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Experience the Green Belt Nature conservation and eco-tourism along the former Iron Curtain

1 The 'death zone' turned to a treasure chest of diversity

The former inner-German border had a massive impact; it divided families and friends, towns, villages and landscapes. But within this inhuman border area with its metal fences, mines and guard towers, a unique nature developed over the decades. The 'death zone' for people turned into a lifeline for nature. The Green Belt is the

longest ecological network in Germany, extending 1,393 kilometres. By decree, it became a part of the national natural heritage in the coalition agreement of 2005 and as lighthouse project for the conservation of biological diversity in the National Strategy of 2008, the high status priority of the Green Belt for nature conservation in Germany has now been confirmed. It connects valuable areas, passing 17 distinct physiographical regions with more than 600 endangered species (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Green Belt Germany (Thuringia/Hessen) in the valley of the river Werra. The Green Belt is often the last remaining habitat structure in agriculturally intensively used areas (photo: Klaus Leidorf).

The Green Belt crosses forests like beech groves rich in numerous orchid species, near to inland surface waters, wet meadows, a variety of grasslands and fallow lands, as so forming a coloured mosaic of various habitats. Almost half of the ecological network consists of endangered habitat types according to Red List Germany. The Green Belt Germany is the origin of the fantastic vision for the Green Belt Europe, running along the entire former 'Iron Curtain'. From the Barents Sea to the Black Sea runs a strip of habitats about 12,500 kilometres long and passing through 23 countries. A living monument to European history and an outstanding nature heritage!

The BUND (Friends of the Earth Germany) began the Green Belt Germany initiative in 1989. Expanding from this initiative, many people are engaged in cross-border efforts since 2003 to preserve the Green Belt Europe on a permanent basis (www.europeangreenbelt.org, www.greenbelteurope.eu).

2 Set off on the trail – Experiencing nature, culture and history

The Green Belt has much to offer – nature, culture and history are all interlinked in a unique manner. Allowing this experience to be available, while still protecting the valuable nature within its boundaries at the same time, is the aim of the ambitious testing and development (T+D) project 'Experience Green Belt'. It is initiated and funded by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN). The central aim is conservation and development as an ecological network, which is of national importance. The touristic valorisation increases the acceptance among the local population and tourists as well as

among politicians referring to the Green Belt initiative. The project will be implemented until the end of 2010. In three model regions (Figure 2) along the Green Belt Germany, touristic packages are being developed that combine nature conservation with sustainable tourism, bringing history back to life, enabling people to experience nature and leading them to special cultural delights. The BUND-Project Office Green Belt has taken over the scientific attendance process, which aims at co-ordinating the activities among the three German model regions and the transfer of methods, experiences and results to other regions along the European Green Belt.

3 Model regions

3.1 Border experiences in the quadripoint country

The model region of Elbe-Altmark-Wendland in the quadripoint country (Federal states of Mecklenburg Western-Pomerania, Brandenburg, Saxony Anhalt and Lower Saxony) stretches from the floodplain of the river Elbe to the historic landscapes of Wendland and Altmark. The visitor is invited to experience the Green Belt as a 'blue miracle': The former border river, the Elbe, dominates the landscape (Figure 3). The White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) lives here in large numbers, and rare species, such as the White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*) and European Otter (*Lutra lutra*) inhabit the river banks, wet meadows and the remains of the floodplain forests. Even in winter, the floodplain is full of life: Cranes (*Grus grus*), northern geese and swans are guests and can be observed close up in their winter habitats. Visitors can find out more about the history of the river landscape by visiting the castle at Lenzen. This over 1000-year old castle structure is today open to guests as a modern conference and visitor centre. Right in front of the historic Hanseatic

