



Green Belt Europe – From „Iron Curtain“ to Europe’s lifeline

The so called “Iron Curtain” divided Europe for almost 40 years from the Barents Sea at the border between Russia, Norway, and Finland, all the way to the Bosphorus at the border between Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. It was a political, ideological and physical barrier, most strongly expressed in Germany: Metal fences, walls, barbed wire, guard towers, spring guns, land mines and watchdogs created a death zone through Germany and separated one country in East and West, divided families and friends for decades. In this forbidden zone to people the only winner was nature.

Today, the *central* Green Belt’s lifeline through Germany is the area between the road for military vehicles and the former borderline of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and German Democratic Republic (GDR) – today the borderline of the German federal states. This strip is between 50 and 200 m wide. In the long run it is planned to protect the more or less narrow *central* strip and also (large) protected nature conservation areas along the entire Green Belt. The *central* Green Belt is the important backbone with ribs to both sides building up the longest habitat connecting system existing in Germany and Middle Europe, respectively.

For decades almost nobody was admitted to enter the border strip through Europe, this area was comparatively undisturbed and underwent no cultivation or intensification of land use. Due to its remoteness and restrictions the situation was similar in large areas in the border regions. Despite its inhumanity, this border granted nature a pause for breath: nature flourished and developed something extremely rare in intensively used landscapes – a truly wild area. The route of the Iron Curtain thus travels through some of the most important habitats for biodiversity in Europe.

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, BUND (Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland), one of Germany’s leading environmental organisations and a member of Friends of the Earth, is engaged for the protection of the valuable habitats along the former inner-German border – the so called Green Belt. Originated from the Green Belt Germany the vision of a Green Belt through Europe developed. A Green Belt from the Barents Sea to the Black Sea can become a backbone of an ecological network that is a global symbol for trans-boundary co-operation in nature conservation and sustainable development. Moreover, it connects people and shows that the enlarged European Union has not only a cultural but also a natural heritage.