and environmental challenges presented by the DMZ (Kim, 2022). Managing the DMZ's unique biodiversity and ecological potential requires comprehensive mechanisms with legal frameworks that allow cross-border cooperation and resolve military and political constraints that impede conservation efforts (Hwang et al., 2019). Furthermore, to enable the upscaling of initiatives such as eco-villages and rewilding, Korea requires legal instruments that can reform land use and support wildlife conservation and ecosystem restoration initiatives (Kil, 2023). Equally importantly, a substantial shift in societal norms, values and motivations are needed for transformation in the economic system towards sustainability- and well-being-oriented futures (Pascual et al., 2021). An innovative and integrative governance system that considers nature and human well-being centrally across sectors would be essential in institutionalizing the long-term sustainability of social, ecological and economic transformations in the Korean Peninsula.

4.3 | Co-developing future scenarios in science–policy–society interfaces to improve implementation potential

The visioning of the future of the Korean DMZ at the DMZ Open Festival's *2023 EcoPeace Forum* provided an important opportunity to test global policy and scientific frameworks (*CBD Living in Harmony with Nature*, *IPBES NFF*, *SoGA*) in a new science–policy–society interface hosted by a subnational government. A science–policy–society interface extends the science–policy interface concept by explicitly incorporating society as a domain—including citizens, communities and non-governmental stakeholders—into both scientific knowledge generation and participatory governance processes. While the science–policy interface has been well-established in biodiversity conservation and climate science (Sarkki et al., 2025), the science–policy–society interfaces broaden this framework to reflect the critical relational, non-linear and non-hierarchical dynamics of interactions across the research landscape, governance systems and the broader society to enhance the societal relevance of research, co-construct context-relevant, actionable evidence and strengthen research uptake in broader decision spaces—increasing the transformative potential through the whole-of-society approach (IPBES, 2019). The process was successful at convening diverse stakeholders to shift the discourse of the Forum to preferable and positive future possibilities, moving beyond the challenges of geopolitical history. The concept of 'visioning' or 'imagining' sustainable futures is not yet widely practiced in governments and societies. Accordingly, considerable time was required to communicate the principles, motivations and methods to the wide range of stakeholders involved in organizing the visioning at the *2023 EcoPeace Forum*.

In a uniquely designed science–policy–society interface created for citizens' enriched experience and learning about the DMZ's historical, ecological and cultural values through arts, music, sports and academic events, the convening agency Gyeonggi Province patiently anticipated and persistently supported the visioning process with openness to learn the new concepts and practices. The youth and adult participants in the visioning workshop embraced and appreciated the experience of visioning preferable futures, continuing their engagement post the workshop by co-developing the narratives presented in this paper and by participating in training to facilitate visioning at the *2024 EcoPeace Forum*. The Northern Gyeonggi Province also took the initiative to apply the NFF when co-developing their planned autonomous governance system at the *2024 EcoPeace Forum*, for a balanced consideration of ecological, cultural/historical, and economic values and potentials in the DMZ, CCZ and bordering area.

The visioning workshop filled a crucial gap by bringing to the forefront the perspectives of citizens that are often not engaged or considered in national planning. However, the workshop lacked participants from government agencies or major corporations who play an influential role in shaping the national developments. This participant composition likely enabled citizens to envision the future more freely, without the constraints of institutional interests. Given participants' leadership roles across diverse civil society organizations, as well as the private and the public sectors, they are well positioned to serve as ambassadors and catalysts for initiating transformative actions within their respective communities to realize the co-developed visions. This visioning study, together with earlier studies that developed and applied similar methods in other locations around the world (Okayasu et al., 2025), demonstrated strong potential for advancing participatory scenario development in support of inclusive governance. Achieving sustainable societal transformation requires collective learning and action across all sectors and science–policy–society interfaces such as the 'DMZ Open Festival' could play a pivotal role in enabling this process around the world (IPBES, 2023; O'Brien et al., 2025).

The open-dialogue-based Forum created a safe space for all stakeholders to engage and learn without boundaries. The participatory, encouraging and enabling environment was key to creative visioning with each individual participant representing his or her voice as a citizen. Moreover, what uniquely enhanced this visioning was the integration of arts, music and sports in the programme of the 'DMZ Open Festival', which allowed facilitators and participants to learn and experience the region's historical and cultural context prior to the workshop. In the future, having actors from the regional government and the economic sector as participants in the process could allow more explicit consideration of realism and tensions in exploring future pathways. Participatory visioning that involves citizens and broader societal actors should be able to inform government planning (Sellberg et al., 2020). In fact, this aligns with the open and democratic governance principles of the new Administration in Korea, whereby the government is actively seeking to engage with diverse parts of Korean society, including the marginalized and less privileged groups, younger and older generations with unique challenges of the era, to ensure that all voices are represented in key planning and decision processes. Given the central role of 'future planning' in governance, establishing a sustainable infrastructure for

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science–policy–society interfaces is a novel and timely endeavour for nations such as Korea to exemplify anticipatory, democratic and participatory governance. Moreover, Korea takes pride in its long-standing passion for arts, music and innovation. Exploring how the future visions, and science and policy supporting their realization, can be communicated and disseminated through creative means, can offer great potential to inspire and engage broader parts of Korean society.

