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## Green Belt Europe – Nature knows no boundaries

From »Iron Curtain« to Europe's lifeline

### 1. Introduction

The so called »Iron Curtain« divided Europe for almost 40 years from the Barents Sea at the border between Russia, Norway, and Finland, all the way to the Bosphorus at the border between Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. It was a political, ideological and physical barrier, most strongly expressed in Germany: Metal fences, walls, barbed wire, guard towers, spring guns, land mines and watchdogs created a death zone through Germany and separated one country in East and West, divided families and friends for decades. In this forbidden zone to people the only winner was nature.

Today, the *central* Green Belt's lifeline through Germany is the area between the road for military vehicles and the former borderline of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and German Democratic Republic (GDR) – today the borderline of the German federal states (German »Länder«, see Figure 1). This strip is between 50 and 200 m wide. In the long run it is planned to protect the more or less narrow *central* strip and also (large) protected nature conservation areas along the entire Green Belt. The *central* Green Belt is the important backbone with ribs to both sides building up the longest habitat connecting system existing in Germany and Middle Europe, respectively.

For decades almost nobody was admitted to enter the border strip through Europe, this area was comparatively undisturbed and underwent no cultivation or intensification of land use. Due to its remoteness and restrictions the situation was similar in large areas in the border regions. Despite its inhumanity, this border granted nature a pause for breath: nature flourished and developed something extremely rare in intensively used landscapes – a truly wild area. The route of the Iron Curtain thus travels through some of the most important habitats for biodiversity in Europe.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, BUND (Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland), one of Germany's leading environmental organisations and a member of Friends of the Earth, is engaged for the protection of the valuable habitats along the former inner-German border – the so called Green Belt. Originated from the Green Belt Germany the vision of a Green Belt through Europe developed. A Green Belt from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea can become a backbone of an ecological network that is a global symbol for trans-boundary co-operation in nature conservation and sustainable development. Moreover, it connects people and shows that the enlarged European Union has not only a cultural but also a natural heritage.

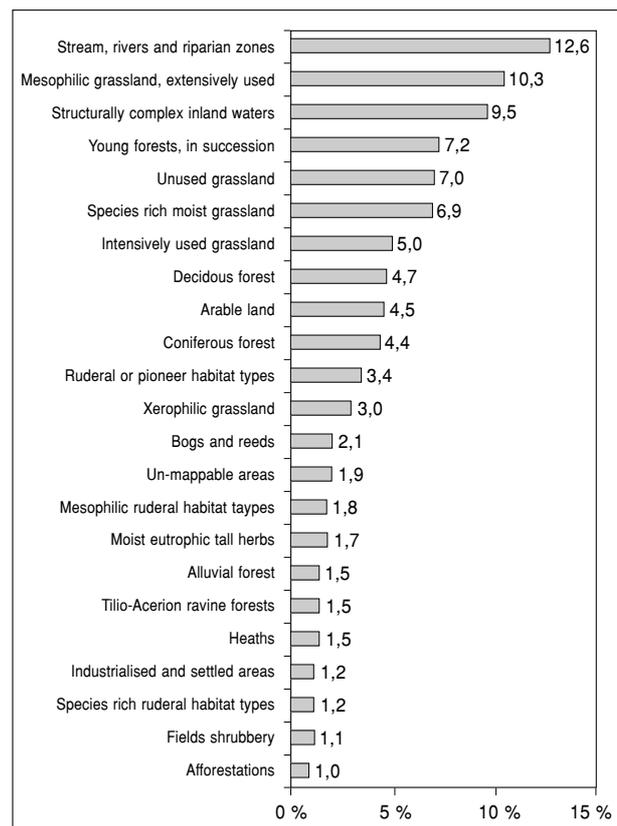
## 2. Green Belt Germany

### 2.1 Historical development

Already before the breakdown of the Iron Curtain, surveys of the border area, mainly only possible from the Western side, showed the richness of animal and plant species and habitats in the seclusion of the East-West-German border. The first mapping in the inner-German borderline was performed on birds in 1979/80 by staff members of the BUND. In December 1989, BUND organised the first meeting of more than 400 nature conservationists from East- and West-Germany which took place in the town Hof in the Bavarian-Saxonian-Czech border area. During this meeting the name Green Belt was created by BUND and all participants agreed to the first resolution for the protection of the unique habitats in this Green Belt through Germany. Thus, the »Green Belt« project was born. Right from the start, the Green Belt was not only Germany's first nationwide nature conservation project but also a living memorial to recent German history.

