



The European Green Belt initiative

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Abstract

In the remoteness of the Iron Curtain a “Green Belt” of valuable pristine landscapes developed through Europe from the Barents to the Black Sea. Today the Green Belt Europe connects a large number of valuable areas in the sense of European nature conservation; it is a cross section of all European biogeographical regions and could be developed as part of a European Green Infrastructure and backbone of a Pan-European ecological network. Furthermore the Green Belt is an outstanding memorial landscape of European relevancy with a great potential for trans-boundary cooperation, sustainable regional development, the support of understanding among nations and the merging of Europe. The initiative Green Belt is a geopolitical challenge and change; it connects 24 European countries and stakeholders from the local to the international level from governmental and non-governmental organizations.

1 Introduction

‘Nature knows no boundaries’ is an often stated truism, but absolutely pertinent in Europe with its densely packed political borders which frequently follow natural features such as mountain ranges or river systems. Regarding the European Green Belt, nature does not only know no boundaries, nature is uniting across borders: people, organizations and states, large pristine areas through the continent, animal and plant populations as well as Europe’s history and future.

Along the former Iron Curtain, which separated the continent in East and West for nearly 40 years, an outstanding ecological network and living memorial landscape developed. Despite its brutal inhumanity, the Iron Curtain granted nature a pause for breath along more than 12,500 kilometres from the Barents Sea at the Russian-Norwegian border, along the Baltic Coast, through Central Europe and the Balkans to the Black Sea.

A lack of conventional land use and agriculture as well as the absence of most human-made disturbances along large parts of the Iron Curtain and also in its surrounding led to the conservation and development of large pristine areas and a connected system of various nature related habitats and landscapes. In the former Eastern Bloc countries the utilization of border land was mostly prohibited (Riecken et al. 2006), in some areas villages at the border were raised to the ground and people were forcefully settled down in the inland in order to control the area more efficient, whereas on the western side remote border areas were less attractive for investors, sparsely populated and no major infrastructure was needed.



Figure 1: The Green Belt Europe connects 24 European countries and a great number of pristine and nature related landscapes.

2 Background: From many Origins to one European Initiative

Unwittingly the Iron Curtain supported the conservation and development of valuable habitats and therefore served as a retreat for many endangered species. The richness of nature related habitats became obvious long before its fall. Years before the breakdown of the Iron Curtain, conservationists in several areas of Europe draw their attention to the flourishing nature and wildlife proliferated undisturbed. Right after the decline of the Eastern bloc, regional initiatives started to preserve valuable nature along the borders. Therefore, the establishing of the European Green Belt initiative was a merging of different existing regional initiatives to one common European.

In the year 2002 BUND (Friends of the Earth Germany) firstly suggested the creation of a Green Belt all along the former Iron Curtain. It succeeded to bring together the different approaches by implementing first conferences on the European Green Belt supported and organised by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in 2003 and 2004 (Riecken et al. 2006). The three main origins – besides the many local initiatives and activities - of the European Green Belt initiative are - from north to south - the activities along the Fennoscandian Green Belt, the German Green Belt and along the Green Belt in the Balkans.

Green Belt Fennoscandia

Already in 1970 satellite pictures showed a dark green belt of old-growth forest on the Finnish-Russian border. Nature conservation cooperation between Finland and the Soviet Union started in the 1970s when a scientific-technical cooperation agreement was signed (Haapala et al. 2003). Furthermore a joint Finnish-Russian working group on nature conservation was founded, which led to the successive establishment of a series of twin parks along the border in the mid-1980s. An inventory project on border forests conducted from 1992 to 1994 showed the ecological value of this border area with regards to ecosystems and species in the boreal forest zone and led to the idea of establishing a network of separate protected areas on each side of the border. In this connection it was firstly discussed to develop a Fennoscandian Green Belt covering also the border of Norway and Russia (Haapala et al. 2003). Core of this Fennoscandian Green Belt are the large and many nature reserves

along the border (Figure 2). The concept of the Fennoscandian Green Belt includes also a joint environment policy in the border area (Hokkanen 2004).



Figure 2: Existing and planned nature reserves along the Fennoscandian Green Belt (Hokkanen 2009). E. g. the Kalevalskiy national park in Russia is one of the last European primeval forests and retreat for species like Wolf (*Canis lupus*), Eurasian Lynx (*Lynx lynx*), Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*), Eurasian Eagle-Owl (*Bubo bubo*) and Three-toad Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*).

