

German Green Belt: National Natural Heritage and Living Monument

Uwe Riecken

Introduction: From death zone to life line: Ecological values of the Green Belt

The German Green Belt has a length of 1,393 km and covers an area of some 177 km². It runs along the former inner-German border from the Baltic Sea to the Saxon-Bavarian-Czech border triangle. Thus, it is part of the largest national ecological network existing in Germany. On its way it touches nine federal states, 38 administrative districts and two independent cities. The Green Belt includes all major landscape types in Germany except the alpine region (Fig. 1).

The Green Belt contains and connects different habitat types like grasslands, fallows, dry meadows, wetlands, rivers and brooks, small stands of mature woodland and close to natural forests (Fig. 2). In some regions, brooks, rivers and lakes also form parts of this belt. All these habitat types have become very rare and are threatened in the present-day cultural landscape. Often they can only be found as isolated patches in monotonous agricultural landscapes (Fig. 3).

In some regions the Green Belt forms the last remaining close-to-natural structure in the countryside. In these landscapes it is often one of the most important retreats for endangered species and plays a major role as connecting line or stepping stone within the national ecological network. Different habitat types occur tightly meshed within the Green Belt. This leads to its high diversity in structure and species. Over 600 animal and plant species from the German Red Data Book have made their homes in the Green Belt.¹

The Green Belt also connects many large areas of high value for nature conservation that serve as core areas in the national ecological network. Therefore, the Green Belt is expected to fulfil the function of a backbone for an ecological network of national and European importance. The German Green Belt is part of the German natural heritage. A habitat mapping project financed by BfN in 2012 impressively demonstrated this importance.² About 86% of the area of the inner-German Green Belt had not yet been degraded. On the other hand, an increasing number of local human impacts can be observed. Around 11% of the Green Belt has already been converted into intensively used arable land and grassland. Furthermore, 1.5% has been destroyed by traffic infrastructure, buildings and settlements.

The German Green Belt as part of the national ecological habitat network

Since 2002 the German Federal Nature Conservation Act has committed the German federal states (Bundesländer) to devel-

oping and implementing a national ecological network on at least 10% of their territory, consisting of core areas, corridors and stepping stones. In addition, this ecological network has to be legally protected. For many years, the general concepts³ and a national plan have been set up, based on expert knowledge and on mapping data and other sources.⁴ Nevertheless the implementation has been very poor so far.⁵ The German Green

