

Improving the European Green Belt initiative visibility with an international photo contest: a preliminary proposal

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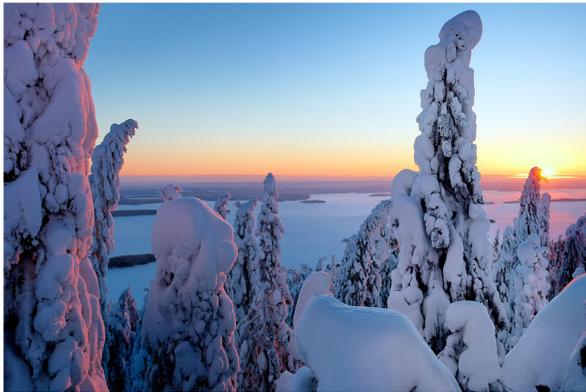


Philippe Fayt

School of Forest Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, P.O. Box 111, FI-80101 Joensuu, Finland (Philippe.Fayt@uef.fi)

1. Background

The objective of the European Green Belt initiative is to promote the importance of the shared natural and cultural heritage along the line of the former Iron Curtain. The international recognition of the area is not only key to the maintenance and conservation of among Europe's most valuable interconnected landscapes for biodiversity. The high-value corridor also provides conditions that are beneficial to the socio-cultural, identity and economic needs of those local communities living nearby. It is therefore of prime importance for the Green Belt initiative to be seen and its implications well understood as widely as possible, supporting cross-border cooperation and local involvements.



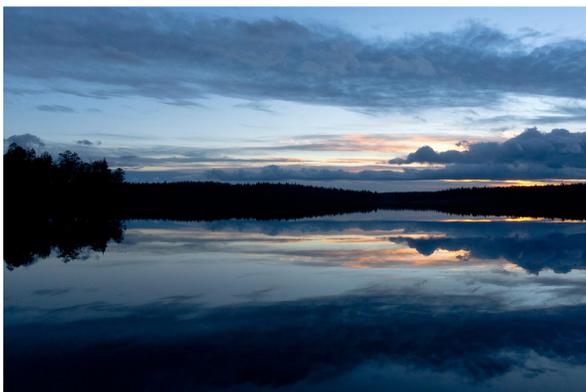
One way to increase the project visibility would be by organising annually an international photo contest specifically dedicated to the area covered by the Green Belt. This contest would promote awareness on nature conservation in the area through the means of photography by showcasing to the world the finest examples of natural heritage and eco-friendly cultural practices that are being achieved under the ecological conditions of the European Green Belt. *The underlying idea is that, a good picture is worth a thousand words, and a portfolio of rewarded high-quality photographs a powerful way of storytelling and connecting people around shared emotional values.* Even more if the selected photographs can be part of a touring exhibition afterwards. Supporting this idea, a first version of an international Green Belt Photo Contest was initiated in 2016, focusing on the Balkan region. Here is an overview of different challenges involved and questions raised by this kind of contest whose answers would help supporting its development at the European level.

2. From idea to reality: challenges and opportunities

Planning and organising an international Green Belt Photo Contest require answering beforehand a number of questions, making choices and defining criteria that, ultimately, will influence the quality of the photographs submitted and hence the international reputation of the contest. One aspect of central and foremost importance for convincing recognized photographers to submit their photographs, especially if the photo contest is new, is the possibility for them to win attractive prizes, such as in the form of photo equipment or cash money. In general, means to achieve this include the use of sponsors (e.g. municipalities, various private partners, photo equipment brands, photo magazines, nature conservation associations, etc.), a participation fee, or both. In the specific case of the European Green Belt, being a cross-border initiative under the patronage of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, there could be also a possibility for additional funding from involved European institutions, governments and stakeholders from nature conservation and sustainable development. A lack of participation fee, on the other hand, could make the proposed contest more attractive to newcomers.

