



Introduction

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) jointly organised a conference that took place at the transboundary protected area of the Fertő-Hanság National Park in Hungary. Over 70 participants from 17 countries attended the conference, which had the goals of:

- introducing the European Green Belt concept to national representatives and international experts from the different countries that lie along the route of the Green Belt, and;
- debating what the Green Belt would be, how it could be implemented and what its 'added value' would be to nature conservation and sustainable development in Europe.

The aim of the Green Belt initiative, as set out before the meeting, is to establish an ecological network running the entire length of the former Iron Curtain in Europe. As much of the land around the Iron Curtain was forbidden to people, nature was able to thrive without the pressures of intensive agricultural and development practices. The route of the Green Belt also contains a great number of important areas for biodiversity, highlighted by the high number of protected areas (many with transboundary cooperation) that could form the core areas within the ecological network.

The Meeting

The conference started with plenary presentations that discussed the role of transboundary cooperation for nature conservation. Practical examples showed how it is possible to overcome many of the difficulties often identified for transboundary cooperation, such as language barriers, to successfully work together. Representatives from NGOs and national focal points were then asked to give presentations on the status of the Green Belt in their regions. There are many initiatives currently running or in development along the Green Belt. In Scandinavia, the Fenno-Scandian Green Belt has been proposed as a World Heritage Site. In Central Europe, initiatives started in several countries and work continues on the German Green Belt, the inspiration for the European initiative. In South Eastern Europe, there are many examples of successful transboundary cooperation. Half the priority areas for transboundary nature conservation in the region (as identified in a UNESCO/IUCN/SDC workshop recently) lie along the Green Belt. These contain some examples of the

beautiful natural and cultural heritage that can be found along the Green Belt.

During the meeting the participants also celebrated the 15th anniversary of the opening of the Hungarian-Austrian border at the location of the Pan-European Picnic. As this event led to the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 this highly symbolic date and location were chosen for the launch of the European Green Belt initiative which itself is a symbol for the development of the former Iron Curtain from death zone to life line.

Green Belt as an institutional tool

It was clearly identified at the meeting that there was no need for yet another initiative that would compete with or dilute existing legislation and agreements for nature conservation. In contrast to this the Green Belt was seen as an important tool with its high public and political visibility for the implementation of the various networks of protected areas and international conventions. There is a need for joint action for nature at the European level and the Green Belt could contribute to the establishment and inter-connection (i.e. Article 10 Habitats Directive) of the Natura 2000 network, especially in new member states and third countries. The Green Belt is also an important tool to meet the commitments made by EU Heads of State and pan-European Ministers of Environment "to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010".

The Green Belt could actively contribute to a number of initiatives occurring at the pan-European level, including the Bern Convention and the Emerald Network of protected areas. Together with UNESCO, the Council of Europe performs coordinated actions in the field of Natural Heritage and Landscape conservation. The Green Belt could become an important implementing tool for joint actions between World Heritage Sites, Biosphere Reserves and the different Council of Europe conventions.



Fertő-Hanság National Park headquarters, the meeting venue

What will the Green Belt look like?

The Green Belt has a complex structure because it will operate at a range of different levels (i.e. local to European), with many different actors (i.e. NGOs, State authorities etc) utilising many different tools and strategies to realise its objectives.

The discussion group on international cooperation suggested that the Green Belt focus on four levels:

- **Local** - this would include protected areas, specific site projects, interactions with land-owners, town/country authorities and businesses;
- **National** – work between national NGOs and State authorities, and their counterparts in neighbouring countries. It would see the coordination between protected areas and land users at a national level and the input of different sectors of the national administration (e.g. transport and energy). At the national level there would be a focal point that is sanctioned by the Ministry responsible for nature conservation and officially in charge of issues concerning the Green Belt.
- **Sub-regional** – it is recognised that an initiative of this scale requires management and support at a level between National and European. It is proposed that the Green Belt be divided into three sub-regions, each of which would be coordinated by a competent organisation with a history of active conservation work in that region. The discussion group on international cooperation proposed the following structure:
 - The Fenno-Scandian Green Belt – from the Barents Seas to the Baltic Sea.
 - The Central European Green Belt – from the Baltic Sea (inclusively) to the Adriatic Sea.
 - The South-Eastern Green Belt – from the border between Austria, Hungary and Slovenia to the Black Sea including a branch surrounding Albania.
- **Regional** – the entire Green Belt. The initiative will be coordinated through the IUCN sub-regional office for South Eastern Europe in Belgrade.

