



The European Green Belt Initiative - 10 years of challenges, experiences and achievements

Vision for the European Green Belt

“The European Green Belt, our shared natural heritage along the line of the former Iron Curtain, is to be conserved and restored to function as an ecological network connecting high-value natural and cultural landscapes, whilst respecting the economic, social and cultural needs of local communities.”

The European Green Belt Initiative – 10 years of challenges, experiences and achievements

The German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) is one of the initiators of the European Green Belt Initiative. After more than ten years we still strongly believe in the ideas behind the initiative. The European Green Belt, that means the former Iron Curtain running through Europe from the Barents Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the southeast, creates an important backbone of the Pan-European Ecological Network, contributes to the Natura 2000 and the Emerald networks of protected areas and accordingly forms a major component of the Green Infrastructure for Europe.

The remoteness of the regions along the former iron curtain did not only preserve natural landscapes. It also contributed to the preservation of traditional cultural landscapes by preventing land-use intensification for four decades. These landscapes and the cultural singularities found there can therefore be considered as European treasures to be developed in a sustainable way regarding the needs of nature but also of the local people.

The European Green Belt today can also be considered as a living memorial for the former division of Europe. All efforts to protect and develop it thus definitely are forward-looking investments in our common European natural, historical and cultural heritage. They contribute to trans-boundary cooperation thus enhancing international understanding and peace in Europe.

We are convinced that this view is shared by many other countries and organizations along the European Green Belt. In 2013 this has been illustrated, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the initiative, when representatives of the majority of European Green Belt states signed a Joint Declaration of Intent on the European Green Belt. BfN intends to continue its support of the European Green Belt Initiative in the future and we hope that many others will do the same.

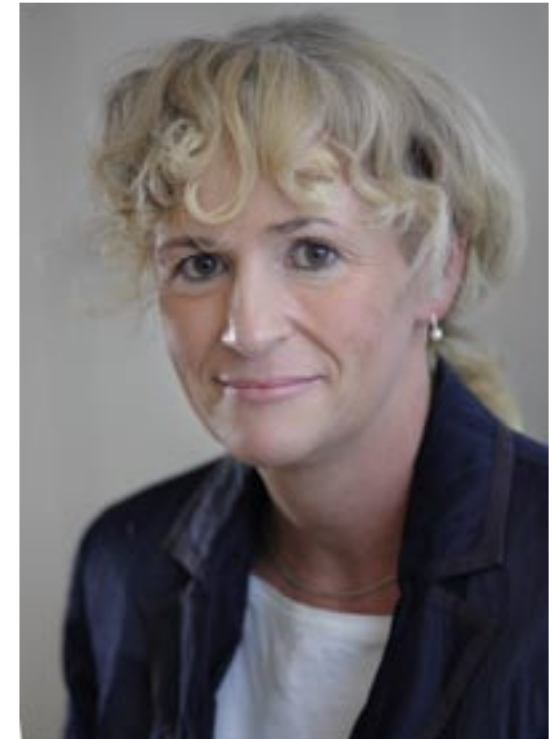


Photo: German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation

Prof. Dr. Beate Jessel

President of the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation

Foreword

The European Green Belt is one of the most fascinating projects in European nature conservation. It links the conservation of Europe's natural heritage with our human history. It connects people with Nature.

The idea of linking up habitats across Europe was dreamt up and developed in various regions of Europe quite independently of one another. In 2002 the idea of a Green Belt running through Europe was first publicly expressed and already in 2003 committed conservationists had got together to campaign jointly for the vision of preserving the ecological backbone of Europe.

Since then, what has characterized the Initiative and the activities in the European Green Belt has been the fruitful cooperation between governmental (GO) and non-governmental organisations (NGO). This cooperation has found striking expression in the composition of the Coordination Group of the European Green Belt Initiative in which representatives with different institutional backgrounds from all four sections of the European Green Belt steer the general direction, alignment and further development of the Initiative. On the basis of their experience the representatives of the Coordination Group and the majority of all actors in the European Green Belt have come to realize that it would make sense to formalize the network, for instance by founding an association for the declared purpose of furthering the development of the initiative. In addition, whether it continues to work in its current form or is established as a legal entity, the Coordination Group requires secure financial resources.

In 2013 the European Green Belt Initiative received a significant boost when a ground-breaking Declaration of Intent was signed by 15 states of the Green Belt with two further states

presenting corresponding documents to declare their support. We welcome this Declaration of Intent and we recognize in it a clear call to work even harder to further the development of the European Green Belt Initiative.

Ten years after the founding of the network for the European Green Belt the vision of preserving the ecological backbone of Europe has become reality. But in the euphoria over this unique project we must not close our eyes to the many threats to which the European Green Belt is still exposed. In particular the integrity of this ecological corridor through Europe is threatened by major infrastructure measures, by far too intensified forestry and agriculture and by unregulated developments for mass tourism in the mountains and along seashores. The ecological network is in danger of being fragmented and so losing its vital function of connectivity.

We are all responsible for making sure that the peaceful cooperation across borders inherent in the idea of the Green Belt and the pan-European ecological network of the Green Belt are not sacrificed to the interests of particular groups or individuals.

The European Green Belt not only links human beings with nature, it also brings people of different nations together and reaches out beyond the confines of Europe. To the many in the world divided by insurmountable walls and trenches the Green Belt signals the hope that these walls will one day fall.

We wish to thank all the actors in the European Green Belt Initiative for working to make the vision we share a reality, and we hope that together we will achieve our goal of preserving the European Green Belt as a functioning ecological network and as an important part of the Green Infrastructure of Europe.



Photo: Julia Pauer

*Prof. Dr. Hubert Weiger
President of Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND)*



Photo: Peter Schmeinger

*Christel Schroeder
President of EuroNatur Foundation*

Foreword

Congratulations on the tenth anniversary of the Green Belt Initiative. Building a green network that runs through eight bio-geographical regions in 24 countries covering a surface of 12,500 km is an impressive undertaking.

The Green Belt crosses borders and connects nature and people. That goes to the heart of what Europe and sustainable development stand for. But it also helps to make another connection, that between European policy and reality on the ground.

In May 2013 we adopted a Communication on Green Infrastructure. The objective of the Communication is to provide an enabling framework for Green Infrastructure projects on the ground, and underline its contribution to the EU growth and jobs agenda. We want to send a strong policy signal to decision makers, planners and promoters on the importance of investing in Green Infrastructure projects at local, regional, national and cross-boundary level.

Concretely we will:

- support and facilitate the further deployment of Green Infrastructure across the EU;
- promote Green Infrastructure use and best practice, develop technical guidance and exchange platforms, facilitate information sharing, and encourage innovative technologies;
- improve data and expertise to facilitate the deployment of Green Infrastructure; and
- explore innovative financing mechanisms to support investments in Green Infrastructure projects.

If people ask me what is meant by green infrastructure, I will not hesitate to refer them to the example of the Green Belt Initiative.

Building Green Infrastructure is about developing natural solutions to provide ecological, economic and social benefits. It is about understanding the value of nature and using its potential to benefit human society. By working with nature, not against it. We are saying that. You are doing it. And I want to encourage you to continue doing it.

The Commission will also continue to explore opportunities to set up innovative financing mechanisms to support Green Infrastructure. We are already working with the European Investment Bank to see how we can set up a financing facility to support promoters seeking to develop Green Infrastructure projects.

The European Green Belt Initiative is an excellent example of how Member States, NGOs and other stakeholders can work together effectively. United by a common project: Preserving nature's most precious gift to humanity.



Photo: European Commission

Janez Potočnik
European Commissioner for Environment



The European Green Belt

The European Green Belt Initiative is a success story. But achieving this has been neither quick nor easy.

Up until 1989 the existence of the "Iron Curtain" was a manifestation of the Cold War dividing the world into two antagonistic hemispheres; an Eastern and a Western bloc. For decades its presence symbolized the atrocities of the Cold War era in Europe and in many regions metal fences, walls, barbed wire, guard towers, spring-guns, land mines, and watchdogs demonstrated its harsh reality.

Inhumane developments in politics can, however, sometimes have unintended side effects which benefit nature. The unrelenting spread of accelerated agricultural methods and the perceived "need" to satisfy our societies' demands for convenience and mobility have gradually overtaken and damaged most of Europe's natural landscapes. During this development the regions around the former Iron Curtain stayed out of this rat race and they remained largely undisturbed, inaccessible and unattractive to planners, settlers, conventional tourists and investors.

This partition of the entire continent, harsh and inhumane though it was, had created a zone of life. As of now this 12,500-kilometre long strip of land – narrow in some places, wider in others – connects 3,272 protected areas, including 40 partly transboundary national parks.