Compared to other traditional country-based contests, another challenge lies in the identification and appointment of the organising/managing team of such a transnational event. This could be overcome by its annual designation by the Board of the European Green Belt Association and the contest be held and widely advertised using the structure of the new Green Belt official website (www.europeangreenbelt.org). As such, a European Green Belt Photo Contest would actively contribute to the implementation of the association's latest objectives by supporting knowledge exchange, awareness raising and education.

Only photographs taken within the area covered by the European Green Belt shall be entitled to enter the competition. It is therefore crucial for the photographers to know exactly where the corridor boundaries are and so for the Green Belt spatial reference area to be unambiguously and openly defined (i.e., between 10-50 km wide, depending on the region – see the proposed draft indicative spatial reference area of the European Green Belt).



With its length of 12,500 km supporting a great variety of habitat types among eight biogeographical regions, the European Green Belt has been subdivided into four regions, namely, from south to north, the Balkan, Central Europe, the Baltic and Fennoscandia. A dedicated photo contest should therefore be able to encompass and illustrate that diversity, for example by having specific "Green Belt's Regional Environment" photo categories. In addition to traditional photo contest categories (birds, mammals, etc.), it would be also important to have a "Man for Nature" category that especially recognises and rewards the positive role of undertaken habitat restoration & traditional land-use activities for the maintenance of the Green Belt ecological integrity. Unfortunately, human activities within the Green Belt can be as well a major source of habitat loss, ecosystem connectivity disruption and, in turn, biodiversity impoverishment, a reality calling for changes and improvements that a photo category "Losing the Belt" would help denouncing.

3. Project feasibility: a comparative approach

To support the feasibility and success of a new photo contest, it makes sense to look first at the rules and recommended best practices being in use in already well established and internationally recognised nature photo contests. In this section, I compare the general rules of five of them based in Europe, namely the International Nature Photo Competition of Namur (Belgium), the Montier Festival Photo (France), the GDT European Wildlife Photographer of the Year (UK), the Nordic Nature Photo Contest (Norway), and the Wildlife Photographer of the Year (UK). The aim of this exercise is to provide an overview of existing guidelines and see how the available information can help defining the rules of a future photo contest taking into account (1) the geographical, ecological, societal and historical specificities of the Green Belt area, and (2) the existing challenges and opportunities previously discussed (Table 1).

Table 1 – Presentation of five major European Nature Photo Contests and the derived guidelines of a hypothetical European Green Belt Photo Contest.

