



Inside the secret state

Only a handful of western scientists have been into North Korea. Keith Bowers is one of them and here is his story



Pyongyang's people are mired in poverty and poor living conditions

WHEN we landed in Pyongyang, it was March and the Korean peninsula was in the last vestiges of winter. The landscape was windswept and eerily quiet. It felt as though something was missing. It was a feeling that stayed with me throughout the trip.

I had been invited to North Korea to take part in a seminar on the country's environmental crisis, jointly organised by two NGOs, one based in Pyongyang and the other in Beijing, China.

On receiving the invitation I was unsure what to do. Like most westerners, my image of North Korea was not a good one: a backward, totalitarian state, gripped by famine and ruled by fear, and in a state of uncertainty after the recent death of its leader Kim Jong-il.

My family were afraid that they would never see me again. But the fact that the trip was sponsored by the AAAS, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, helped, as did information supplied by the Environmental Education Media Project (EEMP), the Chinese NGO, whose executive director has travelled to North Korea many times.

I supplemented this with whatever I could find on the internet. I obsessively checked the US State Department's travel information and looked into insurance policies for travelling to rogue states. In the end EEMPs history of leading technical exchanges with the North Koreans – and the AAAS's sponsorship – convinced me to go.

Getting into North Korea is not easy. I am a US citizen, and my government does not maintain diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. The only way to get in was to obtain official permission from the North Korean authorities and then get an entry visa from a country with diplomatic ties to North Korea. In my case, that meant China.

With official permission to visit arranged by the North Korean NGO, the Pyongyang International Information Centre on New Technology and Economy (PIINTEC) – its director Ri Song-uk is also vice-president of North Korea's State Academy of Sciences – I travelled to China where EEMP arranged visas for myself and three other US participants.

We left Beijing on Air Koryo, the North Korean state-owned carrier. Its slogan – To The World! – is something of an exaggeration; it flies mostly to and from China and Russia, plus a handful of other Asian destinations.

Not surprisingly, then, our group made up the majority of Sunan International Airport's arrivals that day. At first glimpse the terminal looked surprisingly modern. But the glass-clad exterior was a mere facade for a shoddy

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cinder block building with plywood ticket counters and customs booths. Pictures of North Korea’s leaders hang in prominent view, the first of what was quickly to become a familiar sight.

The customs agent questioned us in broken English. Our cellphones were confiscated and placed in plastic bags for us to collect on our way back home. We were allowed to keep our laptops and cameras, but nothing with GPS or satellite-tracking devices.

This wasn’t the only restriction. Once inside, access to the international internet was all but impossible. At our hotel, we were permitted to send emails but only by typing out a message and an address and giving it to the business centre staff to send. Our rooms had land-line phones. I called home twice; I expect somebody was listening in.

North Korea occupies a land area around the size of Pennsylvania with a population believed to be approximately 25 million. Beyond that, statistics are sketchy and unreliable; not for nothing is it known as the most secretive country on Earth.

Information on the state of the environment is also quite hazy. More than 80 per cent of the land is mountainous and once harboured dense, deciduous and coniferous forests. Most of the rest is rolling countryside with deep, narrow river valleys and a wide range of coastal habitats.

The climate is at the mercy of cold Arctic fronts sweeping through Siberia and down the peninsula, often making growing seasons relatively short, especially at higher elevations.

Until the Korean war began in 1950, forest cover was apparently plentiful enough to provide wood for fuel and other forest

products, plus “ecosystem services” such as regulating water runoff, stabilising steep slopes and supporting diverse flora and fauna. But after the ceasefire in 1953 the landscape that had worked in balance with human cultivation for thousands of years began to decline.

In the 1990s, disaster struck. The fall of communism in Russia and China’s dash for capitalism led to a downward economic spiral. Widespread food and fuel shortages forced people to turn to the forests for their basic needs. At the same time devastating storms and floods ravaged much of the country, wiping out harvests and infrastructure.

Lifeless land

That was 15 years ago, and the landscape is still in a state of shock. Much of the country is deforested, save for a very few steep slopes and some protected areas. Erosion, sedimentation and habitat loss are pervasive, and many watersheds are ecologically lifeless.

The environment is now near total collapse. Conditions are so bad that even the notoriously closed North Korean state has been forced to acknowledge that it needs outside help. That is why we were there.

It took about 20 minutes to drive the 25 kilometres from the airport to downtown Pyongyang, travelling through a landscape devoid of traffic and people. We stopped once to clear a checkpoint, where our two minders spoke to the armed guards for a few minutes. Pyongyang itself was quiet, conspicuously lacking in the bustle I have come to expect when visiting a foreign capital.

The minders would be our constant

companions for the next few days, monitoring every move we made outside the hotel grounds.

Also accompanying us throughout was PIINTEC’s Ryu Kumran, who was instrumental in organising the visit. Our minders spoke little English, but Kumran’s was good and we could talk to her openly. She was eager to answer our questions, but she was guarded and at times protective of her homeland. There were several occasions when we wanted to vary from our prescribed itinerary. For the most part, we were politely told: no.

Before we could check in to our hotel, we made a surprise detour to visit bronze statues of Eternal President Kim Il-sung (who died in 1994) and his son Kim Jong-il, the Eternal General Secretary of the Workers’ Party of Korea (died 2011), both on horseback. We were unprepared, but our minders supplied a bouquet of flowers to place at the base of the statues. Such detours became a regular feature of our stay.