As the Green Belt snakes from north to south it passes through a huge variety of European landscapes and of types ranging from alpine peaks, arctic tundra, boreal forests, mires, bogs and lush flood plains to coastal areas and grasslands. It connects 24 countries and its potential as the backbone of a Pan-European ecological network is widely greeted with interest and enthusiasm.

In the words of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN, the Green Belt of Europe is a "global symbol for transboundary nature conservation and sustainable development". This little word "and" is groundbreaking, for the European Green Belt demonstrates the connection between the needs of humans and those of nature in a belt which in its meandering course extends over a length equivalent to the air-line distance from Berlin in Germany to Darwin in Australia.

The Green Belt can truly be seen as a "life-line" in more than just the strict ecological sense. The inhabitants of these "borderlands" have suffered for decades from restricted access and marginalization. Limited infrastructure and low income was (and is) not a fertile matrix for conservation. But the European Green Belt has much to offer today – for the sustainable development of rural regions and for the support of a peaceful co-existence in border regions.

Aldo Leopold, a pioneer of modern conservation in America, warned in 1937 of the pitfalls of his own branch: "Conservation, without a keen realization of its vital conflicts, fails to rate as authentic human drama. It falls to the level of a mere utopian dream." But the European Green Belt is no longer a dream. It actively connects nature conservation with care for local history and cultural values throughout Europe. With the power to be an integral part of people's lives it has developed from what was a vision more than ten years ago to become a vibrant European initiative integrating people from local up to international level.

Accordingly, at the tenth anniversary of the European Green Belt celebrated in May 2013 in Berlin, one "guest" attracted great attention and applause: At this jubilee Janez Potočnik, European Commissioner for the Environment, congratulated the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental organizations (GOs) and politicians who had worked with great diligence to make the Green Belt a success. Reaching his audience via video message he stressed that building green infrastructure such as the European Green Belt is "about developing natural solutions which provide ecological, economical and social benefits."



*in accordance with UNSCR 1244 and opinion of ICJ.

The formation of the European Green Belt Initiative

Already in the 1970s and 1980s a growing appreciation was emerging of the special value of the natural and traditionally cultivated landscapes along border areas in a number of regions in today's European Green Belt. Biologists discovered the rich biodiversity along the former border areas in various studies and research projects, for example in Finland and Russia and along the inner-German border.

Today the European Green Belt Initiative connects 16 EU countries, five candidate countries (Albania, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey), one potential EU candidate (Kosovo¹) and two non-EU countries (Russia and Norway). Almost 150 GOs and NGOs from these countries have come together in the Green Belt Initiative. The Initiative is organized in four sections – Fennoscandian, Baltic, Central European and Balkan Green Belt – in order to reflect and highlight the regional diversity of the European Green Belt. Besides its extraordinary ecological importance, the Initiative is a living example of how Europe and its diverse cultures can truly grow together. From the European Green Belt we can learn that biological diversity goes hand in hand with cultural diversity. It is a symbol for transboundary cooperation and Europe's shared natural and cultural heritage.

The idea of an European Green Belt was put forward for the first time in 2002 at the opening of a land art monument, the East-West Gate. One year later, in 2003 in Bonn, the Initiative was formally born, when various existing regional initiatives merged into one common European initiative during an international conference. At both events the guest of honour was Mikhail Gorbachev, the former President of the Soviet Union.

In September 2004, at a second international conference in Hungary, a programme of work and a coordination structure for the initiative were established. Regional coordinators were appointed for each of the three regions – Fennoscandian, Central European and Balkan Green Belt – (later to be completed by adding the Baltic as a fourth region). In addition, a so-called National Focal Point (in most cases belonging to a government organization) was specified in each Green Belt country to promote and support the idea of the European Green Belt in that state. The overall coordination of the Green Belt went to the IUCN which was also to run the Green Belt secretariat. Taking up work in 2005, the secretariat was responsible for networking activities such as fund raising, organizing meetings, issuing a Green Belt newsletter and maintaining the website. To general regret, in 2010

the IUCN closed the secretariat and a new structure had to be discussed in order to safeguard the continuation of this model European project.

Answering this immediate need, a group of organizations initiated a broad discussion process on how to establish and maintain a new and efficient structure based on collaboration and participation. Since 2011 EuroNatur Foundation (EuroNatur) and Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND) have been supported by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) and the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety (BMUB) in implementing a three year project to "Advance the European Green Belt Initiative", which in a first step led to the establishment of a Coordination Group for the Initiative.

¹ in accordance with UNSCR 1244 and opinion of ICJ



The Fennoscandian Green Belt

Back in the mid-1980s Finnish and Russian conservationists – most often with ornithological interests – had already started working together on locating and conserving the habitats of some of the characteristic birds of the north, such as black throated loon (*Gavia arctica*), whose wailing, yodel-like calls fascinate hikers and canoeists alike.

The Fennoscandian Green Belt stretches along the borders of Norway, Russia and Finland from the Barents Sea to the Gulf of Finland in the Baltic. It is a wild belt. Due to glaciation this zone is dotted with lakes, wetlands, bogs and mires. A highlight of the vegetation here is the vast, old-growth coniferous taiga while further north this vegetation finally gives way to tundra before the land reaches the Arctic Ocean.

Birds to be found in this region include the redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*), whooper swans (*Cygnus cygnus*), whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), white-tailed sea eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) and willow ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*). Sighting the pawprints of large carnivores such as lynx (*Lynx lynx*), bear (*Ursus arctos*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), and wolverine

(*Gulo gulo*) makes the exploration of these remote zones an exciting experience. Large ungulates encountered here are elk (*Alces alces*) in the south and reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus tarandus*) and forest reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus fennicus*) further north near the Arctic Circle. In point of fact most of the reindeer encountered in the "wilds" belong to the semi-domesticated subspecies which are bred, owned and used by the local Sámi people of Norway and Finland.

Incidentally one of the characteristic bird species, the magnificent capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*), was a particular victim of the political border: the bird's preferred habitat is on the fringe of mature forest where it finds cover and food in the low-growing shrubs and herbs. It's heavy build means that it also needs this kind of open space as a runway when taking off and landing. For decades this manoeuvre was threatened by the wire fences which were used to fortify the border and in more recent years these large birds have got caught in the fences put up to protect forest plantations from browsing ungulates (in this case elk and roe deer).

The early cooperation of Finnish, Russian and later also Norwegian conservationists first led to the formation of a joint Finnish-Russian Working Group on Nature Conservation and later to the enlargement and establishment of protected areas along the Green Belt, notably the Oulanka National Park (established in 1956 and enlarged in 1989) in Finland and its Russian sister the Paanajärvi National Park (1992). It was not until around the year 2000 that trilateral cooperation between the various institutional and government levels of the three states was officially started. This cooperation has turned out to be extremely fruitful especially in the fields of sustainable tourism and wildlife biology with particularly noteworthy projects pooling the results of the transboundary research on brown bear and golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*). It was the effective international cooperation at government, scientific and general public levels which served as a basis for the development and signing of the Finnish-Norwegian-Russian Memorandum of Understanding on the Fennoscandian Green Belt in February 2010 by the ministers for the environment of the three countries. This memorandum facilitates intensive transboundary cooperation for ecologically, economically and socially sustainable solutions along the Fennoscandian Green Belt.

Rustam Sagitov, Baltic Fund for Nature, Regional Coordinator (Russia):

“The European Green Belt is proving itself to be an ideal location for the preservation of networks of natural habitats as well as the development of environmentally friendly land use. It is a challenge for the countries along the European Green Belt to preserve this pearl at the heart of Europe for future generations and not to squander what is a unique natural heritage for short-term profit.”



The Fennoscandian Green Belt

Threats

The arctic and subarctic circle has suffered a long history of exploitation for the excavation of iron ore, gold, nickel, copper, bauxite, fluorite, diamonds and also, of course, oil. Environmental concerns have been of little concern for those involved in prospecting for and exploiting these resources. This is still the case and the exploitation of mineral resources continues to be a threat to the valuable habitats in the region. Thus regional NGOs are voicing deep concern over a projected gold-mining project, which threatens the clean waters and endangered trout stand in transboundary national parks.

The vast boreal forests are slow-growing due to the climate and this produces hard wood, giving northern lumber a special quality. As a result, these forests are of particular interest for the logging industry and are threatened by the practice of both legal and illegal logging. Especially outside the protected areas on state-owned land in the territory of the Fennoscandian Green Belt the remaining old-growth forests are under extreme threat from logging.

Owing to the harsh climate and to unstable political conditions along borders, utilization of resources was at first slow but now, due to advances in technology and also as a consequence of increased globalization, multinational enterprises have entered the scene and the scale of land use has increased significantly. Many of the environmental problems now encountered in the area result from rapid economic development without sufficient attention being paid to environmental issues.