	International Nature Photo Competition of Namur	Montier Festival Photo	GDT European Wildlife Photographer of the Year	Nordic Nature Photo Contest	Wildlife Photographer of the Year	European Green Belt Photo Contest
Registration	Free of cost	Free of cost	30 €	26 € (NOK 250)	33.5 € (€30.00)	Free of cost?
Associated events	Part of a ten days long international nature festival including pro/amateur film competitions, indoor/outdoor photos exhibitions, conferences & meetings with nature photographers and film-makers, nature fair, various educational nature-oriented activities (e.g., introductory courses to nature photography, thematic workshops, field trips, youth activities such as school group participations to film projections and photo exhibitions, etc.)	Part of a four days long international nature festival including photos exhibitions, conferences & meetings with nature photographers, nature fair, various educational nature activities (especially youth-oriented such as thematic workshops, field trips, etc.)	Part of a two days long international nature festival including indoor/outdoor photos exhibitions, conferences & meetings with nature photographers, photo market, product presentations and short seminars by various companies, short lectures on all aspects of nature photography	One-day awards ceremony	One-day awards ceremony	Possibility for the online contest to be followed by a one-day awards ceremony or as a part of an international nature festival specifically dedicated to the European Green Belt? Should this be a touring event whose organisation changes over the years between the country or region partners?
Nb of sponsors (in connection with associated events)	64 sponsors (including those renting a space at the nature fair)	73 sponsors (including those renting a space at the nature fair)	2 sponsors (but 70 exhibitors renting their space at the festival photo market)	10 sponsors	2 sponsors + many corporate partners	In addition to various private sponsors, EU institutions, governments and stakeholders involved in and supporting the European Green Belt initiative?
Photo categories	Nature Photographer of the Year, Birds, Mammals, Other Animals, Flora, Landscape, Human and Nature, Mini-Series, Wild Wallonia, Young Photographer (< 18 years)	Nature Photographer of the Year, Birds, Mammals, Other Animals, Wild plants, Landscape, Man and Nature, Mini-Series, Graphics, Form and Matter of Nature, Nature revisited, A Nature Short Video	Nature Photographer of the Year, Birds, Mammals, Other Animals, Plants & Fungi, Landscape, Man and Nature, The Underwater World, Nature's Studio, Young Photographers (two groups: ≤ 14, 15-17 years)	Nature Photographer of the Year, Birds, Mammals, Travel Photo, Close-ups, Landscapes, Threatened Nature, Tour Image, Creative Nature, Young Photographer	Nature Photographer of the Year, Animals in their Environment, Animal Portraits, Amphibian and Reptile Behaviour, Bird Behaviour, Invertebrate Behaviour, Mammal behaviour, Plants & Fungi, Under Water, Urban Wildlife, Earth's Environments, Black and White, Creative Visions, Wildlife Photojournalist: Single Image, Wildlife Photojournalist Award: Photo Story, Rising Star, Portfolio Award (aged 18 to 26), Wildlife Photographer Portfolio Award (aged 27 and over), Young Photographers (three groups: ≤ 10, 11-14, 15-17 years)	Green Belt Photographer of the Year, Birds, Mammals, Other Animals, Plants & Fungi, Green Belt's Environments: Fennoscandia, Green Belt's Environments: Baltic, Green Belt's Environments: Central Europe, Green Belt's Environments: Balkan, Man for Nature, Losing the Belt, Composition and Forms, Young Photographer (< 18 years)
Prizes	Equipment prizes in the amount of about 8,000 € altogether	Non communicated	Cash and equipment prizes in the amount of 25,000 € altogether	Cash and equipment prizes in the amount of 16,000 € altogether	Cash prizes in the amount of 42,160 € altogether in addition to trips to London for the top winners to attend the awards ceremony	Cash and/or equipment prizes in the amount of 12,000 € altogether, including 3000 € for the overall winner, 800 € for the category winners except the Young Photographer category (200 €)? All winning participants would receive the contest portfolio.
Contest deliverables	Portfolio and exhibition	Portfolio and exhibition	Portfolio and exhibition	Portfolio and exhibition	Portfolio and exhibition	Portfolio and exhibition?
Possibility of touring exhibitions	Yes	Yes	Yes	?	Yes	Yes, among countries sharing borders with the European Green Belt?

4. Outlook

There are several reasons why an international photography contest would greatly benefit the European Green Belt initiative. Especially, by increasing its visibility and environmental awareness, a dedicated photo contest would help protecting, promoting and developing the Green Belt common natural and cultural heritage. Moreover, by focusing on a cross-border initiative having the support of international institutions and organisations, there are good possibilities for a European Green Belt Photo Contest to gain financial support from various partners. Ways to promote its international influence could be by publishing annually the winning and highly commended photographs in a memorable portfolio together with touring photo exhibitions, for example among countries sharing borders with the European Green Belt. Even more ambitious, the European Green Belt Photo Contest could become one day part of a larger international Green Belt Festival, as it already exists with other major nature photo contests. Should we start thinking about it?

About the author: Postdoc researcher in forest ecology, Philippe Fayt is a nature photographer in his free time and several of his photographs have been winning international competitions. For the last two years, he was in the pre-selection jury of the internationally recognised Golden Turtle nature photo contest (Russia). All the poster photographs were taken by him.