### 2.2 Habitat network – the Green Belt

The Green Belt Germany passes 1393 km through 17 distinct physiographic regions from the Baltic Sea to the intersection of the border Saxony, Bavaria and Czech Republic. It is a cross-section through almost every type of German landscape – from the coast to lowlands and low mountain regions. The special status of the Green Belt is that it connects



**Figure 3:** Percentage distribution of areas of aggregated habitat types (only types with more than one 1% area are shown) in the Green Belt Germany. Graphic: BUND-Project Office Green Belt.

different habitat types. A fact extremely rare in the intensively used and fragmented German landscape (Figure 2). Fallow grassland, shrubland, dry grassland, pioneer forest, wet meadows, water bodies and bogs are linked and interlinked.

From April 2001 to September 2002, a survey of habitat types along the entire length of the Green Belt was conducted (BN/BUND 2002). The study was funded by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) and the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety. The results of the survey reveal the great importance of this 177 km<sup>2</sup> large alignment of valuable habitats. Within its area 109 different habitat types were mapped. Summarised, 60% of the Green Belt are composed of aquatic ecosystems, different forest-types, extensively used mesophilic grassland, unused grassland (fallow) and species rich moist grassland (Figure 3). Half of the area (48%) of this habitat network consists of endangered habitat types (Riecken et al. 1994). About 16% of the area of the Green Belt Germany is covered by priority Annex I habitats (EU Habitats Directive 92/43/EWG).

Regarding the conservation status of the Green Belt so far 28% of the area is protected as nature reserves, thus, under the statutory protection of German nature conservation law and about 38% are proposed Sites of Community Interest (pSCI – EU Habitats Directive) or Special Protected Areas (SPA –EU Birds Directive). Undoubtedly, the Green Belt meets all the essential criteria of a national-level habitat network and should be a backbone for the establishment of a European Ecological Network (Engels et al. 2004).

By analysing the inventory of habitat types, as well as the literature on planned and existing protected areas, and conducting interviews with all nature conservation authorities along the Green Belt, the survey has succeeded in identifying 32 focus areas of high importance for nature conservation and development (Figure 4). These cover 937 km, i.e. 67% of the length and 79% of the area of the German Green Belt. 21 of these areas were rated as focus areas of at least national importance, which will form core areas in a national ecological network (Schlumprecht et al. 2002).

There are 150 nature reserves which are including or directly bordering the Green Belt. The habitat network is extended by 12.5-fold from 17.656 ha up to 223.211 ha adding including and directly bordering protected areas to the *central* Green Belt. This habitat network area of 2232 km<sup>2</sup> corresponds nearly to the size of the German federal state Saarland (2570 km<sup>2</sup>). Additionally, adding the protected areas in 5 km surrounding the Green Belt is extended by 26-fold and a habitat network results with an area of 454.381 ha. This area corresponds to 1.3% of the area of Germany. Thus, the protected areas along or nearby the Green Belt do have great importance for the function of the habitat network Green Belt. In Germany, the federal states are responsible for nature conservation and the designation of nature reserves. There is an urgent need that the federal states protect the Green Belt and adjacent areas to develop a national habitat network.

Obviously, the Green Belt harbours a great diversity of species in its different habitats. The area is a unique retreat for many rare and endangered species which need undisturbed and mainly unused areas like fallow grassland, extensively used grassland, water bodies and forests close to nature. Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*, Figure 5), red backed-shrike (*Lanius collurio*), river otter (*Lutra lutra*), kingfisher (*Al-*

*cedo atthis*) and black stork (*Ciconia nigra*) are only a little extract of the species in the Green Belt.

During the so called Biodiversity Day along the German Green Belt in June 2003, which was organised by BUND in co-operation with a popular science magazine called GEO, about 500 experts mapped over 5200 different species of animals and plants in only 24 hours in nine areas along the Green Belt. Even species which were thought to be extinct in Germany were discovered again.

### 2.3 Threats

About 85% of the Green Belt Germany has not yet been degraded to intensively used arable land or grassland, forest plantation, streets or buildings. The function of the Green Belt as a system of connected habitats is ecologically intact at present.

But, despite this, from the beginning on the unique habitats are threatened. In the whole about 1949 ha of the Green Belt are impaired by agriculture (Figure 6). Another problem for the connectivity of the Green Belt is the crossing of roads. Altogether about 450 roads cross the Green Belt (Germany has the tightest road network in Europe). Another problem are industrial parks (120 ha) in and beside the Green Belt and reforestation with non-indigenous species.

The so called »border land law« from 1996 was and still is an exceeding threat. By this law, former landowners in the border area which were dispossessed by the GDR government could get their land back. Today, there is around 20% private owned land in the Green Belt, 13% municipality and other (public) authorities owned land, around 2% in the ownership of non-government organisations (NGOs), mainly BUND, and 65% federally owned land. The big threat for the Green Belt was the federal government which started a sell-out on the free real estate market. The NGOs protested intractably against the sell-out and claimed to transfer the federally owned land in the Green Belt free of charge to the German federal states or the NGOs for nature conservation purpose. It was a huge success for all organisations struggling for the sustainable protection of the Green Belt as the minister of the environment as representative for the federal government enunciated during an international conference on the Green Belt in 2003 to transfer the federally owned land for free to the federal states for nature conservation. Unfortunately, so far this unique chance to secure 65% of the Green Belt at once is not yet implemented. New demands of the German ministry of finance and the indecision of some federal states impede the transfer.