Aimo Saano, Metsähallitus, Co-chair of the Finnish-Russian Working Group on Nature Conservation (Finland):
“From the Fennoscandian perspective the European Green Belt is the perfect and most welcome forum for providing environmentally positive and open civic initiative capable of uniting Europeans across the continent, from the Barents Sea in the North to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean in the South.”



The Fennoscandian Green Belt

The Arctic Biological, Cultural and Geological Heritage Project (ABCG)

Even though multinational exploitation of resources in the arctic and subarctic in parts of the Fennoscandian Green Belt has gathered pace faster than cultural co-operation, the regions have experienced an increase in numbers of visitors across borders.

This trend – and the need to connect to EU partners – gave rise to the idea of European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instruments (ENPI) established in 2006 for the period of 2007 to 2013 which, together with Kolarctic CBC (Cross-Border Cooperation), funds the Arctic Biological, Cultural and Geological heritage project (ABCG).

The overall objective of the ABCG heritage project is to raise regional awareness of their common natural and cultural heritage across the borders of Eastern Lapland (Finland), Norway and the Kola Peninsula in Russia.

This new approach is helping to facilitate the work of stakeholders in tourism, education and research who are active in fostering the sustainable use of protected and recreational areas. The project aims to create new,

innovative co-operative networks along the Fennoscandian Green Belt to carry out long-term nature conservation work and establish sustainable nature tourism.

Activities include mapping and restoring sites relevant to the cultural history of the area. In some protected areas, new nature trails have been opened and nature guides and tourism operators are being trained in methods to achieve more sustainable tourism.

Managers in the protected area are assisted with educational materials on the common heritage explaining how it can be protected in the Fennoscandian Green Belt.

Among the projects emerging from the ABCG heritage project is the monitoring of phenological processes in nature by schoolchildren designed to draw young people's attention to the heightened vulnerability of the region to the effects of climate change.



Bjørn Arne Næss, Norwegian Environment Agency (Norway):

“The European Green Belt contains a huge variety of natural areas, habitats and species. It represents a real possibility of preserving a network of important natural habitats as refuges and corridors for wild animals, plants and other species and at the same time an opportunity for development of environmentally friendly land use based on both modern science and traditional knowledge.”



The Fennoscandian Green Belt

Prosperity from Sustainable Cross-Border Nature and Culture Tourism

South of the Kolarctic ENPI areas, Karelia ENPI covers the large territory encompassing the Kainuu, North Karelia and Oulu districts in Finland and the Republic of Karelia in Russia. Here the climate is warmer by comparison and the metropolitan areas of Leningrad and St. Petersburg supply a large proportion of visitors.

Investments in tourism infrastructure and services require careful consideration and the ENPI program "Prosperity from Sustainable Cross-Border Nature and Culture Tourism" aims to improve the quality of tourism to counteract some of its detrimental effects. One of the key actors in the area is the Natural Heritage Services (NHS) of the Finnish Forest Administration Metsähallitus.

The overarching goal is to facilitate "transboundary cooperation for ecologically, economically, socially and culturally sustainable solutions". One target in this direction is to strengthen the image of the region by improving know-how on tourism and recreation and increasing customer service capabilities.

Activities include the modernization of National Park visitor centres. Six visitor centres are targeted for a redesign of exhibition material to meet modern standards for nature and cultural tourism and nature education. The network of trails is to be improved, extended where necessary, and – most importantly – the trails are to be equipped with uniform multilingual signposts and information boards.

Innovative approaches are being taken by means of an extensive "Park Twinning Cooperation" which is designed to develop common management principles and to share best practices. "Park Twinning" is also aimed at enhancing cooperation with local municipalities, enterprises and research institutes and with the local population in order to benefit the local and regional economy.





The Baltic Green Belt

The Green Belt along the Baltic Seashore is the only part of the European Green Belt that does not run along the state borders of the former political and military block. Here it follows the cliffs and beaches along the southern and eastern Baltic coasts. The Iron Curtain impacted both people and nature very strongly here, although out on the open sea, where the actual borders ran, the effect was not great.

During the days of the Iron Curtain access to the coast was restricted in many ways. Even on beaches far away from NATO states and waters, such as in Lithuania and Latvia, bathing and even beach walking was restricted and in some places totally prohibited. Floodlights swept over beaches and coastal waters at night, ready to spot anyone who dared to violate the strict border entry prohibitions. A line of watchtowers marked the shore from Germany to the Soviet Union and civilian building along the coastline was not only severely restricted, but also many existing houses were demolished in the interests of more efficient surveillance. In an unintended side effect these ruthless measures also favoured nature. While other European coasts fell prey to developers, the

coasts of today's Baltic Green Belt retained their natural beauty. Huge flocks of foraging birds in secluded bays and colonies of seals resting on the beaches enjoyed the undisturbed spaces in access-restricted areas. Active dune fields, ancient woodlands and extensive boglands remained largely unharmed and became precious natural "islands" in an otherwise increasingly altered landscape.

With the disappearance of the Iron Curtain, this was destined to change. The local population wished at long last to use the land and the countryside long denied to them, to enjoy the seashore with all its pleasures and to have alternatives to working in the armed forces, which had been their main option till then. But even in those difficult times of change many people recognized that the four ghastly decades behind the Iron Curtain had produced one valuable asset: their unspoilt natural coast. From Estonia's islands to the German lagoon coast local initiatives sprang up and campaigned to put especially precious areas under protection. As a result several large reserves have been established but many other equally deserving areas of natural beauty remain endangered to the present day.

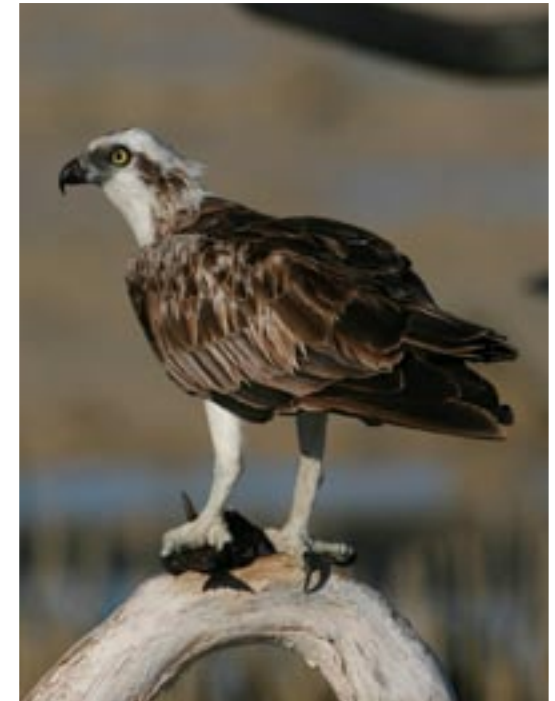
The Baltic Green Belt boasts a great diversity of plant and animal life, different in character from all other sections of the European Green Belt. The marine and coastal habitats add significantly to this diversity and host many unique species. Some of them are even endemics - they live solely in the narrow Green Belt strip along the Baltic coast and nowhere else in the world, not even in adjacent stretches of country. Among them are the colourful Baltic toadflax (*Linaria loeselii*) which populates natural dunes or the Wismar cinquefoil (*Potentilla wismariensis*) growing very locally on small cliffs and beach walls. Limestone outcrops are rich in orchid species, while dry sandy grasslands boast violet pasqueflowers (*Pulsatilla pratensis*, *P. vulgaris*) or flowering beds of sea pinks (*Armeria maritima*, *A. elongata*).



The Baltic Green Belt

The only whales in the European Green Belt and three species of seals are specialties of the Baltic coast fauna as are land mammals such as red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) or the semi-aquatic European Otter (*Lutra lutra*). Visitors are particularly struck by the variety of bird species and by the vast numbers to be seen, particularly during migration. Tens of thousands of Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) from northern Europe and Siberia collect every year in the bays and lagoons of the Green Belt coast. Of all areas, the narrow strip of the Green Belt along the Baltic Sea is the most important wintering area for these ducks, and it has a central importance for the conservation of this species in Europe. Several other duck species are likewise common visitors or breeders, some of them specialized benthic feeders at sea and seldom seen near land. Huge and widely famous flocks of grey cranes (*Grus grus*) rest on the southern Baltic coast while white-tailed eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) are a frequent sight in the sky.

Much of the biodiversity in the Baltic Green Belt is based on the productive shallow water habitats. They nourish the myriads of resting ducks, provide food and cover for fishes of all sizes and hide millions of small and not-so-small invertebrates. While colourful mussel reefs and mysteriously floating seagrass meadows are usually hidden from the human observer, the dunes and beaches are not. And among the seashells and seaweeds washed ashore some of this underwater biodiversity still catches the eye of the many million tourists visiting the Baltic Green Belt every year. For them, the vast woodlands and extensive wetlands are a major attraction, but so also are the soaring coastal cliffs and of course the long beaches that invite sea bathing. Some of the old watchtowers have been transformed into look-outs and a few of the old military buildings now host exhibitions on the natural and cultural heritage of the Green Belt.