The Fennoscandian Green Belt is a mosaic of forests, bogs and lakes; it covers a wide range of ecosystems from the Arctic tundra on the Barents Sea coast to mixed broad-leaf forests covering the islands in the Gulf of Finland. The largest part is northern coniferous forest, known as the boreal zone. The area comprises also last tracts of old-growth taiga in the European part of the continent and highly interesting geological structures and relief as part of the ancient Baltic crystalline shield. The Fennoscandian Green Belt contains the last large massifs of old-growth taiga typical for Fennoscandia, which mainly consist of dry pine forests (Karivalo & Butorin 2006).

Because of the large pristine areas and forests, the Green Belt of Fennoscandia serves as a retreat for several large and endangered carnivores like Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*), the Eurasian Lynx (*Lynx lynx*), Wolf (*Canis lupus*) and Brown Bear (*Ursus arctos*). Large carnivores are an indicator group of animals which has been carefully studied for decades and shows the high value of the Fennoscandian Green Belt (Hokkanen 2009).

Inner-German Green Belt

The border fortifications of the Iron Curtain were most strongly expressed in the former divided Germany. The GDR (German Democratic Republic) used 3,000 kilometres of fences, 200 kilometres of walls, 800 kilometres of anti-vehicle ditches, 1,800 kilometres of patrol routes 850 watchtowers,

1.2 million tons of concrete and 700,000 tons of iron, land mines and spring guns to “secure” their border to West-Germany.

First observations of the border areas, only possible from the western site, from 1975 on and a systematic ornithological survey in 1979 on a stretch of 140 kilometres along the inner-German border conducted by young conservationists of Bund Naturschutz (BN), the Bavarian branch of BUND, showed the richness of biodiversity. The ornithological survey covered the immediate border zone to Thuringia (GDR) and large areas of adjacent farmlands in Bavaria for comparison (Meyer et al. 2011). 90% of the recorded, highly endangered bird species like Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*), Red-Backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*), European Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) and Woodlark (*Lullula arborea*) preferred to breed inside the border strip (Beck & Frobel 1981). Further activities followed, e. g. first land purchases at the western side of the border by BN and attempts to get in contact with conservationists from the eastern side (Frobel et al. 2009).

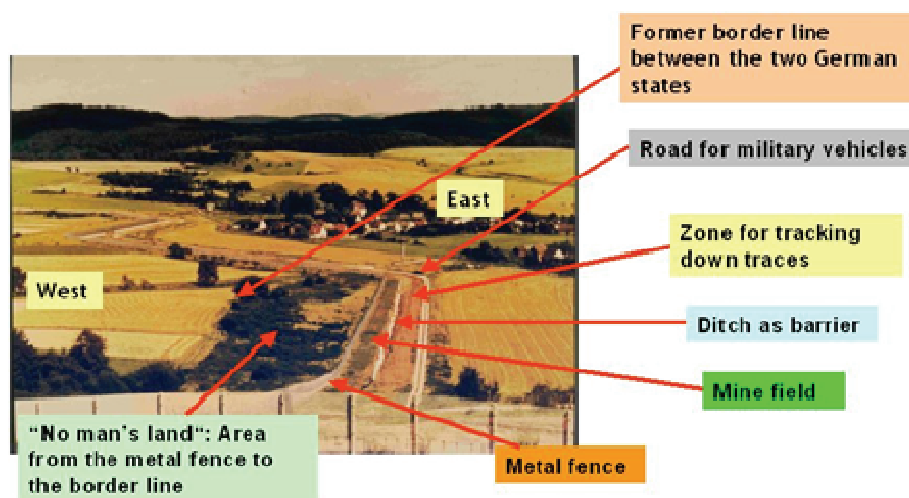


Figure 3: Structural components in the former border zone between the two German states. The central area of the Green Belt Germany is the former “no mans land”, the upstream territory of the GDR lying west to the metal fence. Here, habitats could develop nearly undisturbed for decades. Picture: Bundesarchiv/BUND-Project Office Green Belt.

The Iron Curtain fell in 1989. One month after the Berlin Wall was officially opened; BUND organized the first meeting of nature conservationists from East and West Germany. The approximately 400 participations of the meeting passed a resolution to protect the “Green Belt” along the border (Meyer et al. 2011). Thus, the Green Belt Germany-project was born. Right from the start, it was not only Germany’s first nationwide nature conservation project but also a living memorial to recent German history. The first years of the Green Belt in Germany were marked by a positive interest by the media, environment politicians and committed nature conservation authorities in the new states (the former GDR-countries), who designated nature reserves along the former Iron Curtain. But these times were also characterized by rapid intervention and destruction of valuable areas. E. g. habitats that had been unused for decades were ploughed up in a few days mostly by Western farmers. Not until 2001 a decisive breakthrough came when the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) together with BUND carried out a habitat survey of the entire former inner-German border line.