Important components of the Green Belt are the national Focal Points. Prior to the meeting each country was requested by IUCN to appoint a competent person from their Ministry responsible for nature conservation, a related institution or a sanctioned NGO, to represent that country within the Green Belt. Most countries were able to do this and many focal points attended the meeting in Hungary. First ideas on the role of the focal points have been developed at the conference. The focal points will act as vectors for the Green Belt within their countries. However, it is now up to the Secretariat for the Green Belt to develop guidelines for the focal points, to help them in their work for the Green Belt.

The Major Ecosystems in the Green Belt

Forests make up a large part of the Green Belt, from the coniferous forests in the north of Scandinavia to the beech and spruce forests in Central Europe to the riverine forests that lie along the Prespa Lakes in Greece. These forests represent a great range of ecological conditions and patterns of human use and modification. The Forests ecosystem discussion group identified some of the many different initiatives that the Green Belt could be involved in. On the other hand unlike other ecosystem types, forests have been under stronger national control, for example there is no common EU policy for forestry. This could present both barriers and opportunities to the Green Belt.

There are a great number of transboundary wetlands and river systems running through the Green Belt. The most important could be listed. However it would be useful to additionally identify the wetlands in the Green Belt that offer synergies with international conventions such as Ramsar, and legal instruments such as the EU Water Directive. It was identified that, whereas in some regions there are successful examples in the transboundary management and protection of wetlands, there are too many examples of poor cooperation, either due to a lack of funding or communication. There are already high profile areas, like the Drava-Mura delta, that could provide powerful case studies for international cooperation within the Green Belt.

In contrast to forests and aquatic ecosystems, the members of the agricultural discussion group were unable to identify any examples of transboundary cooperation in extensive agriculture, and this will become a focus for the Green Belt in near future. Agriculture occupies a position



The route of the Green Belt indicating the different biogeographic regions (Source: European map from EEA)

of high importance within the EU, the new Member States have seen the introduction of the EU Common Agricultural Policy and this holds both future benefits and potential troubles for biodiversity in these countries. Within the Green Belt it was decided that countries should make available their rural development plans and that these should be reviewed and compared across countries. There should be a wider communication of best practice and opportunities. Where possible, the Green Belt should promote and help establish rural products and labels, to stimulate the market for these products. Increasing the visibility of these plans and actions would also increase the connections between land users and conservationists – a key goal for the Green Belt – and also provide a service for the successful implementation of the CAP (i.e. minimising the negative impacts seen in EU-15). Agriculture also offers opportunities for the development of an ecological network along the Green Belt through the linking of agricultural practices to buffer zones around protected areas and movement corridors.

Key requirements for the future include:

- the generation of an overview of agricultural regions and their status throughout the Green Belt;
- the promotion and support of traditional farming systems still existing and the re-establishment of those lost, along the Green Belt;
- the promoting and market of regional tourism and products along the Green Belt;
- a strong communication strategy for agriculture that sees the integration of the Green Belt into national regional development plans.

Mapping and Monitoring

Given the diversity of ecological, political and socio-economic conditions running through the Green Belt and the central goal of creating a functional ecological network, the compilation of maps and the use of databases are going to be crucial to the successful implementation of this initiative. Maps of the Green Belt will be essential for showing how the network can become a reality and thus for gaining political and public support. In addition they will be used to identify priority areas for future action. Discussions in the mapping group highlighted an interesting direction for the immediate future. A standardised methodology should be agreed for the generation of a GIS database for the Green Belt. It would contain base maps of vegetation structures and landscape features, i.e. remotely sensed, present in the Green Belt. Over these would be a number of layers containing data on protected area status, land management and use practices. Most of the information it would contain already exists and requires collation and standardisation. This will become a key target for completion in 2005.

