

The European Green Belt as UNESCO World Heritage? Reflections in the Light of Recent Developments in the Convention

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All deliberations and reflections on a potential nomination of a site as UNESCO World Heritage require a careful consideration of not only the place/site(s) itself and its natural/cultural qualities and values, but also of the political setting of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. The World Heritage Convention, although in place for more than 40 years with a Convention text that has never been changed, is a highly dynamic system.

The Operational Guidelines, the Convention's binding technical document, change almost every two years, reflecting recent developments in the Convention. The World Heritage Committee, the Convention's decision-making body, adopts some 100+ decisions every year and thus further develops the application of the Convention by setting new standards, changing requirements and creating new policies. By inscribing c. 25 properties per year in the World Heritage List, the Committee also creates expectations for new nominations and by filling gaps of underrepresented site categories, it limits the potential for similar sites to be inscribed. In addition, the Advisory Bodies continue to develop their standards for the evaluation of new nominations.

Therefore, it is equally relevant for a potential Green Belt nomination to look into recent developments which might influence the views on such a nomination:

- The Committee established the so-called “Upstream process” to guide States Parties in the development of complex nominations.
- A revised evaluation mechanism by IUCN/ICOMOS on mixed sites (following Decision 37 COM 8B.19 on Pimachiowin Akin) has been established which links the evaluation of the natural and cultural elements more than ever.
- An increased recognition of the bonds between nature and culture (especially for mixed properties) has been observed in the last years following the inscription of several large mixed properties.
- This has come with a “rising bar” for new inscriptions: In 2018/2019 three great sites (Pimachiowin Akin/Canada, Chiribiquete National Park/Colombia, Paraty/Brazil) covering several million hectares were inscribed.
- The integrated management system for complex/serial sites receives increasing attention.

In 2012 the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) commissioned a feasibility study on a potential nomination of the European Green Belt as a UNESCO World Heritage site.¹ This study came to the conclusion that a nomination is generally feasible, but that rising standards regarding the threshold to reach OUV and rising national exceptions exist. In addition, a potential nomination would have to deal with a

comparatively high degree of complexity. Why complexity?

The feasibility study suggested a mixed nomination under both cultural and natural values. This scenario would allow a better recognition of the natural values of the European Green Belt and also realising synergies between natural and cultural heritage conservation. Both aspects seem to be highly relevant for nature conservation. On the other hand, a mixed nomination is more complex than a nomination as a cultural landscape. In the WH Convention, mixed properties have gained more attention in the last years as they allow a better covering of the links between nature and culture. The joint IUCN/ICOMOS project ‘Connecting Practice’ helped to better recognise and support the interconnected character of the natural, cultural and social values of highly significant land- and seascapes. In the same framework, IUCN and ICOMOS have consolidated their procedures for the evaluation of mixed nominations. It would therefore be essential for a potential nomination to first clarify what stakeholders would like to achieve with a WH nomination: achieving nature conservation objectives needs a mixed nomination – whilst a purely promotional nomination could also just use a cultural landscape scenario.

The feasibility study came to the conclusion that a potential nomination should cover the whole European Green Belt (EGB) and not only one EGB region or a single State Party. This approach would entail enhanced efforts to deal with a growing complexity due to differences in culture, understanding of the EGB, conservation standards and management structures in the States Parties along the EGB. Furthermore, the World Heritage Convention requires an integrated management system for the whole property which would have to be established before inscribing the property on the WH List. The current situation is as follows: The European Green Belt Association e.V. has been founded (23 members) and has presented a potential management structure. However, the integrated system would have to include all States Parties and site managing organisations/institutions of all component parts included in a serial transnational nomination, as well as both cultural and natural heritage stakeholders. In the German Federal States of Thuringia and Sachsen-Anhalt the process of protecting the whole Green Belt as a National Natural Monument (PA category under German conservation law) is being accomplished or under way. This can be seen as a favourable development as the National Natural Monument already integrates natural and cultural values. On the other hand, the conservation situation in the Balkan region is currently less favourable to conservation (high development pressures, rebuilding fences, migration, nationalisation, etc.).

There are some identified gaps and further requirements for a potential nomination: First, the identification of potential component parts of a serial site is the critical step to achieve



“integrity”. Those sites need to be the most representative ones for the values expressed in the nomination and all components need to be adequately protected and management.

A decision to start a process towards a World Heritage nomination of the European Green Belt has to take into account that such an endeavour needs a strategic approach and strong sense of ownership. This includes a high level of multilateral coordination and leadership, considerable financial and personal resources as well as a considerable amount of (inter)national coordination and harmonisation (e.g. nature – culture, management, conservation, selection criteria). A nomination needs the full commitment of all political levels (local, regional, nation-

al). It also requires a group of States Parties willing to bring the nomination forward to UNESCO. Such a group should ideally include countries from all the EGB regions and above all be representative of the former Cold War blocs.

Using the established “Upstream process” might be an advantage. This means to officially work with the advisory bodies from the beginning of the nomination to avoid fallback and potential failure of the nomination.

In conclusion, the results of the feasibility study remain valid but need to be considered in the light of the recent developments under the World Heritage Convention.

¹ See the presentation “Ergebnisse der ‚Machbarkeitsstudie Welterbe Grünes Band““ by Katharina Diehl at this conference.