After that, we were shuttled to Yanggakdo Hotel, which is on an island in the Taedong river and reserved for foreign guests. The hotel was comfortable but surreal. It has 47 storeys, but as far as we could tell we were pretty much the only guests. The lights only came on when we entered the hallway and only individual rooms were heated. The corridors, bar and restaurant were cold.

The primary purpose of our visit was to attend the International Seminar on Forest and Landscape Restoration at the People’s Palace of Culture – three days of presentations and discussion with some of North Korea’s leading scientists and top government officials. Our delegation consisted of 15 restoration ecologists and policy-makers from around the world, but before we arrived it was hard to know what our hosts expected from us. It quickly became clear that what they wanted was know-how: practical information about planting forests and restoring the landscape.

We made alternating presentations with simultaneous translation. The first slide of each of the Koreans’ presentations, and sometimes the second too, paid homage to Kim Il-sung for recognising the need for healthy landscapes, restored forests and economic prosperity.

Once they were past the formalities, the Koreans proved refreshingly au fait with the latest environmental terminology. Some of

The North Korean landscape is severely eroded, stripped of trees and devoid of wildlife





TONY WHEELER/OLNEY PLANET IMAGES/GETTY

“There were power outages every night; it was not uncommon to see bonfires lit on high-rise balconies”

them had travelled abroad; a few spoke English. They seemed surprisingly open about their country’s plight; climate change, loss of biodiversity, water scarcity and food security were mentioned often.

Initially, I felt encouraged that the North Koreans appeared to acknowledge the connection between a healthy, robust and resilient landscape and social and economic security – an awareness shared by few governments around the world. There also appeared to be a genuine desire for change, and a commitment to work within international environmental conventions.

Prior to our visit, for example, the government had ordered the mass planting of trees to emphasise the importance of individual initiative – or *Juche*, the national ideology – in the task of reforestation. Travelling around Pyongyang, I noticed many newly planted trees. Any large city would be envious of the speed at which this effort was carried out.

However, when we asked specific questions, the cracks began to show. When we quizzed them about what data they were collecting, the resources they had at their disposal and the methods they used to engage citizens, it became clear that their depth of knowledge was limited, resources were scarce and community engagement was nonexistent. They were badly in need of computers, access to satellite imagery, data collection tools and,

most of all, funding. Several presentations exposed a fixation with the immediate and desperate need for food and wood.

Dialogue was very limited. They asked few questions and informal conversation was heavily discouraged. During breaks, lunch and at the end of sessions we were directed to separate rooms.

Some of us were able to strike up limited discussions during lulls in the presentations and chance meetings, which confirmed for me their desire to embark on more meaningful discussions if only they were given time and approval. But the constant presence of government officials was stifling.

Government censorship

Many of us brought books, papers and pamphlets to hand out, but we were not allowed to distribute them directly. All had to pass a government censor first, which we were told could take weeks. I don’t know if any got through. I have had no direct contact with any of the Korean scientists since the trip.

Travelling through Pyongyang was depressing. The city is supposedly for the elite and privileged but poverty and poor living conditions were everywhere. Power outages occurred almost every night between midnight and dawn. It was not uncommon to see bonfires on high-rise balconies at night, presumably lit for warmth. People in every walk of life appeared crushed by poverty and total government control.

After the meeting our delegation was granted permission for two day-trips outside Pyongyang. We visited a forest nursery not far from the demilitarised zone, a farm in Sariwon City and the World Biosphere Reserve at Mount Myohyang. There was also homage-paying at the birthplace of Kim-Il sung.

The reality doesn’t match the propaganda

As we travelled along the highways the feeling of quietness haunted me again. Shops, hotels and gas stations were nonexistent. The roads, mostly empty of cars, carried a few cyclists and many people on foot. Movement appeared in slow motion, and so did the countryside. Beyond the roadside trees lay what appeared to be a lifeless landscape except for scraps of woodland clinging to steep slopes and the tops of mountains. River valleys were severely eroded; every inch of arable land was cultivated, mined or fallow. We often saw families in the frigid rivers collecting minerals for fertiliser.

Given that it was winter and temperatures hovered around freezing, I didn’t expect to see a lot of wildlife. We saw almost none. This was a constant topic of conversation for many of us. The landscape was eerily quiet.

We were told, often, of heroic reforestation efforts. At the nursery we were proudly shown a newly built greenhouse for tree propagation. But it turned out there was usually no power for heating or running the potting machines.

After a week, it was time to return to the outside world. Back at the airport they returned our cellphones, and confiscated our visas. I guess I won’t be needing it again.

There was a strangely proud and defiant attitude among the Koreans I met, but I wonder how deeply that had been shaped by the regime. They clearly need help. Their landscape needs help too.

Restoring North Korea’s destroyed environment will take time, resources and money, but it can be done. To improve people’s lives, two types of restoration should be given priority: biodiversity and agro-forestry, focused on providing food, fibre and wood.

To that end I am working on setting up a chapter of the Society for Ecological Restoration in China in the hope that it can serve as a conduit for scientific and technical exchange with North Korean scientists. Many of my colleagues on the trip are exploring similar opportunities for the exchange of information and technical know-how.

We can’t ignore the repressive regime that controls every aspect of life in North Korea. But I would argue that restoring the landscape and lifting people out of poverty will help them in spite of their leaders. The health of the land and food security could serve as catalysts for them to effect positive and lasting change in this depressing and forgotten country. ■

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