

The German Green Belt – from “Death Strip” to “Life Zone”

Following the German Division in 1949, mass migration of East German defectors to West Germany led to a one-sided heavy fortification of the inner-German border area. On the East side, a sophisticated system was formed, consisting of a depopulated hinterland, which all people considered politically wavering had to leave, a number of border zones guarded in varying intensity and finally a so-called “death strip” with mines, fences, spring guns and soldiers. On the Western side of the border, no large-scale fortifications were built, though there was also heavy military presence. While the death strip was one of the most drastic and deadly implementations of the East German socialist regime, it also had another, much more positive outcome: Due to its inaccessibility and its limiting effect on human activity, the 1393 km long, though relatively small border area (covering a total territory of some 177 km²) over the years became a habitat for various endangered species. The situation of wetlands in Germany is a good example for the value of such habitats: Since more than 90% of all wetlands in Germany disappeared in the last century, parts of the former death strip could transform into unique sanctuaries for rare birds (like the reed warbler) and amphibians. Already during the German Division, conservationists of both the Federal Republic of Germany and German Democratic Republic called attention to this fact and conducted a broad range of ecological examinations. This article will summarize the most important developments in the emergence of the Green Belt as well as describe efforts carried out by the government and non-governmental organizations and its effect on the present situation. In this connection, the example of Schaalsee biotope will be introduced. A short discussion of German Green Belt’s relation to the bigger European context will conclude the article.

Since the appearance of first border installations in 1954 and their successive fortification, regions within the 50 to 100 meter wide death strip area and, by reason of the depopulation of border regions especially on the East German side, also some areas adjacent to the border were able to regenerate and transform into retreating spaces for rare birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals and flowers. This is even more meaningful, as the Death Strip includes all major German landscape types except for alpine and therefore was able to harbor a great diversity of animals and plants. The first scientific studies dealing with this specific topic date back to the mid-1970s and were followed by further examinations, which showed the ecological value of the areas: Watercourses like brooks or rivers in the border area were, differently from the rest of Germany, not used for transport and therefore not straightened,

which left them in a very good condition. Their clear waters, among other animals, host river clams and are a habitat for river otters. Furthermore, neglected grasslands are important for the preservation of reptiles, birds and orchids. Forests neighbouring the border, finally, could not be used intensively during the time of division. Thus, in the forests of the Southeast border region (between Bavaria and Thuringia) for example, rare black storks can be seen again. Other rare birds, which appeared more frequently since, include the black grouse, the nightjar, the kingfisher and the northern shrike. In this part of the border alone, 130 birds have been found, 30 of them being on the Red List of endangered species. This new knowledge of the biodiversity in former border regions led to diverse efforts in conserving the new ecological spaces even before the opening of the border – among other things, acquisition of land in the border area through NGOs, pleads to the inner-German border commission and efforts to gain media attention.

Just shortly after the border was opened in 1989, a German environmental NGO, the BUND, organized a meeting of 400 conservationists from West and East Germany in Hof in Bavaria, near the inner-German and German-Czechoslovakian (today German-Czech) border and passed a resolution which stated the aim of safeguarding former border areas. In the context of this resolution, the phrase „Green Belt“ appeared for the first time. Against the then-popular opinion to destroy all signs of the former border, it was the ambition of the conservationists to change those areas into nature-sanctuaries in order to maintain the biodiversity of the regions and at the same time create a memorial for the hundreds of people who died trying to defect to West Germany. The death strip by this means was thought to become a „line of life“. In the following weeks and months, German conservationists were particularly successful in raising consciousness for the endangered border region and a cooperation involving NGOs as well as local, regional, and in the end also the federal governmental level was shaped. In 1990, then German Environment Minister Klaus Töpfer pronounced „saving as much as possible of the natural areas of Green Belt“ as an aim of great importance.

In spite of this efforts, about 11% of the Green Belt ceased to exist till the middle of the 1990s, as farmers – mostly from the West – used the now-accessible land to enlarge their acres. While there were a number of conservation measurements implemented in the southern part of the Green Belt, huge gaps emerged in the more fertile and therefore agriculturally valuable Northern part, in some areas as long as 7 km. One reason for the difficulties can be traced back to the legal situation: nature protection in Germany is mainly a task of regional

politics, while 50% of the former border areas were still in possession of the federal government and the status of the remaining areas was not certain for quite a while. Although the states environment ministers, together with environmental associations, passed a declaration on preservation of the Green Belt in 1995, just shortly after, the German Parliament passed a law allowing former owners to purchase areas from the Green Belt for a reduced price and state-owned land was started being sold as well. Reacting to the new situation, German NGOs started raising funds for the purpose of buying especially endangered and valuable areas of the Green Belt. Also, following a joint agreement announced at the 25th German Nature Conservation Meeting, the Ministry of Environment and the Federal Office of Environment Protection started declaring specific areas nature-sanctuaries.