The results proved that the Green Belt is of high value for German nature conservation. The survey identified 109 different habitat types along the 1,393 kilometres long and 17,656 hectares wide central Green Belt Germany (Figure 3). 60% of the Green Belt Germany consists of streams, rivers and inland waters, various types of forest, extensively exploited mesophilic grassland, unused fallow land and species-rich moist and wet grasslands.

Half of the area consists of endangered habitat types of the Red List for Germany, e.g. xerophilic grassland, moors and wetlands, semi-natural riparian zones and alluvial forests. At the same time, 85 % of the area and 80 % of the length may be regarded as intact (Schlumprecht et al. 2002).



Figure 4: In intensively used agricultural areas like Germany, the Green Belt is irreplaceable as ecological network and often last retreat for endangered species like Red-Backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*). Green Belt between Thuringia and Hesse near the village Obersuhl (left). Pictures: Klaus Leidorf and BN-Archiv.

The Green Belt Germany is a backbone of a nationwide ecological network. There are 150 nature conservation areas along the Green Belt, most created after 1989, and further 125 conservation areas in the vicinity. If the 150 conservation areas directly to the Green Belt are included, the ecological network increases 12.5 times to 2,232 square kilometres (Geidezis & Kreutz 2009), which is nearly the size of the German federal state Saarland. In the long run, it is the aim to protect and develop not only the partly narrow central German Green Belt as ‘backbone’ of the ecological network but also adjacent conservation and nature-related areas as ‘ribs’ to both sides.

Balkan Green Belt

In South-Eastern Europe the political situation after the Second World War was even more complicated. The Iron Curtain separated several countries, not just the two political blocs. Although Yugoslavia was connected to the socialist and communist countries, it was not part of the Eastern Bloc and the Warsaw pact. Yugoslavia followed a development independently of the USSR: the people were allowed to travel, also they enjoyed more freedom than people in countries of the Warsaw Pact. In consequence, Yugoslavia was not considered as serious and trustful partner by the countries of the Eastern bloc which controlled their borders heavily in order to prevent people to escape from their countries. Also the border between Yugoslavia and Greece was heavily controlled and only a few border crossings were open. Albania as a special case completely closed its borders and was isolated from the rest of Europe since the early 1970s. This special situation led to the fact that on the Balkan Peninsula the Green Belt follows not only the borders of the Eastern Bloc, but also those of Albania and former Yugoslavia. Similar to other parts of the Green Belt these borders largely preserved nature from human activities (Schneider-Jacoby et al. 2006). After the collapse of communism also on the Balkan Peninsula, the European Nature Heritage Fund (EuroNatur) began together with many local partners building support among governmental and non-governmental organizations in the early 1990s, with the aim of protecting transboundary areas of high ecological value (Riecken et al. 2006). In the focus of this regional initiative has been the border stretch between Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and Macedonia.



Figure 5: The first results from a survey of important sites along the Balkan Green Belt published by EuroNatur in the late 1990s.

From the Pannonian Plain to the Mediterranean and Black Sea coast, the Balkan Green Belt forms an extremely heterogeneous, but mostly natural corridor. Alluvial wetlands, steppe areas, mountains, lakes and nature related cultural landscapes form a unique mosaic of valuable habitats. Along the Balkan Green Belt different valuable transboundary ecosystems are connected, for example in the centre of the Balkan Peninsula, mountain national parks are linked with the protected Lakes Greater and Lesser Prespa (Albania, FYR Macedonia, Greece) and Lake Ohrid (Albania, FYR Macedonia,). On the coast, marine habitats such as beaches and lagoons are interrelated with the freshwater ecosystem of Lake Skadar (Montenegro, Albania) or the alluvial wetlands of the Evros-Meric-Marica River (Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey). Although many wetlands are situated at the border, the biggest part of the Balkan Green Belt is formed by mountain chains and forest complexes. No large towns or industrial zones are located along the formerly strictly controlled border and the range offers excellent opportunities for the establishment of large-scale protected areas (Schneider-Jacoby et al. 2006).

The Balkan Green Belt is part of an extensive connected habitat system and forms an important ecological corridor. It is a retreat for numerous rare species like Dalmatian Pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*), Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*) and Balkan Lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus* resp. *Lynx lynx martinoi*) (Schwaderer et al. 2009).

