

The European Green Belt – Initiative for a Pan-European Ecological Network

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The European Green Belt – European ecological network and transnational initiative

The area along the former Iron Curtain, which divided Europe over a period of almost four decades, was for a long time virtually untouched by human hand. Consequently, many habitats and near-natural landscapes have been preserved in numerous regions along today's Green Belt. The European Green Belt covers a distance of more than 12,500 kilometres, running across the European continent from the Norwegian-Russian to the Bulgarian-Turkish borders. It connects 24 European countries, runs through virtually all eight biogeographic regions of the continent, links climatic and vegetation zones and provides an important refuge and migration corridor for numerous animal and plant species. The Green Belt comprises wilderness areas, cultural landscapes, water ecosystems and coasts as well as threatened species. There are as many as 49 national parks alone directly along the Green Belt, 19 of which are cross-border protected areas. There are more than 1,100 protected areas in general in a corridor of one kilometre. Today the Green Belt is an ecological network of global significance and of vital importance for the long-term preservation of Europe's unique ecosystems and biodiversity: It contributes to the diversity of European nature and to the pan-European Ecological Network. In May 2013, the EU Commission named the European Green Belt Initiative as one of the few examples of green infrastructure realised at the European level.¹ The purpose of the "Green Infrastructure Concept" is to preserve the diverse services provided by nature (ecosystem services) and hence make them usable for human beings on a long-term basis. Moreover, the Green Belt is a living memorial landscape linking nature, culture and recent European history in a unique way.²

In the 1970s, governmental organisations (GOs) from Finland and the former Soviet Union practised transboundary cooperation in nature conservation and first surveys of endangered bird species, e.g. whinchats, were carried out along the inner-German border by the non-governmental organisation BUND (*Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland* – Friends of the Earth Germany) (Fig. 1). It was also BUND which initiated the Green Belt Germany just after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

The aim of the activities of BUND since 1989 have been to preserve and develop the German Green Belt.³ They have been combined with the initiatives launched in the 1990s for the protection of valuable landscapes in the Balkans by the NGO EuroNatur,⁴ in the transboundary Austro-Hungarian national park Neusiedler See/Fertő Hanság, and in the "Fennoscandian Green Belt" in the Finnish-Russian border forests⁵ (Fig. 2). All these activities together led to the founding of the European Green

Belt Initiative.⁶ This development was prompted by the current chairman of BUND, Hubert Weiger: He first spoke publicly about the vision of a Green Belt across the whole of Europe in June 2002, at the opening of the Land Art Project "WestÖstliches Tor – WestEastern Gateway" on the Green Belt Germany, and called for transnational efforts to protect the Green Belt as a pan-European ecological network and a memorial landscape. Guest of honour at this event was Mikhail Gorbachev, the former president of the Soviet Union, who instantly agreed to become patron of the European Green Belt.

Shortly after, in 2003 and 2004, the idea was taken further by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (Bundesamt für Naturschutz – BfN) and by IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature). Two preliminary international conferences were held on the subject of the Green Belt:⁷ On two days in July 2003, the first conference took place in Bonn, Germany, titled "Perspectives of the Green Belt – Chances for an Ecological Network from the Barents Sea to the Adriatic Sea?". There, the advantages of a pan-European initiative were worked out: gain of political and public attention and support, exchange of experience, facilitation of multi- and transnational cooperation and capacity building for NGOs. The plans for a pan-European initiative received strong political support and the decision for the establishment of the initiative was made. Subsequently, IUCN took over the coordination of the initiative and activities on the working level started. The second international conference on the Green Belt was held in Sarród, Hungary, from 8 to 12 September 2004. During that meeting, concrete decisions on direct actions for the implementation of the European Green Belt, on the institutional structure, on stakeholder participation as well as on enabling activities were taken.