Jörg Schmiedel, BUND Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Regional Coordinator (Germany):

“Of course the Green Belt successfully overcomes national borders. But for me it’s even more important that it also reaches across mental barriers: The European Green Belt’s truly multifaceted approach merges the preservation of history with land use, nature conservation, local traditions, national idiosyncrasies and much more to produce innovative ideas for our time and beyond.”



The Baltic Green Belt

Threats

Some parts of the Baltic Green Belt have become so popular among tourists that tourism infrastructure is becoming a threat to the region's natural and cultural heritage. Sophisticated planning is needed to keep hotel and housing projects limited to suitable sites, thereby safeguarding the natural attractions. The increase in traffic by ship and boat, in port construction and marine gravel extraction also threaten what the Green Belt aims to protect. There is a lot of pressure to "develop" the coastal strip, and there is a clear danger that in a few decades it could become as built-up as other European coasts. Particularly affected are the areas around the major cities.

The main threat to the Baltic Sea is eutrophication, that is to say excessive amounts of nutrients being washed into the sea from farmlands, traffic and industries around the Baltic. This nutrient charge profoundly alters the marine ecosystems as it increases the growth of planktonic algae and the sedimentation of organic material on the sea floor, and decomposition of organic matter depletes the oxygen in the water. Many organisms are deprived of light and ultimately suffocate.

According to the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (Helsinki Commission = HELCOM), commercial fishing affects "the Baltic Sea food web structure by removing mainly large predatory species such as cod, pikeperch, pike, salmon and grey seal (by-catch) which have an important role in the food web in regulating the lower trophic levels."



Dace Samite, National Park Slitere (Latvia):

"As someone who used to live in the Soviet Union, the border is still clear in my memory but the idea of the Green Belt is one I really like, because it is something real. For me the European Green Belt is like a living organism, because it is not only about nature, the local people and their history, it affects everything around it."



The Baltic Green Belt

The Hel Marine Station in Poland

The Baltic Sea is the home of four species of sea mammals: grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*), ringed seal (*Pusa hispida*), harbour seal or common seal (*Phoca vitulina*) and harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*). Their status is continuously researched and monitored by the Hel Marine Station, the field laboratory of the Institute of Oceanography of Gdansk University.

One important focus of research at the station are the effects of commercial fishing on these four species of marine mammals. By monitoring the population and the ecology of Baltic mammals, Hel station is fulfilling Poland's obligation under the Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area and under the Bonn Convention on the Conservation of migratory species.

While the populations of grey seal and harbour seal are considered stable and slightly increasing, the population of the ringed seal is declining. The harbour porpoises – being the only cetacean in the Baltic – are a flagship species for the centre's work. The species is threatened by habitat loss, marine pollution, acoustic disturbances from various sources and, most importantly, by incidental catch through entanglement in fishing gear, so-called by-catch.

Another major focus of Hel Marine station is the grey seal research, breeding and rehabilitation centre. This attracts 450,000 visitors annually.

Management of semi-natural coastal grasslands in Väinameri (Estonia)

Väinameri – in translation "the sea of straits" – is a large bay in Estonia covering an area of 2,000 km² dotted with islands, four larger and numerous small ones. With an average depth of less than six meters Väinameri is extremely shallow. Around the bay there are reed beds, dune beaches and a large swathe of meadows so that it presents a very varied mosaic of habitats. The meadows are maintained by a century-old tradition of livestock grazing mainly with local breeds of cattle, sheep and horses.

During the Cold War Väinameri's strategic location attracted the occupation of quite a few of the islands by Soviet troops.

WWF Sweden, in partnership with the local NGO Arhipelaag and others, initiated an innovative pilot project in the Baltic coastal area of Väinameri in West Estonia and "its main goal is to restore and manage semi-natural coastal grasslands to maintain a higher level of biodiversity of coastal flora and bird fauna."





The Central European Green Belt

This part of the European Green Belt connects up a whole string of nature conservation areas and pristine landscapes to form a last retreat and migration route for many endangered species in the intensively exploited cultural landscape of Central Europe. Beginning on the shores of the German Baltic Coast in the north, it runs southward through Germany, along the borders of the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia and then branches to follow two routes, one along the Italian-Slovenian border to the Adriatic and the other along the Croatian-Hungarian border towards the Balkans. Along its path the Green Belt forms a last surviving remnant of wilderness and at the same time traces the line of a historical divide through the continent.

Along the ecological corridor, which ranges in character from coastal to lowland, river and lake landscape through unspoiled woods in the low mountain ranges to reach Alpine peaks, there are 'conservation pearls' in plenty: the Harz National Park (Germany), the transboundary national parks of the Bavarian Forest/Šumava (Germany/Czech Republic), Thayatal/Podyji (Austria/Czech Republic), Neusiedler See/Fertő Hanság (Austria/Hungary), the trilateral Nature and National Park of Raab/Őrség/Goričko (Austria/Hungary/Slovenia) and the Italian Prealpi Giulie Nature Park with the Slovenian Triglav National Park are just some of the outstanding nature conservation areas. The floodplains of Elbe, Danube, Thaya, Morava, Mura and Drava form the largest

and last-remaining pristine floodplains in Central Europe. And in 2012 - for the protection of the "Amazon of Europe" - it proved possible to establish a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve of 6.310 km² to preserve and develop the Drava river along the Green Belt between Croatia and Hungary. Extensions of this biosphere reserve, e.g. on Serbian territory, were pending at the time of print of this brochure.

The species that characterize the Central European Green Belt are as diverse as its landscapes: endangered mammals such as lynx (*Lynx lynx*), Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*), and wild cat (*Felis sylvestris*) highlight its importance as a migration corridor while the bird species ranging from black stork (*Ciconia nigra*), white-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*), corn crake (*Crex crex*), little tern (*Sterna albifrons*) or exotic-looking bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*) to European roller (*Coracias garrulus*) reflect the diversity of habitats.

Just as in the Fennoscandian Green Belt, in Central Europe, too, the idea of a Green Belt was the brain-child of a few conservation-oriented birdwatchers. The absence of conventional land use and of most forms of man-made disturbance in the border zone had drawn the curiosity of conservationists as early as 1975. In 1979, BUND (Friends of the Earth Germany) started an ornithological survey on a stretch of 140 kilometres along the inner-German border

and - for comparison - on large tracts of adjacent farm lands. The results showed that 90 % of a number of highly endangered bird species such as whinchat, red backed-shrike (*Lanius collurio*) and woodlark (*Lullula arborea*) all preferred to breed inside the border strip and avoided areas of farmed land. On December 9, 1989, exactly one month after the Berlin Wall was officially opened, conservationists from East and West Germany met to pass a resolution to preserve this "green belt" and memorial landscape. It was the starting point for the German Green Belt project initiated by BUND and later to be one of the 'germ cells' of the Green Belt idea in Europe.

Work for the Green Belt is done in various forms: there are local activities and projects run by numerous stakeholders on national or bilateral level. These operate across borders and range from nature conservation measures and environmental education to eco-tourism. And there are also large-scale transnational projects funded by the European Union which support networking and cooperation in various sectors: examples here are the first "GREEN BELT" (Interreg IIIB) project which ran from 2006-2008, involving partners from seven countries, and the follow-up project "GreenNet" (2011-2014, Central Europe Programme), involving six countries. These projects enhance long-lasting transboundary cooperation and raise awareness for the protection and sustainable development of the European Green Belt.



The Central European Green Belt

Threats

In terms of habitats for wild animals and plants modern Central Europe is one of the most fragmented regions on earth. There are two major reasons for the fragmentation: the first is that industrialized agriculture covers most of the land and renders it unsuitable as habitat for the majority of wild animal and plant species. Even birds that used to be characteristic of traditionally cultivated landscapes such as partridge (*Perdix perdix*), quail (*Coturnix coturnix*), lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) and meadow lark (*Alauda arvensis*) have been driven out.

Moreover, due to the lack of buffer zones the artificial fertilizers and pesticides used in this mode of farming also harm and threaten the biodiversity in the neighbouring remnants of precious habitats such as oligotrophic grasslands, fens and mires in the Green Belt. Additionally, in recent decades this situation has been severely aggravated by highly intensive biomass production for energy, competing for land use with food production and nature conservation.

The second cause of fragmentation and degradation is the spreading of "grey infrastructure" which includes roads, settlements, commercial zones, power plants and river training structures. Wildlife mortality through road accidents, especially in roaming species such as Eurasian otter, wild cat or lynx and the degradation of wildlife-friendly habitats are just the most obvious effects of grey infrastructure.