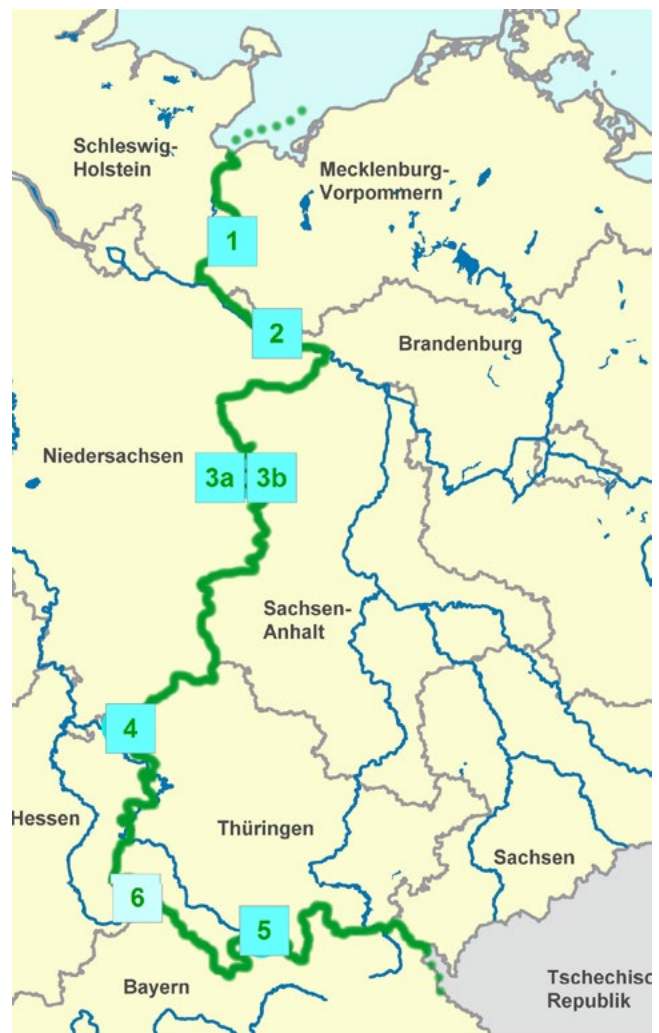


Fig. 1: Map of the inner-German Green Belt indicating the areas of current Large-Scale Nature Conservation Projects (nos. 1-5) and of a planned one (no. 6) (s. below) (© BfN 2018) 1 Lake Schaalsee; 2 Elbe river alluvial plain at Lenzen; 3a Drömling Lower Saxony; 3b Drömling Saxony-Anhalt; 4 Green Belt Eichsfeld – Werra valley; 5 Green Belt Rodachtal-Lange Berge-Steinachtal; 6 Planned project Kuppenrhön



Fig. 2: Green Belt at the border between Lower Saxony and Thuringia near Pferdsdorf (photo Uwe Riecken 2001)

Belt is the only existing national ecological corridor and therefore plays an important role in terms of realising the German ecological network.

Implementation of the Green Belt

Political support

Since the start of the Green Belt initiative in 1989 and even more intensively after the year 2000 there has been strong support from politics, especially from the German federal government and the governments of the federal states (Bundesländer) as well as from most political parties. One example is the coalition agreement of the German federal government signed on 26 October 2009. It says: “We are protecting the ‘German Green Belt’ along the former inner-German border as ‘Natural Monument’ and want to initiate the development of a ‘European Green Belt’”. This political support has been and still is the relevant basis for a large number of concrete projects funded along the entire Green Belt. Additionally, the broad and fruitful cooperation between administrations like BfN and NGOs like Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND) is broadly accepted and one factor of the great success.

Project funding by the German federal government

The German federal government supports large-scale nature conservation projects in nationally important landscapes to protect the German natural heritage and to fulfil international obligations. This programme focuses on the long-term preservation of natural landscapes as well as the conservation and development of outstanding cultural landscapes with their valuable habitats and endangered species.

Support primarily covers the purchase or long-term lease of sites, compensatory payments for conservation-related restrictions and measures to manage and develop sites. Furthermore, socio-economic studies, staff salaries, public relations efforts and monitoring investigations can be financed. Along the inner-German Green Belt several large-scale nature conservation projects are funded by BfN, another is in preparation (Fig. 1).⁶

But there are other funding programmes which offer additional support. Besides testing and developing projects (E & E-Vorhaben) the national programme on biological diversity has to be mentioned here. On 1 October 2019 the latest project was started. The main task is about the implementation of ecological cross linking the Green Belt with other ecologically important areas close to the Green Belt. This project will run for six years and will be supported with 4.36 million euros by the German environmental ministry (Fig. 4).

Legal protection

Beside financial support the legal protection of the Green Belt is fundamental. By now one national park and four biosphere reserves (nine administrative bodies) have been established; one additional biosphere reserve is in preparation. Very important is the protection of the entire course of the Green Belt Thuringia (763 km) as National Nature Monument (NNM), which came into force on the symbolic date 9 November 2018, adopted by the Thuringian parliament. One year later the Saxony-Anhalt section (343 km) was also designated as NNM. The category NNM belongs to the strongest protected area categories after the German Federal Nature Conservation Act.



