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THE EUROPEAN GREEN BELT INITIATIVE

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The European Green Belt initiative has the vision to create the backbone of an ecological network, running from the Barents to the Black Sea, that is a global symbol for transboundary cooperation in nature conservation and sustainable development.

Key words: European Green Belt, transboundary cooperation, ecological network.

А. Ланг, А. Штраус. ИНИЦИАТИВА ПО СОЗДАНИЮ ЗЕЛЕННОГО ПОЯСА ЕВРОПЫ

Инициатива по созданию Зеленого пояса Европы возникла из образа, связанного с формированием «костяка» экологической сети, которая протянется от Баренцева до Черного моря и станет глобальным символом межграничного сотрудничества в сфере охраны природы и устойчивого развития.

Ключевые слова: Зеленый пояс Европы, межграничное сотрудничество, экологическая сеть.

The European Green Belt initiative has the vision to create the backbone of an ecological network that runs from the Barents to the Black Sea, spanning some of the most important habitats for biodiversity and almost all distinct biogeographical regions in Europe (Fig.). By following a course that was in large sections part of the former east-western border – one of the most divisive barriers in history – it symbolizes the global effort for joint, cross border activities in nature conservation and sustainable development. Moreover, the initiative shall serve to better harmonise human activities with the natural environment, and to increase opportunities for the socio-economic development of local communities.

When the so-called Iron Curtain began to fall in the late 1980s, it meant more than the end of the Cold War period on the political level: it marked

the end of inhumane borders, separated families, disunited cultures. And it put an end to access restrictions in dead end border areas, that had caused economic stagnancy for decades. One of the rare positive heritages of that rigid border – areas of high ecological value – forms the basis for transboundary cooperation within the European Green Belt.

The implementation of the Green Belt initiative was launched in September 2004 in the Fertő-Hanság National Park in Hungary. This national park is situated in the border area to Austria where it not only forms a transboundary protected area widely known for its vast reed beds and numerous waterbirds, it also represents the cultural and historical dimensions of the initiative – as this was the area where the borders were first opened in 1989. In 2004, experts and national representatives from the countries along the Green Belt met to



European Green Belt (schememap)

identify the steps required to make the Green Belt a success. The main outcome of this meeting was the Programme of Work, which was then discussed and supplemented by the stakeholders and partners of the Green Belt.

The initiative's objectives range from the local to the global level, which implies that it must have an organisational structure to meet these objectives. Therefore the route of the Green Belt is divided into three regional sections:

- Fennoscandia and the Baltic
- Central Europe
- South Eastern Europe.

Each section has a regional coordinator. For the Fennoscandian and Baltic Green Belt section, the Baltic Fund for Nature of St. Petersburg Naturalists Society nominated the director of Nizhnesvirsky strict nature reserve and president of Association of Zapovedniks and National Parks of Northwest Russia, Mr. Vladimir Belianin, to be the Regional Coordinator.

The initiative itself is overseen by the IUCN Green Belt coordinator. The secretariat for the European Green Belt is hosted by the IUCN Regional Office for Europe in Brussels. In the 23 countries adjoining the Green Belt, national representatives, authorised by their respective state agency responsible for nature conservation and regional development, serve as National Focal Points. By this structure, the initiative gives consideration to the fact that the Green Belt means different things to different stakeholders along the line.

The Green Belt has a high regional diversity in many aspects. It stretches across Europe, running through most of its biogeographic regions. Land use structure differs considerably though its course. Rights of use, property and land use planning are different in all 23 countries, even within the EU member states. Moreover, the former barrier between East and West had a different face in each of the affected countries, and the border has therefore been perceived in many different ways. As a consequence, the initiative has to be implemented in various ways, depending on the natural preconditions, on the prevalent land use as well as on the political situation.

For the whole European Green Belt, a network of protected areas will contribute to the conservation of biodiversity – first of all by harmonizing management methods on both sides of the border. The Green Belt connects National Parks, Nature Parks, Biosphere Reserves and transboundary protected areas as well as non-protected areas along or across borders and it supports regional development initiatives based on nature conservation.

The Green Belt is an initiative that is tailored to fit the current political situation and the development taking place now, focusing on some of Europe's most impressive and fragile landscapes. The European Green Belt has the chance to take one of the world's leading symbols of human division, transform it into a model of future nature conservation in Europe – and contribute to build new transboundary regional identities.

In several countries of Europe people will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the end of the Cold War in 2009. This will lead media, witnesses to history and ourselves to the question how and if the border areas have developed since then, how they are managed nowadays in terms of nature conservation, and if the opportunities of transboundary cooperation have been perceived.

In the Fennoscandian region, the Finnish-Russian and the Norwegian-Russian borders did not originally fall under the definition of the Iron Curtain. However, the border was strictly guarded and it still is, now functioning as an external border of the EU. Until today, the region boasts vast intact forest landscapes. At the same time, large-scale commercial logging is ongoing. During the last two decades, large protected areas have been established and transboundary cooperation in nature conservation and in economic terms has been intensified. For the northernmost part of the Green Belt, this also includes cooperation with partners in the circumpolar Arctic region.

To the coastal zone of the Baltic part of the Green Belt, the Cold War imposed a system of mostly strict border regimes. The political transition process has created new borders in the region, though it made those within the Schengen zone more permissive. Today, the coastal zone is in large parts opening up and developing rapidly. Transboundary cooperation focuses, amongst others, on marine pollution, fisheries, tourism and coastal protection.

In Central Europe, borders have been getting more and more permeable during the last 20 years. The former state border between Eastern and Western Germany, which used to be one of the most fortified during Cold War times, is not existent anymore. The European Union is bringing many of the countries along the Central European Green Belt closer together. In all EU member countries along the Green Belt, the process of establishing protected areas was boosted by the implementation of Natura 2000. Inventories and gap analyses on protection along the Green Belt, transboundary cooperation in management planning and regional development, land purchase and conservation of cultural landscapes are some of the activities which have taken place in the region.

South Eastern Europe experienced tense relations between countries of differing political systems in the second half of the 20th century as well. Isolated Albania or the borders between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey are examples of those times. In the nearly two decades which have passed since the end of the Cold War, transboundary exchange, new protected areas along the borders, joint habitat mapping etc. have taken place along the borders. Partly, local communities are already being involved into planning and managing of the sites. On the downside, increasing human impact on natural resources causes large scale destruction of natural habitats in formerly closed border areas. Political transition, the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, and the Balkan wars established new conflict lines – and new borders.

Each section of the European Green Belt has its regional aspects and particularities. But whatever the regional specifications and history, the shared

vision for the conservation of biodiversity and the promotion of sustainable regional development remains as strong as ever.

For the future, there is a continuing need for manifest activities on protection regimes and sustainable regional development along the European Green Belt. Involvement of the local population in planning and management of protected areas and land use schemes is crucial. Moreover, the proclamation of protected areas is only a first step, which has to be followed by a strategy of integrating cultural landscape into the conservation efforts along and across borders. At the same time, new concrete and realistic income opportunities must be developed and communicated in lesser favoured areas. Moreover, the conflicts present in the South-Eastern European region of the Green Belt call for ongoing peace-building and conflict prevention, which can – again – be fostered by transboundary cooperation in various fields.

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