Many rivers with their near-natural floodplains and adjacent wetlands along the Central European Green Belt form valuable parts of a "Green Infrastructure" – important for water retention, for the supply of fresh water and as CO₂ sink. But many floodplains are also threatened by hydropower utilization and the construction of flood protection dams with watertight walls and drainage systems in the surrounding land.



Liana Geidezis, BUND Project Office Green Belt, Regional Coordinator (Germany):

“The European Green Belt has the potential to function as the backbone of Green Infrastructure across the continent. For this reason the EU member states, federal states, administrative regions right down to small rural districts should seize all opportunities for developing this unique pan-European ecological corridor within the GI-framework. The European Green Belt Initiative with its interdisciplinary and intercultural character plays an important role for the implementation of the Green Infrastructure policy.”



The Central European Green Belt

Experience the Green Belt and discover nature, culture and history

Making a landscape more attractive for wildlife means making it attractive for tourism as well. As more and more people in Central Europe are now living in urban zones, their preferred holiday destinations are expected to have attributes such as babbling brooks and blooming meadows, ancient "enchanted" forests, quaint farmhouses and adventurous wilderness trails. The Green Belt has much to offer – nature, culture and history are interlinked in a unique manner. Making this experience available, while protecting valuable nature at the same time was the aim of the ambitious testing and development project "Experience the Green Belt" along the inner-German Green Belt. It was supported by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation and implemented by BUND together with a range of local stakeholders from tourism, nature conservation and rural development in three model regions from 2007 until 2011. Activities

covered watching cranes by the River Elbe, nature conservation measures to make the Green Belt visible and preserve unique species, "border experience" hiking trails and audio-routes with testimonies from contemporary witnesses – the wide range of activities developed within the project shows the great potential of the memorial landscape of the Green Belt. A nationwide opinion poll showed that the level of awareness and readiness to accept the Green Belt and the conservation goals was greatly increased by the project.

Moreover, the project created sustainable structures for further activities after its completion: for example, in the Elbe-Altmark-Wendland area local stakeholders successfully continue with activities for nature conservation, nature tourism and other sustainable regional development under the title "Experience the Green Belt".



Thomas Böhm, Organic farmer at Wakenitz lowlands (Germany):

"The Green Belt Initiative shows how ecological farming can preserve species diversity and the identity of the rural world as it is here in the Wakenitz lowlands, the German Amazon. Industrialized farming not only endangers this diversity, it also jeopardizes the very basis of our own lives and obliterates the traces of human memories embedded in the landscape of the European Green Belt."



The Central European Green Belt

“Greening” the Kutschenitza/Kučnica

At first sight this area, situated on the border between Slovenia and Austria and named after the creek Kutschenitza on the Austrian side and “Kučnica” on the Slovenian side, is a picturesque landscape.

The Kutschenitza creek is a tributary of the river Mura and is a habitat system which is characterized by large alluvial forests, parts of which are protected under Natura 2000. Local residents proudly refer to their home turf as one of the pearls of the Green Belt. Taking a closer look, we find that the habitat quality of parts of the forests, wetlands and meadows is deteriorating. The main reasons for this are intensive land use practices such as industrial bio mass production on the one hand or, on the other, complete neglect of the land. Intensive land use has resulted in nitrate runoff and input of fine sediment but one can nevertheless still find river mussels (*Unio crassus*) in the clean parts of the river. On the

other hand, where land has fallen into disuse this has caused valuable dry meadow habitat to disappear and given way to shrubs and trees which are of less benefit to insects and birds.

The Kutschenitza/Kučnica region is one of six pilot regions of the GreenNet transnational project mentioned above. At Kutschenitza/Kučnica specific remedial activities including revitalization and restoration are part of the management strategy developed by the project. Together with the agencies for water management and farmers suitable extensive land use practices will also be identified. The cross-border activities are jointly implemented by the Goričko Nature Park and the Styrian League for Nature Protection who will endeavour to implement these concepts and measures for a follow-up project with local agencies and land users.



Maja Simoneti, Urban Planning Institute of Ljubljana (LUZ) and Institute for Spatial Policies (IPoP) (Slovenia):
“The European Green Belt Initiative is an extremely valuable example of effective cross-border and cross-sectoral cooperation. The fact that this kind of long term cooperation works in favour of nature protection carries a very powerful message for everybody in spatial planning and sustainable development. The experience, knowledge and skills that were gathered through the Green Belt Initiative are namely the most important ones we all need for the effective participation in sustainable spatial development.”



The Balkan Green Belt

Gorbachev and most of the early proponents of the "European Green Belt" certainly knew that "moving away from confrontation" was more than a bipolar affair of two political blocs. At the Balkan Green Belt it becomes obvious that the Iron Curtain separated a number of countries and not just the two political blocs of East and West. While Yugoslavia was not part of the Eastern bloc and people were allowed to travel, Albania had closed its borders and was isolated from the rest of Europe from the early 1970s onwards. Greece was part of the European Union and most of the other states were inside the Eastern bloc. Thus the Balkan Green Belt takes an interesting course, surrounding Albania and following the former border between Yugoslavia and the Warsaw Pact countries as well as Greece and continuing along the borders between Greece and Bulgaria and Turkey towards the Black Sea.

The Balkan Green Belt is extremely heterogeneous in nature as well as in culture. The lowest point in the Pannonian Plain is the Danube, which rises only 68 m above sea level, while the mountain peaks reach 2,753 m high in the Korab

Mountains between Albania and FYR Macedonia. From the Adriatic Sea and the mouth of the Bojana-Buna River, the landscape rises within a distance of only 80 km up to 2,693 m in the Prokletije massif between Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo. Thus, the Balkan Green Belt links extremely important wetlands such as coastal areas, rivers and lakes with the mountain ranges of the Balkan Peninsula. But also traditionally cultivated landscapes with pastures, hedgerows and small villages are characteristic of the Balkan Green Belt. No large towns or industrial zones are located along the formerly strictly controlled border, and this has produced a mosaic of pristine natural and traditionally cultivated landscapes.

The multifaceted natural history of Southeastern Europe – with the Danube and its tributaries, the Balkan, Dinaric and Rhodope mountain ranges, the steppe areas in the Pannonian region and the ancient lakes at the border between Albania, FYR Macedonia and Greece – makes the Balkan Green Belt a hot spot of biodiversity and endemism. The mammals roaming here include Balkan chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra balcanica*),

bears, wolves and the critically endangered Balkan subspecies of the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*). Above the smooth hills of Sakar and its open pastures along the border between Bulgaria and Turkey the Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*) circles in the air together with Black (*Aegypius monachus*) and Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*). Globally threatened species like the Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*), too, are dependent on the Balkan Green Belt. The colony at the Lesser Prespa Lake is the largest colony in the world and comprises about 20% of the estimated global breeding population of the Dalmatian pelican.

In the early 1990s first ideas were developed for transforming the border zones to create an ecological network especially between Bulgaria, Greece, FYR Macedonia and Albania, and were already given the title of the Balkan Green Belt at that time. Starting in 2003 these activities were then integrated in the European Green Belt Initiative.

Gabriel Schwaderer, EuroNatur, Regional Coordinator (Germany):

“The European Green Belt Initiative is one of the most important nature conservation programmes in Europe. Not only because nature along the European Green Belt is of outstanding value, but also because the European Green Belt is actively connecting people – and in the process is connecting people with nature.”



The Balkan Green Belt

Threats

The main threats for the Balkan Green Belt are major investments in grey infrastructure. In the last ten years tourism has skyrocketed in several areas and has been accompanied by the arrival of investors with the result that previously untouched areas are now dotted with resorts and their accompanying infrastructure. The coastal zones are especially under threat, but this is also true for some parts of scenic mountainous areas where ski resorts are planned or to be developed. Further the wild and scenic rivers of the area are at risk to fall prey to hydro-power projects. Hydro-power dams modify entire river landscapes, interrupting natural river connections. Additionally, the site development will go hand in hand with the construction of roads which will lead to an additional fragmentation of the Balkan Green Belt. Altogether, current infrastructure developments along the Balkan Green Belt lead to a loss of endangered habitats and species thus posing great threats to biodiversity.

Yet, due to the predominantly mountainous character of the Balkan Green Belt it is still possible to find vast tracts of unspoilt nature and pristine habitats. The Balkan Green Belt is to a considerable extent covered by forests. Especially along the former border areas forests remained untouched including large stretches of natural old-growth woodland. However after the opening of the border areas these forests are in serious decline due to the intensification of their use. Illegal logging and summer fires also pose frequent threats to the forests along the Balkan Green Belt.

Considering the very high quality of most habitats along the Balkan Green Belt a much higher number of individuals of charismatic species such as Balkan lynx, Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and chamois might be expected. But poaching and illegal killing are a major threat to wildlife along most sections of the Balkan Green Belt.