Fig. 3: Section of the Green Belt in an intensively used agricultural landscape (photo Klaus Leidorf 2009)

Experiencing nature, culture and history along the Green Belt

The Green Belt is more than an important part of the national natural heritage. For many people this area has already developed into a recreation area and a place to enjoy nature. In addition, it forms a living monument which reminds people of the recent German and European history. Especially young people, who did not witness the time of the Iron Curtain and its peaceful overcoming in 1989, are an important target group for the historical aspects of the Green Belt.

To ensure the continuing existence of the Green Belt, it is very important to raise public awareness and understanding of the Green Belt, both for people from the region as well as for visitors from outside. To promote this idea and to develop sustainable nature tourism a testing and development project called 'Experience Green Belt' has been supported by BfN. This project intends to increase the local acceptance of the Green Belt, to improve its visibility and thus the possibility to experience its landscapes with their specific history.⁷

Remote border areas are perfect places for experiencing nature with all senses, e.g. by:

- feeling and smelling: walking and hiking, canoeing
- reading: signs, folders and electronic information (e.g. via smartphone)
- listening: guided tours
- watching: outlooks and watchtowers
- touching: own management activities/work camps.
- But it is also a living historical monument which offers a lot of historic experiences, e.g. by
- inspiration: land art projects
- historic workshops

- cooperation with border museums
- interviews with contemporary witnesses (recordings can be used in audio guided tours)
- visiting, preserving and reconstructing border relicts.

For this purpose, measures for habitat management and landscape development are implemented, bicycle and hiking routes signposted, exhibitions and points for border experiences established and offers for tourists developed in the context of 'nature-culture-history'. Additionally, a broad range of events have been and are still arranged. Target groups addressed are hikers,



Fig. 4: Symbolic cheque-handover for the project 'Cross-linking Green Belt' (28 October 2019) from Dr. Uwe Riecken, Head of the Department on Habitat Protection and Landscape Ecology at BfN (left) to Prof. Hubert Weiger (right), President of BUND (photo Martin Kuba 2019)

local visitors and tourists, providers of tourist activities as well as managers and rangers of protected areas within the regions.

Transboundary cooperation is an important foundation pillar in all model regions. This concerns not only the overcoming of administrative borders but also of borders between different disciplines like nature conservation, agriculture, forestry, and tourism. Finally, historic facilities like border museums and memorial places are integrated.

Conclusions and outlook

The project Green Belt contributes significantly to the conservation of the German natural heritage and will have positive effects on sustainable regional development based on nature tourism. Furthermore, the border areas form a living memorial that serves to keep the former division of Germany and Europe in peoples' minds as a reminder. In summary, the following can be stated: The German Green Belt has an exceptionally high value in terms of

- all components of biodiversity
 - several ecosystem services, including
 - healthily and sustainably produced foods, spices etc.
 - carbon sequestration and climate regulation
 - purification of water and air
 - cultural, intellectual, historical and spiritual inspiration
 - scientific discovery,
 - etc.
- living historical monument
- a region for experiencing nature and history (including ecotourism and promoting sustainable regional development).

During the last 30 years the Green Belt Initiative has been very successful both for nature as well as for the people living close to the former border. On the other hand, many economic changes have been going on which generate several threats for the landscapes and habitats of the Green Belt. Examples are infrastructure measures (roads, railroads, river constructions, etc.) and changes in agricultural land-use, mainly caused by the EU common agricultural policy. The latter is responsible for both, intensification of land-use as well as abandonment of important cultural habitats with a high level of biodiversity.

Therefore, BfN and its partners in Germany as well as all over Europe⁸ have to continue to actively engage in the protection of ecosystems and landscapes along the Green Belt and its sustainable development. In cooperation with our partners the main focus will be on habitat conservation and management, transboundary cooperation, sharing experiences and public relations work.⁹ Additionally it is necessary that the German federal states complete the legal protection of the entire Green Belt, preferably as a national natural monument.

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⁸ RIECKEN and ULLRICH, From Death Zone to Life Line, 2010.

⁹ ULLRICH et al., Zukunft des Grünen Bandes, 2009.