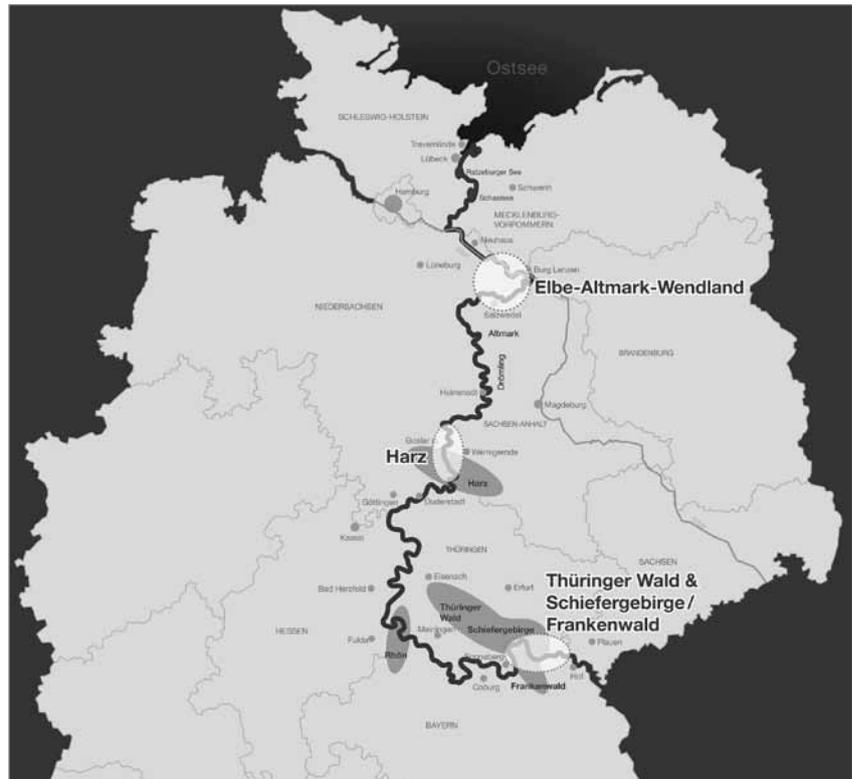


Figure 2: The three model regions of the T+D-project 'Experience the Green Belt' along the Green Belt Germany (source: BUND-Project Office Green Belt).

City of Salzwedel, visitors can have a unique natural experience: the Salzwedel city forest is one of the largest bogalder forests in Germany, and home to many rare species. One section of this primeval forest has been opened up via a raised wooden path. The Green Belt is characterised by quite a few different habitats to the north of lake Arendsee: heathland, dry grassland, as well as open inland dunes. This is the habitat of the thermophilic insect species such as the Blue-winged Grasshopper (*Oedipoda caerulea*) or the European Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*).

The renaturation of the Kusebruchswiesen (meadows) to the north of Salzwedel is an important measure within the project. New areas of shallow water and wet grasslands are being created on previously drained lands. An observation station was set up so that amphibians, water birds and other species can be viewed without any disturbance in their new habitat. Other nature conservati-

on measures in the project 'Experience Green Belt' are aimed at restoring typical dry grasslands, inland dunes and heaths, for example by removing pine growth.

Visitors can find special features of nature, culture and history at 'border experience points' which are signposted along the Green Belt. They point out relics of the former border, such as watchtowers or razed villages ('abandoned villages'). Visitors can experience the diversity of the region on a cycle round trip along the 190 kilometres long 'four countries border cycle path'. On guided tours, guests and local people are invited to acquire 'border experiences in the quadripoint country'. Whether the focus is based upon bird migration or the history of the region, there are always qualified guides to accompany visitors on the trails in the Green Belt. In order to attract the interest of younger generations, project weeks aimed specifically at schoolchildren are offered, supported by artists, on the subject of 'borders'.



Figure 3: To paddle on the river Elbe, the former border river is one of the attractions of the model region of 'Elbe-Altmark-Wendland' (photo: Stefan Reinsch).

3.2 On Harz border paths through nature and history

The low mountain range of Harz is located centrally within Germany. The highest mountain within the area, the 'Brocken' is a symbol of the partition and reunification of Germany. It is situated in the middle of the national park of Harz and at 1,142 m above sea level it towers up to nearly 1,000 metres over the North German Lowlands. Often enveloped in mist, or ravaged by storms, this location has throughout time cast a spell on people and has found its way into German literature, for example in Goethe's 'Faust' or Heine's 'Harzreise'. The unusual climatic conditions of the 'Brocken' result in its unique flora and fauna. Lying directly on the former inner-German border and used by the Soviet Union as a watching post, it was inaccessible to 'normal citizens' from both the East and West during the era of partition, and thus became a symbol of the divided Germany. With the fall of the wall, the focus of attention again has turned to the Brocken, and it has since been visited by numerous guests.