Through the effort of NGOs and politics, about 28% of the whole Green Belt belongs to nature-sanctuaries by now, while another 38% is declared FFH-areas (Flora-Fauna-Habitat – the highest protection priority areas according to the European guidelines). Thus, the occurring degradation could be slowed down so that nowadays about 85% of the Green Belt is not yet converted into acres, intensively used grassland or sealed areas. Another important step towards a broad and systematic conservation of the Green Belt was the 2005 coalition agreement of the new government to assign all national nature heritage areas (therefore also the Green Belt) to the states. Three years later, then minister of environment Sigmar Gabriel signed the first document transferring national nature heritage to Thuringia with the specific function of nature conservation. Even though negotiations between federal government and other states with adjacent areas have not been successful yet, one can be optimistic about the continuity of the Green Belt. The efforts of local and regional administration like the state-run environmental office Plauen (Staatliches Umweltfachamt), which managed to protect the whole former border area in Saxony (about 41 km), and of NGOs all over Germany show that there is a steady progress made relating to the topic. One of the most successful examples of German nature conservation can be seen in the Schaalsee area between Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. The name of the some 309 km² wide area derives from Schaalsee, a 24 km² wide lake in its center, which, with its 72m depth, is the deepest inland lake in Germany. Within the area, there are several different types of landscapes divided in rather small sections, such as the Baltic beach grove type of forests, moors, wetlands, fields and also grassland, all together hosting a vast variety of different plants and animals, of which some are also on the list of endangered species. Among the rare species at Schaalsee is,

amongst others, the Eurasian crane (*grus grus*), which uses the area for breeding and as a resting place. Although parts of the Schaalsee region were 1958 declared landscape protection area in East and nature park in West Germany in 1960, after the German Reunification in 1990 it took about ten more years till Schaalsee finally was recognized as a biosphere reserve. Today, the reserve consists of three different kinds of areas – a core zone of 6,2%, which is free of human activity, a maintenance area of 28,9%, where „soft“ land-use techniques are prescribed and the remaining 64,9%, where balanced, sustainable regional development in the sense of the UNESCO programme “Man and Biosphere” takes places. The reasons, which make Schaalsee area a successful example can be found in the innovative approach towards nature protection, which also included a sustainable development plan for the region. A number of ideas were involved in the region’s transformation – just to name an example, these days one can actively support the protection of cranes by buying so-called „crane-shares“ through the internet page of Schaalsee and thereby showing one’s appreciation of the biosphere. Not only did the efforts carried out lead to protection of the area, but Schaalsee region was also able to evolve into a development model for comparable areas – the former secluded and structurally (industrially) weak region now attracts about 40000 visitors annually and hosts a variety of successful companies belonging to agricultural sector (f. ex. eco-farming or honey production) or related to gastronomy and accommodation business. The transformation of inner-German border not only had significance for Germany: As it became a region for environmental protection and sustainable development, borders of other countries along the iron curtain soon were faced with the same challenge of protecting the environment while creating living opportunities, new transport corridors and trade routes linking East and West. Germany was the first country to develop a green belt concept, which then served as a role model with respect to the other borders along the iron curtain. Throughout Europe, at a length of 8.500 km, there is a network of places worthwhile to preserve, though the actual challenges might differ from case to case. The protection of this trans-boundary habitat network is not only an ecological challenge, but also serves to foster (re-)integration of cultural areas (like in the German-Czech border case or the Balkan countries), overcome hostility and mistrust among former foes of the cold war and prepare regions on both sides of the green belt for European integration and its challenges. Therefore, protection of the Green Belt will continue to be an important task for conservationists as well as policy makers all over Europe. Beginning from 2005, Hanns-Seidel-Foundation in Korea works with partners in Goseong County and Gangwon-Do to transfer the lessons, the

development of the inner-German border area offers, to Korea. The timely planning for protection of areas in the DMZ and the Civilian Control Zone, like a biosphere reserve, is important to prevent an increasing encroachment of competing uses like intensive agriculture or industry in these areas, once the military dominance of the zone ends, e.g. in the case of unification.

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