The conferences were characterised by a strong cooperation between GOs and NGOs who together faced great challenges: First, there was the territorial challenge with geopolitical and cultural relevance. Second, they started an attempt to manage a transboundary exchange and cooperation in nature conservation, regional development and nature tourism. And finally, the partners aimed to support the development of a European civil society, while preserving the common natural and cultural heritage. So, the European Green Belt initiative was founded in which around 150 GOs and NGOs from 24 countries now work together on a cross-border and interdisciplinary basis. Aim and vision of the initiative are: The European Green Belt, the shared natural heritage along 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 is divided into four main regions (Fig. 3) managed by regional coordinators, whose main aim is



Fig. 1: Whinchat on a boundary-post (photo Thomas Stephan)

to promote the cross-border exchange of information and initiate projects:

- Fennoscandian Green Belt, Ministry of Environment Finland and Karelian Research Center, Russia
- Baltic Green Belt, BUND Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania
- Central European Green Belt, BUND Department Green Belt
- Balkan Green Belt, EuroNatur Foundation.

Moreover, every neighbouring country has a counterpart mostly from a GO for the Green Belt (National Focal Point, NFP). The involved organisations of the initiative vary considerably: from municipalities, protected areas, enterprises to scientific institutions.

Regional conferences and regular pan-European congresses facilitate transnational collaboration. The most recent, the 10th pan-European conference took place from 15 to 18 October 2018 in Eisenach, Germany. It was organised by BUND and the EuroNatur Foundation and was funded by BfN and the Ministry of Environment, Energy and Nature Conservation of the Free State of Thuringia.

The initiative gained widespread political support thanks to the Joint Declaration of Intent on working together and securing the European Green Belt, an official pledge to support the European Green Belt Initiative. This declaration was signed by environment ministers, ambassadors and envoys from 11 states at the ceremony held in May 2013 in Berlin to mark the 10th anniversary of the European Green Belt Initiative. Since then nine other countries have signed the declaration or submitted equivalent letters of support, with the result that in total 20 out of 24

countries have now committed themselves to further developing this important network of natural habitats across Europe.⁸

Overall coordination of the initiative – European Green Belt Association e.V.

Until 2010, IUCN was responsible for the overall coordination of the European Green Belt Initiative from its office for Southeast Europe based in Belgrade (Serbia). However, owing to a lack of funds and extensive restructuring of the European IUCN secretariats, IUCN was no longer able to fulfil this role. Consequently, a new organisation had to be found for coordinating the initiative – a task undertaken by BUND and EuroNatur within the framework of a BfN-funded research and development project entitled “Further Development of the European Green Belt Initiative” from 2011 to 2014. In general, the project aimed to develop a sustainable coordination and funding as well as an effective communication structure for the initiative. Subsequently, the project prompted a discussion process about forming a new, efficient grassroots organisation for coordinating activities. This culminated in the founding of the European Green Belt Association e.V. on 24 September 2014 during the 8th pan-European Green Belt Conference in the Czech city of Slavonice. Moreover, during this conference from 23 to 26 September 2014 with 107 participants from GOs and NGOs from 23 European Green Belt countries as well as Canada and the U.S., a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the



Fig. 2: Kitka river valley at the Fennoscandian Green Belt (photo Metsähallitus/Kari Lahti)

European Green Belt Initiative and the European Cyclist Federation (ECF) was adopted and a new comprehensive brochure about the European Green Belt was presented. The founding members of the European Green Belt Association e.V. were 23 GOs and NGOs from 14 countries (Fig. 4) (today: 31 members from 16 countries).

The mission of the European Green Belt Association e.V. is to ensure that the European Green Belt is efficiently protected and that its sustainable development is promoted by facilitating an on-going, co-ordinated transboundary cooperation at all levels and across all sectors of society. The Association is managed by a board of twelve deputies: a representative for each of the three sectors (regional coordinator, NFP/GOs, NGOs) of each of the four regions. One of the twelve members takes the chair, another the vice chair. Moreover, there is an advisor from IUCN in the board. The association is currently chaired by EuroNatur.

Implementing transnational and cross-border cooperation

The European Green Belt Initiative requires funding that does not stop at national borders: It has already been possible, for example, to implement three large-scale transnational projects along the European Green Belt with the help of various EU Interreg funding programmes.