3 The European Green Belt Initiative – A trans-boundary Network

During the international conference “Perspectives of the Green Belt” in Bonn (Germany) conducted by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) in July 2003, the vision of a Green Belt through Europe was officially discussed for the first time. A very big step for the Green Belt Europe was the international conference in Hungary in September 2004. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) and BfN jointly organised a conference that took place in the trans-boundary protected area of the Fertő-Hanság National Park in Hungary. Over 70 participants from 17 countries attended the conference. The two main outcomes of this conference were a common structure for the coordination of the Initiative and a Programme of Work (PoW).



Figure 6: Participants of the first Pan-European Green Belt Conference in 2004 in the Fertő-Hanság National Park in Hungary.

Today a huge number of associations, groups and authorities in 24 countries are working within the European Green Belt initiative. Currently there are three distinct areas of activity: The Fennoscandian Green Belt, with Norway, Finland, the Russian Federation and the Baltic countries Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The Green Belt Central Europe; running through Poland, Germany, Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia and Italy. The Balkan Green Belt; running along the barrier that separated the Balkan countries - Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, FYR Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, Turkey -, ending at the Black Sea. For each of the three sections of the European Green Belt a Regional Coordinator was appointed: The Association of Zapovedniks and National Parks in Northwest Russia for Fennoscandia, BUND for Central Europe and EuroNatur for the Balkan region. IUCN took over the patronage of the initiative. Furthermore, in every country so called National Focal Points, mainly from ministries, were nominated.

In addition to the numerous local trans-boundary nature conservation, environmental education and nature-tourism projects along the Green Belt, there is currently one EU-funded project covering a large part of the Central European Green Belt: The project GreenNet (April 2011 - March 2014, www.greennet-project.eu) with 22 Project partners (thereof 11 associated partners) from Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Slovenia and Italy, supported within the Central Europe Programme.

Along the Balkan Green Belt several projects addressing species and habitat conservation as well as capacity building are implemented. The Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme implemented by EuroNatur, Kora, MES and PPNEA covering activities in Albania, FYR Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro should be highlighted as example for transboundary cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt.

Closing the Gap: The Baltic Green Belt

The activities and results of the Baltic Green Belt-project (published in this volume) luckily closed a long existing strategic gap of the European Green Belt initiative between the (northern) Fennoscandian Green Belt (Norway, Russia and Finland) and the Central Europe section. The Baltic Green Belt-project is a decisive breakthrough, which supported the development of Green Belt-activities in this region sustainably. Due to its special situation as coastline, specific problems, issues and correlations exist. The project succeeded to take all these challenges into account and to develop an own character considering the Green Belt on shore and the neighbouring parts off shore.

Besides the comprehensive activities concerning nature conservation, environmental education and the special history of the coastal line with its military heritage, the Baltic Green Belt-project developed a strong network of engaged people and organizations working for the European Green Belt idea in the Baltic region. The EU-funded project has formally ended in January 2012. But there is reasonable hope, that this project is the beginning of a strong and permanent initiative for the Baltic section of the Green Belt.

In the next years it will be of great importance, that the stakeholder network will be strengthened, public relations and political lobby work specially towards members of the European Parliament continue, existing nature reserves are sustainably protected and further new reserves will be declared (e. g. as national nature heritage) and that the aims of the European Green Belt initiative will be adopted by the Baltic states authorities and governments.

Geopolitical Chance and Challenge

The European Green Belt connects 15 EU-countries, one accession country, three candidate countries, three potential candidates and with Russia and Norway two non-EU countries, the initiative is an outstanding chance of geopolitical, ecopolitical and cultural relevancy for the EU. The initiative offers outstanding possibilities for trans-border cooperation between states and regions as well as for the establishment of sustainable regional development, especially through ecotourism, considering the outstanding connection of nature, culture and history as a unique selling point and competitive advantage particularly of structurally weak areas along the Green Belt. The great potential of this initiative for the historical documentation and clarification of the Cold War as well as for the cooperation of old and new EU-member states, candidate countries, potential EU-candidates and non-EU-countries is obvious.

Future of the Initiative: New Approaches

Due to the large geographical range of the European Green Belt as well as the quantity of actors, the coordination of the European Green Belt Initiative is a huge challenge that requires time and finances respectively. As no core funding for the European Green Belt Initiative is available, most of the coordination and communication activities implemented so far by IUCN as former overall coordinator as well as the Regional Coordinators were financed within externally funded projects or by own resources of the respective organization.