A number of experience routes along the Green Belt are currently being cre-

ated in the shadow of the 'Brocken'. A nature experience route for hikers and leisure cyclists winds its way between the former border rivers, the Ilse and the Oker, along with a 70 kilometre long cycle path through the flat to slightly undulating terrain of the Harz foothills. The Green Belt can be experienced here with a particular sense of intensity at specially marked locations, such as a bird observation station. But there are also places where the Green Belt has almost entirely disappeared, due to intensive agricultural use, especially in the area of the Harz foothills. In order to draw attention to these issues at such



Figure 4: Hikers on the former border patrol path near Sorge in the Harz Mountains, a part of the Harz border path that runs for more than 100 kilometres along the Green Belt (photo: Melanie Kreutz).

sites, a competition is being held in which works of art are being created, which broach the issue of the Green Belt and at the same time Inner-German Border history.

The Green Belt is the major element of the so called Harz border path (Figure 4). Always sticking close to the former border, to a large extent on secluded border paths or on what used to be the 'border patrol path', it runs for more than 100 kilometres, from the former Rhoden border tower to the north, across the Brocken, to the border museum Tettenborn to the south. Here it connects historical and cultural features of the Central German Uplands with habitats deserving of protection, the care and preservation of such habitats in a number of areas is also a central component of the project 'Experience Green Belt'.

In the middle of the National Park in the Altenau district of Torfhaus over 800 metres above sea level, is the new visitor centre for the National Park. With an exciting exhibition and atmospheric multimedia resources, the 'TorfHaus' communicates the core philosophy of the National Park, of 'letting nature be nature', and informs visitors about the ecology of the natural resources and also

about the history and development of the Green Belt in the National Park region.

3.3 Green Belt – an (inter) active experience

The third model region is situated in the south of Germany within the Nature Parks of the Thuringian Forest, Thuringian Slate Mountains/Obere Saale and the Franconian Forest. In this densely-wooded region, agricultural use is usually quite extensive due to the abundance of unspoilt natural settings. This is why the Green Belt is threatened only in a few areas by the high intensification of grassland use. However the emergence of birch trees and spruces are now driving out valuable open landscape habitats such as mountain and wet meadows as well as dwarf-shrub heaths, in which for example, the Wood Lark (*Lullula arborea*) inhabit. This also heavily restricts the way in which the Green Belt is perceived. One main purpose of the project is to guarantee the sustained protection and development of the Green Belt and an improvement in how it is experienced, through the close co-operation of organisations concerned with nature conservation and with partners from tourism.

Species inventories of particularly sensitive creatures such as the Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*), as well as species that can be easily observed in the Green Belt could be used to determine prioritised areas for nature conservation, and to select appropriate areas of interest for tourism. The surveys also formed the starting point for determining areas for nature conservation measures in the Green Belt. By means of landscape management, this unique network of habitats, with its numerous endangered animal and plant species will be protected and developed. Rare mountain and wet meadows will be preserved and restored through mowing or grazing. Spruce woods running along streams will be transformed into close-to nature alder-ash copse margins. It is planned to retain dwarf-shrub heaths through energy wood management. This should result in a mosaic of young or scrubby heathland areas and pioneer forests.

International work camps for young people are organised, to enable younger generations to actively experience the Green Belt. Apart from outdoor work, such as mowing meadows or removing wood from heathland areas, contemporary witnesses tell young people about their border experiences back then (Figure 5). Visits to places of historical

interest are also on the schedule, such as the Inner-Germany Border Museum in Mödlareuth, a little village which was also divided by a wall and named 'Little Berlin' during the Cold War.

Visitors can hike or cycle along fifteen well sign-posted tour routes. Four of these circular hiking paths are set up as exciting 'audio routes'. Using either a mobile phone or MP3 player, hikers can access moving documents of contemporary witnesses and entertaining notes on the diversity of nature and also on other tourist attractions. Some of the interviews with witnesses have been made by schoolchildren from the region. On their walks, guests can be provided with nature and landscape guides, specially certified for this purpose and who have been given special courses on the subject of the Green Belt. Information points are available at a number of places in the region giving guests direct access to further information on the Green Belt.

For more Information about 'Experience the Green Belt' please contact:
BUND (Friends of the Earth) Project Office Green Belt.
E-mail: greenbelt@bund-naturschutz.de
Internet: www.experiencegreenbelt.de



Figure 5: Young people can experience the nature of the Green Belt and the history of the Iron Curtain within a Youth Work Camp. One part of these camps is also outdoor work, to nurse these valuable habitats within the Green Belt (photo: Wiebke Preußner).



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