### 2.4 Activities by BUND

Land purchase is mostly the only way to protect habitats in the long run from destruction. In four areas along the Green Belt BUND is buying unique habitats from private owners – up to now around 210 ha. On the BUND-owned land implementation measures for protection and development of the Green Belt are carried out.

But, how are all activities financed? People can buy so called Green Share Certificates: Any donor giving 65 Euro becomes a symbolic shareholder in the Green Belt and will be invited to guided excursions and other exclusive activities –

the shareholder-meetings (Figure 7) – and regularly gets special information flyers. Up to now 8500 people are shareholders of the Green Belt Germany and finance the land purchase as well as further activities, e.g. public relation, political lobby work, and implementation projects. The enormous reaction in the public shows the interest to preserve these irreplaceable areas of the longest habitat connecting system in Germany. Share-holder No. 3000 is Mikhail Gorbachev, the former president of the Sowjet Union and now president of Green Cross International.

### 3. Green Belt Europe – from a vision to the implementation

#### 3.1 The vision

The Green Belt Germany is the origin of the fantastic vision of the Green Belt Europe. Similar to Germany there was a »forbidden zone« to people along the barrier where no activities were allowed. Elsewhere in Europe, habitats were being changed and modified through processes such as intensive agriculture.

Thus, since the fall of the »Iron Curtain« in 1989, not only in Germany but also through Europe is running a strip of habitats – about 8500 km long. It could become the first trans-boundary habitat network through Europe. The core areas will be big cross-border National Parks and conservation areas of international interest like the National Parks »Bavarian Forest/Sumava« (Germany/Czech Republic), »Thayatal-Podyjí« (Austria/Czech Republic), »Neusiedler See-Seewinkel/Fertő Hanság« (Austria/Hungary) or the river-landscapes and floodplains of Danube, March, Thaya, Drau, and Mur. The Danube-March-floodplains (Austria/Slovakia) are the largest pristine floodplains in Central Europe and a conservation area according to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. This is only a choice of the variety of precious landscapes and areas along the European Green Belt. Moreover, there are many important areas for migrating birds and it is a retreat for numerous endangered species like lynx (Figure 8), wolf, bear and river otter. One of the visions is, that one day these great carnivores could use the Green Belt as a route for migration.

During the international conference »Perspectives of the Green Belt« in Bonn (Germany) from 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> of July 2003, it was announced that Mikhail Gorbachev will be the patron of the Green Belt and this vision of a Green Belt through Europe was firstly officially discussed.

The implementation of the idea Green Belt Europe as the biggest trans-boundary habitat network through Europe is the central challenge for European nature conservation in the next decades. The existing nature conservation areas and pristine landscapes should be conserved as core areas and the landscape beside and between these areas must be developed as stepping-stones for species. In this way, the Green Belt Europe contributes to the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Natura 2000 (EU Habitats Directive 92/43/EWG).

The European Green Belt runs through 22 countries (Figure 9) and currently there are three distinct areas of activity:

- The Fennoscandian Green Belt, with Norway, Finland and the Russian Federation.

- The Central Green Belt; running through Germany, Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, and Italy.
- The Balkan Green Belt; running along the barrier that separated Balkan countries (Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, Turkey), ending at the Black Sea.

A very big step for the Green Belt Europe was the international conference in Hungary in September 2004. The World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) jointly organised a conference that took place in the trans-boundary protected area of the Fertő-Hanság National Park in Hungary. Over 70 participants from 17 countries attended the conference. This Green Belt Europe-conference had the goals of introducing the idea of the Green Belt to national representatives and international experts from the different countries that lie along the route of the former »Iron Curtain« and to debate what the Green Belt would be, how it could be implemented and what its »added value« would be to nature conservation and sustainable development in Europe.

After the conference some visions for the Green Belt were defined. The Green Belt is:

- an ecological network that will fit into, and provides an implementation mechanism for the major European initiatives on protected areas (NATURA 2000) and biodiversity loss (Convention on Biological Diversity, CBD);
- an opportunity to create a nature communication and marketing tool linking nature conservation and sustainable regional development;
- a tool for trans-boundary co-operation;
- an »ecological laboratory« containing a cross section of important European habitats.

#### 3.2 How can we implement these visions?

Above all, the support of the people on site and the policy is urgently needed. First of all, it is necessary to make the project public. People have to get convinced of the idea Green Belt Europe. Not only for nature conservation but also as a symbol of the united Europe and the overcoming of the Iron Curtain.