This proved to be no longer feasible as the degree of engagement of the organizations strongly depended on the availability of external funds. It became obvious that – in order to conquer the above-mentioned challenge - innovative models for coordination and financing are needed.

The development of such will be addressed within a project which is jointly implemented by BUND Green Belt Project Office and EuroNatur, financially supported by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety and the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation.

Main activities of the project which aims to further enhance the European Green Belt Initiative will be to

- further develop the organizational structure of the Green Belt Initiative
- develop a sustainable model for financing the Green Belt Initiative and to
- develop a functioning communication strategy, addressing both internal and external aspects.

All aspects will be worked out by a core project team led by the BUND-Project Office Green Belt and EuroNatur. Results will be presented to all players on GO and NGO level in meetings as well as during several international conferences planned during the implementation of the project in order to ensure participation of the Green Belt Community.

4 Green Belt as Part of a Pan-European Ecological Network

The outstanding importance of the Green Belt Europe for the European ecological network is apparent because of the conspicuous accumulation of large scale nature reserves along the 12,500 kilometre of the former Iron Curtain: 39 national parks are situated directly along the Green Belt, 16 thereof are trans-boundary national parks. More than 3,200 nature protected areas can be found within a 25 kilometres buffer on either side of the Green Belt (Schlumprecht et al. 2009). Furthermore, this ecological network connects all European biogeographical regions (Renzeder et al. 2009). The European Green Belt is a retreat for many endangered and rare habitats as well as animals and plants and a very important corridor for the migration of endangered large mammals. Therefore it represents a unique European nature heritage.

The implementation of the Green Belt Europe as one of the largest European and trans-boundary ecological networks is one of the main challenges of European nature conservation in the next decades. The existing nature reserves and pristine landscapes should be conserved as core areas and the landscapes next to and between these areas must be developed as stepping stones and important corridors for species. In this way, the European Green Belt contributes to the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Natura 2000 (EU Habitats Directive 92/43/EWG). Furthermore the European Green Belt can contribute to the implementation of the EU-Biodiversity Strategy for 2020.

The importance of the European Green Belt in combination with other large scale ecological networks, like the Alpine-Carpathian network or the ecological network along the Rhine river, is described within the study of the Leibniz Institute for ecological spatial planning (Leibenath et al. 2009) and the report by EEB (European Environmental Bureau) (EEB 2008). The mentioned large scale ecological networks support trans-boundary cooperation and contribute to halt the loss of biodiversity.

5 Conclusions

The further protection and development of the European Green Belt as Pan-European ecological network and historical heritage is a big challenge for the next decades. Therefore the EU is asked to support the Green Belt, referring to target 2 of the EU-Strategy on Biological Diversity: ecosystems and their services are maintained and enhanced by establishing green infrastructure and restoring at least 15 % of degraded ecosystems. To achieve these objectives, further trans-boundary projects have to be supported by the European countries as well as by the EU also including EU-candidates and non EU-countries. Regarding the EU-level, this requires a special priority to preserve and support the ecosystem function of the European Green Belt in currently implemented and future infrastructure projects; as well as the trans-boundary harmonization of conservation area management, the closing of gaps within the ecological network and the establishment of additional trans-boundary protected areas as core areas and buffer zones. Also an adaption of the EU-subsidy policy is urgently necessary; e.g. the restriction of biomass production and industrial agriculture, which currently endangers the ecological network of the Green Belt and its unique landscapes. Instead, a support of ecological land use and sustainable regional development along the Green Belt is needed.

Above its uncountable value for nature conservation, the European Green Belt is also a European cultural heritage of invaluable asset. It is both a commemorative landscape and a living monument for the overcoming of the Iron Curtain and the Cold War just as it is a symbol for the overcoming of the separation of Europe. Therefore the long-term objective is to nominate the European Green Belt as UNESCO (natural and cultural) World Heritage.

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The Baltic Green Belt project is an important mile stone in developing the European Green Belt initiative: The project succeeded in building up a network of engaged stakeholders, which developed a wide range of activities and projects to preserve and develop the Green Belt at the Baltic Coast. Before the project started, the Green Belt in the Baltic Sea region was more or less a "blind spot" within the European Initiative. The specific conditions and situations of coastal and marine habitats and species

as well as the special history of the Iron Curtain with many restricted military areas, made it necessary to establish “tailor-made” concepts for this region.

The authors thank all partners involved in the Baltic Green Belt project, who developed activities and projects with creativity and commitment. We are sure that this network and the results of the Baltic Green Belt-project will be a very good starting point for following activities in the region.

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