The Interreg IIIB CADSES Project GREEN BELT from 2006 to 2008 was the first. Largely initiated by BUND and together with the Association for Rural Development in Thu-

ringia (Thüringer Landesgesellschaft – ThLG), Germany, as lead partner, it unified 18 participants from eight countries (Germany, Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia and Bulgaria). Inter alia, a “gap analysis” of the Green Belt in Central Europe and Bulgaria was made, using aerial photographs and uniform methodology. With these data, statements about the protection status of the areas within the Green Belt could be made. Moreover, the first flyer and the first travelling exhibition about the European Green Belt were created – both translated into the languages of all participating countries. Today, there is even a BfN-financed flyer of the European Green Belt in the languages of the 24 adjoining countries as well as in Sami and English.

22 participants from six countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and Germany) worked together on the Interreg Project “Baltic Green Belt” (Baltic Sea Region Programme) from 2008 to 2011 – with the University of Kiel as lead partner. For the first time, active organisations along the Baltic coast could build a strong network, elaborate characteristics for the region, and jointly formulate issues of special importance for it, like the handling of marine and coastal habitats, the special historical development during the Cold War and the consequences existing until today, for instance in the isolation of the numerous restricted military zones. An important outcome: The Baltic was recognised as one of the four main regions of the European Green Belt owing to the special conditions prevailing there.

From 2011 to 2014, the Interreg Project GreenNet (Central Europe Programme) along the Central European Green Belt, once again with the ThLG as lead partner, united 22 participants from six countries (Germany, Czech Republic, Austria, Slova-

nia, Slovenia, Italy). For the first time it was also possible to carry out political lobbying at EU level (Presentations about the European Green Belt: European Parliament / Brussels / October 2011, EU Environment Committee / December 2011). Three international scientific conferences also made valuable contributions to the exchange of expertise.

Besides, various transboundary projects have been raised and carried out: for example, the Balkan Lynx Recovery Programme and the Shebenik-Jablanica national park. Moreover, there have been numerous national projects, like the research and development projects for the European Green Belt funded by BfN.

And there is a topical multinational project: the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) Project “DaRe to Connect” (D2C), whose aim is to support the Danube region’s ecological connectivity by linking Natura 2000 areas along the

Green Belt. The project was submitted for the second call of the Interreg DTP of the European Union and together with 21 others, it was approved out of 118 applications. The runtime of the project is from June 2018 until May 2021. 11 partners from GOs and NGOs of eight countries along the Green Belt are involved (Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia). In addition, there are 14 associated strategic partners – six of them being ministries – from ten countries (plus Bulgaria and Slovenia). The lead partner is BUND Department Green Belt. The project is co-funded by European Union funds (European Regional Development Fund/ERDF and Instrument for Pre-Accession/IPA) and by means of the Federal Programme Transnational Cooperation of the Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure Germany.



Fig. 3: The four sections of the European Green Belt (European Green Belt Initiative/Coordination Group)



Fig. 4: Founding members of the European Green Belt Association e.V. (photo Stanka Dešnik)

Discussion / Conclusions

The founding of the European Green Belt Association e.V. represents a major step towards coordinating and steering the European Green Belt Initiative on a long-term basis. However, further funding tools will have to be found in future in order to ensure long-term financial security for overall coordination. IUCN cites the European Green Belt as a model for a Europe-wide initiative with an innovative management structure. EU funding programmes will continue to play a major role in the implementation of cross-border and transnational activities and measures.

The Joint Declaration of Intent of May 2013 will hopefully provide the support needed for a successful future of the initiative.

Owing to the special way in which it links nature, culture and history, the European Green Belt can act as:

- an initiator and catalyst for more intensive cross-border cooperation;
- an aid to closer cooperation between GOs and NGOs in a transboundary context;
- a basis for EU-funded projects due to the fact that it is a model area for the protection of biodiversity and for the development of an ecological network that incorporates the economic (e.g. nature tourism) and socio-cultural demands of local communities (joint heritage and memorial landscape);
- and a flagship project for pan-European cooperation, as it is suitable for the nomination as natural and cultural UNESCO World Heritage site and as it facilitates transnational cooperation between 24 states.

To be successful, the European Green Belt also needs in future political and societal support in all adjoining countries. It has to be protected against destruction by, for example, intensive agricultural land use, forestry, hydropower plants and infrastructure projects. Moreover, an efficient and good management for nature conservation and for a sustainable regional development, permanent public relations work and dedicated support of all members of the initiative and association are essential.

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