4.4 | Learning and next steps

Large voluntary collaborative efforts such as the *EcoPeace Forum*, which bring together bottom-up initiatives, require a governance system that functions as a learning organization. To this end, the Forum could establish an open and horizontal governance system, modelled after the unique science-policy-society interface it has created, to facilitate more efficient and organic collaboration between the organizers and other contributors. Furthermore, scenario development projects such as visioning require considerable preparation and post-processing time. To ensure that the process and its outcomes are transparent, relevant, credible and useful for stakeholders, they need to be supported by comprehensive background research, locally tailored programme design, moderator training that combines content knowledge with facilitation skills, rigorous analyses of resulting materials validated by local literature and evidence, and diplomatic and well-concerted communication with key actors. To fully realize the potential of the science-policy-society interfaces, securing sufficient resources will be essential to enable meaningful engagement and to maximize the potential of scenario-based approaches to catalysing sustainable transformations.

A research project 'Korean Nature Futures' was launched in 2024 following the *2023 EcoPeace Forum* to elaborate the future visions with realizable pathways and to generate new and timely evidence to inform synergistic policies around biodiversity conservation, climate neutrality and societal well-being on the Korean Peninsula. Integrating complementary systems of knowledge and scientific and modelling advancements, the Korean Nature Futures project aspires to inform potential policies and actions for societal, ecological and economic transformations towards the citizens' preferred futures, shifting the paradigm of future prospecting from risk-oriented forecasting to actionable pathway co-constructed with citizen stakeholders.

5 | CONCLUSION

Korea is a nation with deep historical and ecological connections that have been reshaped by geopolitics and rapid societal and technological change. This study shows how participatory visioning can connect local aspirations for peace and ecological renewal with national and global sustainability goals in a geopolitically sensitive setting. Centring the visioning on human–nature relationships with the DMZ as a place for ecological peace and harmonious co-existence proved to have transformative potential given its immense historical, cultural and ecological meanings and values in Korean society. The visions presented in this paper illustrate the diversity of existing initiatives and practices that have the potential to cultivate new norms and values, both by reviving history and tradition and innovating through science, technology and culture. The stakeholder co-developed visions in this study highlight diverse benefits of harmonizing human activities with ecological principles and the role of intrinsic, instrumental and cultural values in creating inclusive and equitable futures. Given Korea's dynamic and innovative transformation potential, it is an opportune time to explore and exemplify new pathways towards more sustainable, equitable and liveable futures. These positive futures will only be realizable with societal, ecological and economic readiness of the nation, and with transformations and cooperations of the global community beyond the boundaries of the border. The visions presented in this paper identified diverse ways in which the local, regional and national actors can act today to move towards the global goal of *'Living in Harmony with Nature'* for more liveable and just futures for all.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

HyeJin Kim: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analyses, writing—original draft and editing, project administration, supervision. **Garry Peterson, Brian W. Miller, Sanha Kim, Laura M. Pereira, SoEun Ahn, Paula A. Harrison, Junsoo Kim, and Kyung Ah Koo**: Methodology, formal analysis, writing—original draft and editing. **Hyeonjeong Kim, Lisa Yeonjung Gwon, Jaegyun Im, Gwanwoo Jin, Bohun Kang, Hanvit Lee, Seul-gi Lee, Chunhwa Park, Jiyeon Park, Soojin Park, Miyoung Yeo, Yea-YI Yoon**: Resources, investigation, validation, data curation, writing—review and editing. **Yukyong Jung Yun Choe, Youngcheol Cho, and Mijung Im**: Validation, writing—review and editing, project administration. **Jae Chun Choe:** Conceptualization, writing—review and editing, funding acquisition, project administration, supervision.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the valuable contributions made by all participants of the Visioning Workshop. We also appreciate the artists (Jung-in Park, Ahyoung Won, Jihyung Kim, Sunkyung Im) who attended and developed illustrations of the future visions and four writers (Miyoung Yeo, Sujin Park, Kyuri Kim, Yejin Kim) who documented the workshop in records. Finally, this workshop was possible with the platform created by the financial and time commitment of the Gyeonggi Provincial Office and its Peace Cooperation Division and Gyeonggi Tourism Organization. We thank three reviewers and the editors who provided constructive comments to this manuscript. This work was supported by the UKCEH's National Capability for Global Challenge. A portion of this work was supported by the North Central Climate Adaptation Science Center. Any use of trade, firm or product names is for descriptive purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the US government. We thank all of the contributors who worked behind the scenes in making this participatory visioning a successful start for the Korean Peninsula and beyond.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no known conflict of interest by any authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data that were collected from the visioning workshop and analysed for this publication is archived and accessible in Zenodo: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18965193.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Supporting Information SI. List of stakeholder participants, facilitators and organizers.

Supporting Information SII. Seeds in initial and mature conditions.

Supporting Information SIII. 2023 Ecopeace Forum Visioning Workshop Program.

Supporting Information SIV. Visions' summary (in Korean) and full narratives.

Supporting Information SV. Comparison of four visions with common and specific features across domains of relevance to the Korean system (in Korean).

[Correction added on 4 April 2026, after first online publication: The caption for the Supporting Information SV has been updated.].

How to cite this article: Kim, H., Peterson, G., Kim, H., Lee, H., Yeo, M., Cho, Y., Harrison, P. A., Jin, G., Kang, B., Kim, J., Kim, S., Koo, K. A., Miller, B. W., Pereira, L. M., Ahn, S., Gwon, L. Y., Im, J., Lee, S.-g., Park, C., … Choe, J. C. (2026). *Visioning* ecologically diverse and harmonious futures of Korea in *Good Anthropocene*. *People and Nature*, *8*, 1379–1402. https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.70296

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