Emil Komitov, Regional Forest Directorate Smolyan (Bulgaria):

“I wish for more initiatives like the European Green Belt Initiative because we need to take care of pristine nature and ensure species and habitats are carefully preserved for the generations that will follow us. The European Green Belt Initiative is one of the good examples of best practices for conservation and promotion of border areas along the former “Iron Curtain”. Let us hope that the decision makers share the same level of commitment to the Green Belt idea as those who established it, so that the initiative will not be marred.”



The Balkan Green Belt

Belasitsa beyond borders

Just like most of the Green Belt, the Balkan Green Belt follows a general north-south direction. This tendency ends all of a sudden at the Belasitsa Mountain range where the Green Belt forks, running to the West towards the Adriatic Sea and to the East towards the Black Sea.

Due to the presence of the border and political seclusion, nature in most of Belasitsa mountains has remained untouched. The climate is comparatively mild because of the southern latitude of the range. Many mountains are flanked by old-growth deciduous forest predominantly made up of beech and sweet chestnut, and inhabited by the characteristic birds including white-backed woodpecker (*Dendrocopos leucotos*), eastern orphee warbler (*Sylvia crassirostris*) and olive tree warbler (*Hippolais olivetorum*).

On its eastern side the Belasitsa range is flanked by the Struma river which is part of the "Via aristoteli" and an important flyway for migratory birds such as lesser spotted eagle (*Aquila pomarina*), and black and white stork (*Ciconia nigra resp. Ciconia ciconia*).

In this transboundary Belasitsa region EuroNatur is working together with Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF) – Branch Belasitsa, Belasitsa Nature Park Directorate (Bulgaria), Environmental Association Planetum (FYR Macedonia) and Lake Kerkini National Park Management Authority (Greece), from 2013 until 2015 in a DBU-funded project which is focused on facilitating regional cooperatives. The overarching goal of this project is to develop different methods of sustainable cross-border tourism and to raise the sensitivity of the local people to their region's biodiversity and their awareness of this diversity as a cultural as well as an economic asset.



Boris Erg, IUCN Programme Office for South-Eastern Europe (Serbia):

“The European Green Belt Initiative is a transnational endeavor supported from the outset by IUCN and reinforced by a multitude of experts, NGOs, conservation organizations, authorities and communities. Its scale and the broad community recognition it receives make it one of the most prominent efforts working to create a functioning ecological network on a global scale.”



The Balkan Green Belt

Balkan Lynx – Living along the Balkan Green Belt

In cooperation with national partners, such as the Macedonian Ecological Society (MES) and the Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA), and with international experts, such as the IUCN Cat Specialist Group and the Swiss-based organisation KORA, EuroNatur has taken part in launching and is contributing to maintaining the "Balkan Lynx Recovery programme". The programme aims at the enlargement of the protected area system in the border area between Albania, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo in order to protect the current and potential habitats of the Balkan lynx. In addition, the programme contributes to improving knowledge of the behaviour patterns of the Balkan lynx, its population trend and main threats. The dialogue with the local population is an essential aspect of all activities as it improves their knowledge about the Balkan lynx and in

the end secures their support for the establishment of an efficient protected area system. In this respect the stimulation of sustainable development is very important. The programme follows an approach based on micro projects. Innovative project ideas can be launched by the local population, the initial funding is provided by the programme.

The Balkan lynx is the most threatened of the nine subspecies of the Eurasian lynx. The total population is estimated to be less than fifty, tendency falling. One limiting factor for this species is the availability of prey: one lynx for instance requires the equivalent of one roe deer (approx. 8 to 10 kilos of meat a week). In order not to wipe out their prey base – or frighten them out of the area – lynx need to roam large areas, preferably free of other, competing lynxes.



Cvetomir Ugrinoski, Mayor of the municipality of Vevcani (Macedonia):
“The European Green Belt Initiative contributes to the preservation of the rich cultural and spiritual history of the countries along the Balkan Green Belt with the natural beauties of unique areas like Jablanica Mountain. I am very glad this Initiative exists and am looking forward to further cooperation.”

Ecological Networks and Tackling the Gaps in them

Over the last few decades traditional land use activities, such as farming, forestry and logging have become more intensive, and vast areas have been transformed into urban zones or cut up by an increasingly dense transport network. This is also the case in Europe – according to the European Commission recent statistics from the European Environment Agency even show that in a single decade around 5% of EU territory was covered with concrete or otherwise converted into artificial areas. As a consequence, habitats are disappearing and barriers are preventing the natural freedom to dispersal of European plant species and freedom to roam of Europe's wildlife.

The European Green Belt with its practically undisturbed areas of nature and traditionally cultivated landscapes can be seen as last stronghold of nature in the heavily fragmented landscape of Europe, playing an important role as an ecological network and as a central contribution to Green Infrastructure.

Large protected areas are considered core areas in the fabric of an ecological network. A further feature which supports the coherence of an ecological network is a high general permeability of the landscape. Conservationists

and planners need to ask: Do the soils, plant covers, methods of land use enhance or hinder the dispersal, migration and movement of species? Elements such as hedgerows, extensively used agricultural areas, and strips along field margins increase diversity and thus the permeability of the landscape.

To give an example: for the Balkan lynx large protected areas play an important role in the revitalization of the population. In particular the national parks of Mavrovo, Pelister and Galichi in FYR Macedonia and Shebenik-Jablanica in Albania are considered important strongholds from which the lynx may colonize surrounding terrains. However, as the natural territories of large mammals and the scope of ecological processes within landscapes both go far beyond the borders of protected areas and even countries, the creation and maintenance of protected areas will not be enough to conserve biodiversity.

This means that entire landscapes need to be brought into the focus of attention to make it possible to develop and maintain a network of high-quality natural and semi-natural areas capable of sustaining ecosystem functions in order to be more resilient in the face of increasing anthropogenic threats.

At the same time a diverse landscape comprising a network of functioning ecosystems allows for the movement of plant and animal species. The potential mobility of species is also a key factor for their ability to adapt to climate change since small changes in temperature and ultimately in the moisture regime can have large effects on the distribution of many organisms. Organisms need to be able to adapt their distribution range in order to survive.

Towards a Coherent and Functioning European Ecological Network

Natura 2000 and Emerald Network

The "Birds Directive", dating back to 1979 and the "Habitats Directive" from 1992 are the pillars of the establishment of an EU-wide network of protected areas – known as the Natura 2000 network. At the end of 2013 Natura 2000 comprised more than 27,000 sites ranging across all the member states and covering approximately 18% of EU land territory as well as important marine areas. The central goal of the Natura 2000 network is "to maintain or restore, at favorable conservation status, natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora of Community interest". This wording shows the importance of conserving plant and animal species and habitats inside and outside officially designated reserves.

Animals such as otter, grey seal and lynx are protected by Natura 2000, even if they venture beyond the borders of protected areas. Habitat types with distinct plant-sociological compositions such as salt meadows, riparian forests or alpine grasslands are subject to EU regulation and protected as soon as they are recognized and listed – no matter where they occur.

Therefore Natura 2000 has been – and still is – an excellent tool for securing patches of valuable land including areas throughout the European Green Belt.

The obvious disadvantage of Natura 2000 is that it does not cover states along the Green Belt which do not belong to the European Union, such as Albania, FYR Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Norway, Russia, Serbia and Turkey. This is where the Emerald Network comes in. It was launched in 1998 by the Council of Europe, like Natura 2000 under the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention) which came into force in 1982. The Emerald Network sites complement Natura 2000 and together they form important components of the European Green Belt.

But the relevance of the European Green Belt goes far beyond the Natura 2000 and Emerald sites themselves. Due to the quality and structure of its natural and traditionally cultivated landscapes the European Green Belt supports the implementation of another important chapter of Natura 2000: Finally, the main objective of Natura 2000 is to create a coherent and functioning European ecological network. The Habitats Directive calls on member states to maintain, and where appropriate, develop connecting features in the landscape with a view to improving the ecological coherence of the Natura 2000 network. This does not create any

obligation to designate new protected areas but means that in addition to the Natura 2000 areas, the need for connecting elements must be considered in landscape planning. The focus is on conserving and developing the integrity of European natural landscapes including their embedded, interconnected protected areas. The European Green Belt can be seen as model area or even as a backbone to develop and maintain such a functionally coherent network across Europe.

Towards a Coherent and Functioning European Ecological Network

Green Infrastructure

The vision of a functioning and coherent ecological network across Europe is enhanced and has been recently mandated by the Green Infrastructure Communication from the EU Commission which is seen as a road map for the achievement of the 2020 goal of halting the loss of biodiversity.