To bring the project to a success it is needed to combine nature conservation with regional or sustainable development purposes like sustainable land use and gentle tourism. To implement conservation projects and designation of protected areas standardised trans-boundary habitat inventories and mappings are necessary fast as can.

Already in April 2004, just one week before the expansion of the EU, BUND carried out a press-journey along the Green Belt Europe in co-operation with NGOs in Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Slovenia (Figure 10). During five days several nature conservation projects in the border regions of these countries were visited (Figure 11). At the German-Czech border are already existing some trans-boundary projects which are carried out by regional groups of BUND in co-operation with Czech partners. For example, a project to save the pearl mussel by the regional group of BUND together with a Czech school class from Asch. They worked out a plan for the renaturation of a small river to improve the living conditions for the Pearl mussel. Besides those smaller projects also the trans-boundary (Inter-)National Parks Bavarian Forest/Šumava, Thayatal/Podyjí and Neusiedler See /Fertő Hanság were visited.

This was a first step to make the project public to the people on site. It showed that the population and the regional politicians in the visited regions are very open minded and welcome the Green Belt Europe.

### 3.3 Future prospects

A Green Belt Europe Coordinator will start work in the IUCN Office for South Eastern Europe in Belgrade in January 2005. The IUCN secretariat in co-operation with the responsible government and non-government organisations for the three distinct areas will take the Green Belt into international fora and will identify key areas that could become focus areas for activities.

One of the outcomes of the international Green Belt Europe – conference in September 2004 was a programme of work. This document contains time-defined goals and targets to make the European Green Belt a reality. Some of the targets are to complete the database on protected/designated areas under national/international schemes running along the Green Belt, to make a review of funding opportunities available to the different levels of the Green Belt and to identify and research regional flagship species.

The project European Green Belt is a big challenge. It should fulfil the functions of an ecological corridor and thus, contribute to the conservation of biodiversity. However, it should also increase people's connection to their natural surrounding and increase the opportunities for socio-economic development that is beneficial to local communities and biodiversity as well (Figure 12). The Green Belt is a unique chance to overcome the old boundaries and barriers between East and West – a living symbol of growing together in Europe. In 2010 the Green Belt should be established throughout Europe.

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#### Illustrations:

- Figure 1:** *The inhuman inner-German borderline had a more or less standardised structure over its entire length of 1393 km. The figure shows the structural components in the former border zone – so called »death zone« – between the two German states. Graphic: BUND-Project Office Green Belt.*
- Figure 2:** *Green Belt Germany in agricultural landscape south of National Park Harz (Lower Saxony/Saxony-Anhalt) near the village Mackenrode. Obviously, the Green Belt is the last retreat for many endangered species in such a landscape. Photo: BUND-Project Office Green Belt/K. Leidorf.*
- Figure 4:** *Location of the 32 focus areas of high importance for nature conservation in the Green Belt Germany. Graphic: BUND-Project Office Green Belt.*
- Figure 5:** *Whinchat (*saxicola rubetra*) sitting on a border post of the former GDR (German Democratic Republic). Photo: BUND-Project Office Green Belt/Th. Stephan.*

**Figure 6:** *Threats through agriculture. The picture on the left shows the Green Belt in North-Thuringia in 1990. In the background rests of the metal fence. The picture on the right shows the same area two years later in 1992. Photo: BUND-Project Office Green Belt/K. Vowinkel.*

**Figure 7:** *»Shareholder-meeting« in the Green Belt Germany. Photo: BUND-Project Office Green Belt/L. Geidezis.*

**Figure 8:** *Lynx in the cross-border National Parks Bavarian Forest/Sumava (Germany/Czech Republic). Photo: GEO-Tag der Artenvielfalt 2003.*

**Figure 9:** *Proposed route of the Green Belt Europe. Graphic: German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN).*

**Figure 10:** *Press-journey in the Central European Green Belt. Dr. Borut Stumberger from DOPPS (Bird-Life Slovenia) explains the special border situation at the river Mura (Slovenia/Austria) to journalists from Germany. DOPPS and the European Nature Heritage Fund (Euronatur) implement a project to protect and develop the floodplains of Mura and Drava. Photo: BUND-Project Office Green Belt/L. Geidezis.*

**Figure 11:** *Unique tree-breeding stork-population at the floodplains of river March near the village Marchegg (Austria/Slovakia). Photo BUND-Project Office Green Belt/L. Geidezis.*

**Figure 12:** *Eco-tourism along the Green Belt Europe. Bicyclists crossing the border from Hungary to Austria near the lake Neusiedler See. Photo: BUND-Project Office Green Belt/ L. Geidezis.*

For literature and sources turn to page 65.