The European Commission – which supports the idea of Green Infrastructure – defines Green Infrastructure as a "strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas with other environmental features designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services". The underlying principle of Green Infrastructure is that each area of land can frequently offer multiple benefits – if its ecosystems are in a healthy state. Thus Green Infrastructure can provide not only conservation but also socio-economic benefits, ranging from the local scale to EU level.

Green Infrastructure is expected to lead to a marked increase in resilience and improvement in biodiversity on the European continent and enhancement of the quality of life of its people. In this way it presents an alternative vision for both planners and politicians since these are still accustomed to thinking that progress mainly depends on improving the "grey infrastructure" of roads, buildings and channelized water ways. Implementing a Green Infrastructure beyond protected areas will help to strengthen the coherence of the Natura 2000 network by making the core areas more resilient and by providing buffer zones against impacts on the protected sites. The European Green Belt is a unique example of what this could look like.



The European Green Belt Initiative

From individual and separate activities to a common process

The European Green Belt Initiative brings together 24 states – EU-member states, candidate and potential candidate countries as well as non-EU-countries. At individual sites along the Green Belt and in its sections different people and organizations are involved in implementation activities to conserve biodiversity and to support local people in developing strategies to use natural resources sustainably. Alongside implementation on the ground what is also important is to bring people together and allow for the exchange of experiences and ideas – indeed this is an asset which adds value to the European Green Belt Initiative and ensures that the Initiative is successful in reaching its goals.

Continuous interaction, mutual exchange and reflection contribute to the joint development of activities eventually leading to the enhancement of biodiversity conservation along the European Green Belt. Showcasing best practices is likewise important in order to make generally known what the European Green Belt is able to achieve and thus to gain support for the Initiative. At the same time the frame which the European Green

Belt provides guarantees alignment leading to a consistent and coherent strategy which will improve conservation and socio-economic benefits along the European Green Belt: Only if all regions and actors share the same understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it, does the European Green Belt have the potential to make a difference for the conservation of Europe's natural heritage. And only if the insights and ideas of all regions and actors are reflected, does the European Green Belt become a truly European project.

All this explains why the question of governance has been an integral and challenging aspect of the work of the European Green Belt Initiative ever since it began. It remains a major challenge to be truly collaborative and not to let the Initiative be dominated by one or by a few individuals or organizations. In the long-term, sustained leadership and empowerment is needed from the local to the national level. Representatives from different levels need to participate in the development of ideas, in planning and implementation. Considering the geographical span

of the Initiative and the number of countries, institutions, and individuals involved this is not an easy task for this ambitious project. This is especially the case since continuous and sustainable funding has not yet been established and until now the overall coordination has been carried out as part of short-term projects supported by different donors. This makes it even more important for the Initiative to develop a governance structure that is efficient and at the same time allows for true collaboration and participation.



The European Green Belt Initiative

The current structure of governance

Ground-breaking steps to establish a governance structure have been taken in the course of the R+D project "Advancing the European Green Belt Initiative". From the beginning the initiative has been organized in regional sections of which since 2012 there are four. A Regional Coordinator has been appointed for each of the sections. Their main task is to support and facilitate the implementation of activities in close cooperation with all National Focal Points and National NGO Partners while at the same time ensuring the alignment of regional partners and activities, e.g. by organizing regular regional conferences. Other important tasks are to link up with other national and regional authorities, stakeholders and strategies, and to put energy into lobbying for the Initiative at national and regional levels. In early 2014 the following organizations have the mandate to act as Regional Coordinators:

- Fennoscandia: Baltic Fund for Nature
- Baltic: BUND Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania
- Central Europe: BUND (Friends of the Earth Germany)
- Balkan: EuroNatur

A Coordination Group was established in 2012 to reflect the variety of the European Green Belt more thoroughly, to share responsibility and to allow for the involvement of all the different regions. The group consists of the four Regional Coordinators, one selected National Focal Point and one selected National NGO Partner per region. The decision as to which National Focal Point and which national NGO is appointed to the Coordination Group is made according to each region's own principles. As a general rule, such decisions are taken in each division's regional conference. In sum the committee consists of twelve seats. In addition, a representative of IUCN takes part in the meetings of the Coordination Group as consultant.

The Coordination Group meets twice a year. One of the members is elected as chair for a term of two years. The chair is responsible for preparing, chairing and documenting the meetings of the Coordination Group. The decisions of the Coordination Group are adopted according to the principle of consensus.

Since 2012 intensive discussions are taking place on the formal structure of the Initiative. There is consensus that a formal structure is necessary to secure sustainable long-term funding and to support the Initiative and its activities. Various forms are being discussed and possibly an association will be founded. In all the forms envisioned the newly established Coordination Group is to play an important role (e.g. as Board).



The European Green Belt Initiative

Keeping a flow of communication and information

Constant communication within the Initiative and availability of information are important instruments with which to strengthen the stakeholder network. In addition, what is essential is public relations work to raise awareness of the European Green Belt and its Initiative in the general public and also, of course, among decision makers at national, regional and local levels.

Who knows the European Green Belt? What do people know about it? And what don't they know about it? These questions were answered by a study which was carried out by the International Institute for Sustainability Management. The focus was on the question of how to use the opportunities offered by various Web 1.0 and 2.0 tools to set up sustainable communication about the European Green Belt.

The study included personal and telephone interviews in the interviewee's mother tongue with randomly selected interviewees from all the Green Belt countries. Besides the conclusions to be drawn regarding the effectivity of **communication** on the European Green Belt Initiative the results also help to specify appropriate ways of communicating in the various countries. In addition, an internal study was carried out with the members of the European Green Belt Initiative on how to improve the exchange of information and the joint development of projects and measures, which is rather a challenging task with such a large number of organisations with all their differences in background, size, languages spoken etc.

Meeting face to face is essential. The regular Pan-European Green Belt Conferences are at the heart of the European Green Belt Initiative. Stakeholders from all neighbouring countries meet there, exchange ideas and solutions, plan activities and projects. The sheer number of additional meetings and **events** involving stakeholders from several countries, most of them within a regional context, show that the European Green Belt Initiative is a genuine bottom-up initiative. These activities help to spread the vision of the European Green Belt in the population and in administrative and political circles.

People wanting to get an overview or to read news about the European Green Belt and the Initiative can visit the **website** www.europeangreenbelt.org. The homepage aims to provide regularly updated information about past and present projects and activities on the Green Belt. Detailed information is available, e.g. presentations held at the Pan-European Green Belt Conferences or in a number of publications in the Download section.

A European Green Belt **Newsletter** is published on behalf of the Coordination Group of the European Green Belt Initiative. The newsletter gives information on upcoming European Green Belt meetings and conferences as well as on other important activities and developments of the initiative.

The European Green Belt has great potential for bringing European people together. On either side of a border people have a shared history and they have also shared the experience of being separated from their neighbours or even having perceived them as a military threat. This background forms the basis for a shared desire for a lasting peaceful and cooperative coexistence. The Green Belt can be the symbol for European peacekeeping. It can also be the symbol for a Pan-European Ecological Network and a wise long-term vision for Europe: a vision that understands, respects and guards nature and ecosystems as the basis for the prosperity and health of European countries. But a symbol can only unfold its full potential if its message is understood – and if it is known. To raise general awareness and understanding in the population a **leaflet** has been issued in all the languages of the European Green Belt and also in English. In addition to the general information each leaflet contains special information about the Green Belt in the respective country.

The European Green Belt as part of the trans-European Green Infrastructure

The EU infrastructure policy aims to put a powerful transport network (TEN-T) in place across all 28 EU member states. According to the European Commission the financing for transport infrastructure will triple to reach 26 billion € within the period 2014–2020. Funding for grey infrastructure will certainly also be well appointed which will lead to increased fragmentation across Europe – but what about natural networks? The environment sector is one of the least well-funded by the EU. However, a trans-European Green Infrastructure (TEN-G) initiative is aspired too and is badly needed to halt the loss of biodiversity and natural habitats and to secure ecosystem services – the basis for human well-being and a sustainable economy.

In the EU-Communication on Green Infrastructure the Green Belt is recognized as a pan-European initiative already powerfully contributing to Green Infrastructure. But how are much-needed measures, such as creating buffer zones, connecting up fragmented sections and revitalizing degraded areas, to be financed? We think that the idea of Green Infrastructure should be embedded in all policy and planning of land use. It needs to be given early consideration in land management and strategic spatial planning and necessary funds for implementation need to be secured.

The European Green Belt is predestined to function as the backbone of a GI network across Europe. This means that desirably the EU member states, federal states and administrative regions down to rural districts and towns will seize all opportunities for developing the Green Belt within the Green Infrastructure framework. Cooperation across borders and boundaries using macro-regional strategies supported by European Regional Development Fund and European territorial cooperation programmes may be an important component too. And in the end it is also important that stakeholders in spatial planning, agriculture, water management, forestry, politicians and local communities recognize the enormous potential of Green Infrastructure and the Green Belt for the sustainable development of their regions.

In particular for member states implementing Green Infrastructure may unfold great potential: by improving the connectivity of Natura 2000 sites along the Green Belt – across borders where needed – and by initiating regional and national projects they can contribute to ensure the functioning of the Green Belt as an important part of the EU's Green Infrastructure strategy.



Perspective for the Future

Joint Declaration of Intent on the European Green Belt

Ten years after the first conference in Bonn, which was the starting point for the European Green Belt Initiative, a new political impulse was given in holding a high-level celebration on 15 and 16 May 2013 in Berlin, Germany.

During this ceremony several ministers, ambassadors and representatives of the 24 states adjoining the Green Belt received a Green Belt award for their commitment and as an incentive to continue and to do even more for the Green Belt. The prize was awarded by BUND and EuroNatur on behalf of the Coordination Group of the European Green Belt Initiative. Several of the appointed representatives emphasized their political will to support the pan-European initiative: an official Joint Declaration of Intent was signed by eleven countries during the event (Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Kosovo, Romania and Slovenia). In the follow-up four additional countries (Italy, Latvia, Norway and Poland) signed the declaration during a second signing ceremony on 4 September 2013 and Slovakia in spring 2014. Two countries (FYR Macedonia and Serbia) sent letters of support.

The main statement of the declaration is that the participants share a common understanding on the importance of transboundary cooperation for the conservation, restoration and sustainable development of the European Green Belt and affirm their intention to work together. The signing countries expressed their intent to protect the Green Belt both as part of their national natural heritage and as a memorial landscape along the former Iron Curtain. The declaration also contains the expression of the intention to establish a working structure for the European Green Belt Initiative by appointing one National Focal Point per country and supporting the Coordination Group of the European Green Belt Initiative, composed of selected National Focal Points, NGO partners, the Regional Coordinators and the IUCN. In addition, the Coordination Group will undertake efforts to complete the list of signature states and take steps to implement the targets of the declaration.



What is needed in the future?

Only ten years after the launching of the European Green Belt Initiative it can already be considered a success story. A huge range of people and organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, from all the 24 countries are putting enormous efforts into the conservation and development of the European Green Belt in the different states. But there are still many challenges to face and answers to be found to urgent questions.

The Joint Declaration of Intent is an important step towards ensuring continuous political commitment and support from all the countries involved for the conservation and further development of this unique European project. It can be expressed in ideational and financial support and also includes the nomination of National Focal Points which have the capacity and a clear mandate to contribute actively to the European Green Belt Initiative irrespective of possible changes in government. The genuine implementation of the Declaration by the Green Belt states is crucial for the continuity and further development of the European Green Belt.

Another important task is the continuous funding of the European Green Belt Initiative at two levels. Funding is needed for the implementation of activities at the local

and regional levels. Added value for local and regional activities based on the European Green Belt Initiative is only gained if there is overall coordination which provides the framework for regular exchange and for learning from one another. For this to function it is vital that a mechanism for long-term financing is established independent of short-term project funding. Having a formalized structure with the Coordination Group at its heart will be an important precondition to set up a sustainable funding.

The relevance of the European Green Belt for the implementation of important EU policies, such as Natura 2000 and Green Infrastructure, can be demonstrated in regional and national model projects. The support of different sectors and decision makers on all levels is needed for the successful development of the European Green Belt as a model for other European and global initiatives.

In order to raise awareness and sharpen the profile of the European Green Belt continuous communication about its contribution to halting the loss of biodiversity and to securing ecosystem services in Europe will form an integral part of the further development of the European Green Belt Initiative.

Who is needed?

Many people live in, depend on, use, care about and manage the European Green Belt and its regional sections. The European Green Belt Initiative aims to achieve nature conservation beyond protected area boundaries by conserving the integrity of natural and traditionally cultivated landscapes along the Green Belt. At the same time it is a model project for promoting sustainable development based on regional cooperatives which respect the needs of the local population as well as the immense value of biodiversity. Thus the European Green Belt Initiative meets and is affected by a great diversity of sectoral interests such as forestry, agriculture, water management, tourism, transport and hunting competing for the use of land, but also the interests of politicians, administrations, local communities and stakeholders. Cooperation with and support of all these sectors and interests is crucial for the success of the initiative and these joint interests.

It is fundamental to the work of the European Green Belt to understand the various cultures people live in and to bring together different levels and sectors of society. In the end, the success of the European Green Belt Initiative depends on many people and their commitment to conserve and restore the European Green Belt as a functional ecological network of interconnected very valuable natural and traditionally cultivated habitats and landscapes. The contribution of the European Green Belt Initiative and its bodies is to facilitate a coordinated process of trans-boundary and intersectoral cooperation.

The European Green Belt today is a peaceful strip of land.
Its outstanding importance is not just a matter of nature conservation.
For coming generations it will be a living memorial of the division of Europe.
The European Green Belt joins rather than separates people in a converging Europe.
It could also act as a model for other borders in the world of how to
foster the natural harmony between human beings and the environment.

Legend

- 06 Mavrovo National Park in FYR Macedonia (Gabriel Schwaderer)
- 08 European Green Belt and its course along the four regions (European Green Belt Initiative/Coordination Group)
- 10 River Kitkajoki in the Oulanka National Park close to the Russian Karelian border (Metsähallitus/Kari Lahti)
- 12 left Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*) (Jürgen Schneider)
- 12 right Lynx (*Lynx lynx*) (Christof Wermter)
- 13 Wolf (*Canis lupus*) (Gunther Willinger)
- 14 Brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) in the large coniferous, old-growth forests of the Fennoscandian Green Belt (Pentti Sormunen)
- 15 Globe-flowers (*Trollius europaeus*) on the flood meadows of River Oulankajoki (Metsähallitus/Kari Lahti)
- 16 Visitors in Koli National Park in Eastern Finland (Tapio Heikkilä)
- 17 Patvinsuo National Park in Eastern Finland (Tapio Heikkilä)
- 18 Kap Arkona at the island of Rügen (Germany) (Jörg Schmiedel)
- 20 left European Otter (*Lutra lutra*) (Joachim Flachs)
- 20 right Sea pinks (*Armeria maritima*) in the salt marshes along the coast of the Baltic Green Belt (Gunther Willinger)
- 21 White-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) (Jürgen Schneider)
- 22 Kemer National Park in Latvia (Jörg Schmiedel)
- 23 Beach at Gross Schwansee in Germany (Jörg Schmiedel)
- 24 Grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) at German Baltic Sea Coast (Elke Körner)
- 25 Marsh orchid in Kuressaare Saaremaa in Estonia (Jörg Schmiedel)
- 26 River Soča in Triglav National Park (Slovenia) (Jürgen Schmidl)
- 28 left View to Little Arber Lake in the Bavarian Forest (Germany) (Melanie Kreutz)
- 28 right Meadow lark (*Alauda arvensis*) (Jürgen Schneider)
- 29 Black stork (*Ciconia nigra*) (Anton Laut)
- 30 20th anniversary of the Green Belt Germany at River Elbe in 2009 (Uwe Riecken)
- 31 Opening of the Iron Curtain in "Little Berlin" in 1989 (Mödlareuth, Germany) (Borderland Museum Mödlareuth/Arndt Schaffner)
- 32 Mussel survey in River Kučnica/Kutschenitza at the border between Slovenia and Austria (Stanislava Dešnik)
- 33 Cornflower (*Centaurea Pseudophrygia*) (Helmut Schlumprecht)
- 34 Rhodope Mountains in Bulgaria (Carsten Burggraf)
- 36 Old tank in Sakar Mountains in Bulgaria (Gunther Willinger)
- 37 Dalmatian pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*) (Jiří Michal)
- 38 Belasitsa Mountain at the border between Bulgaria, Greece and FYR Macedonia (Piotr Rzerzycha)
- 39 Lesser spotted eagle (*Aquila pomarina*) (Gernot Pohl)
- 40 left Mala Reka in FYR Macedonia (Gabriel Schwaderer)
- 40 right Camera trap for Balkan Lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*) (KORA)
- 41 Balkan Lynx (*Lynx lynx balcanicus*) (Macedonian Ecological Society)
- 44 River Drava in Hungary (Borut Stumberger)
- 46 6th Pan-European Green Belt Conference in Mavrovo (FYR Macedonia) (Zarko Brajanoski/MES)
- 48 left Island Mali Grad in Lake Prespa in Albania (Gabriel Schwaderer)
- 48 right Lake Ohrid at the border between FYR Macedonia and Albania (Gabriel Schwaderer)
- 50 Green Belt Germany at the border between Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Schleswig Holstein (Klaus Leidorf)
- 51 10th anniversary of the European Green Belt Initiative in May 2013 in Berlin (Sascha Hilgers, German Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety)

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