Discussions in the group also looked at the importance of species and habitat monitoring within the Green Belt. It

was decided that wherever possible the Green Belt should use and also contribute to the mechanisms being established under the EU Nature Directives and the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy. However an important additional tool could be the identification of certain ‘flagship’ species. They would be species that have a prominent place in regional cultural heritage and also in the ecosystems along the Green Belt. Such species would be used as an important communication tool for the Green Belt towards civil society in general.



The Hungarian Minister of Environment, Dr. Miklós Persányi celebrates the 15th anniversary of the Pan-European Picnic and the launch of the Green Belt on the Austrian-Hungarian border.

Funding the Green Belt

Funding is needed for the coordination activities of the Green Belt at the national and international levels. The targets identified within the Programme of Work will require funding through the implementation of projects at the local, regional and European levels. Possible sources of funding include: Global Environmental Fund, Phare CBC, NATO (science programme), World Heritage Fund, bilateral agreements with individual countries, private corporate sponsorship or product development, national and international foundations, European funding mechanisms (e.g. EU rural development fund, European Regional Development Fund, Neighbourhood Programme, 6th Framework Research funding) amongst others.

On asking the question, “What could meeting participants do to help fund the Green Belt when they leave the meeting?”, a range of possibilities were named, which ranged from the development of specific project ideas and proposals to take place along the Green Belt, to spreading the idea of the Green Belt among NGOs and State authorities to the development of possible co-financing opportunities between existing or soon to be launched projects and the Green Belt initiative. A clear need was identified for a funding review to be developed that would set out the different funding possibilities and

barriers that face the Green Belt. This will become a key target for 2005.

Finally the funding group discussed the relation between the Green Belt and public-private partnerships for conservation and rural development. The Neusiedler-See National Park served as an example for the profitable relationship between local farmers, who are able to graze cattle on National Park land, and are part of the National Park's management strategy, with the National Parks efforts to maintain the puzshta landscape and to market products from the Park within the local community. The discussion group clearly identified that there were real possibilities for the development of such initiatives and that they could achieve the goals of linking conservation with rural development. But any attempts to use the Green Belt logo or create a 'brand' must be carefully monitored and controlled.

A vision for the Green Belt

1. The Green Belt is an ecological network that will fit into, and provides an implementation mechanism for, the major European initiatives on protected areas and biodiversity loss.
2. It is an opportunity to create a nature communication and marketing tool linking nature conservation and sustainable regional development – essential to communicate outside the nature conservation community.
3. It is a tool for transboundary cooperation at a local and national level in nature conservation.
4. It is an ecological laboratory containing a latitudinal slice of important European habitats and will be an important tool to study the current and future effects of climate change on species populations.

The next steps

The key outcome of the meeting will be the Green Belt Programme of Work (PoW). This document, modelled

closely on the CDB Programme of Work for Protected Areas, will identify clear and time-defined goals and targets required to make the Green Belt a reality. The meeting organisers will distribute a draft of the PoW to all meeting participants and experts who were unable to attend and will collate and incorporate the feedback received.

A Green Belt Coordinator position is being supported through the GTZ/CIM and will start work in the IUCN Office for South Eastern Europe in January. The secretariat will also take the Green Belt into international fora including the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Thailand. The secretariat will work with key partners to identify key areas along the Green Belt that could become focal regions for Green Belt activities. There would be projects taking place in these regions that could be used to highlight the strengths of the Green Belt.

Some Key Targets for the future:

- 2005 – Database complete on protected/designated areas under national/international schemes running along the Green Belt.**
- 2005 – Basic GIS map serving as a rough inventory of the Green Belt completed.**
- 2005 – Review of funding opportunities available to the different levels of the Green Belt.**
- 2006 – High profile media trip travelling along the route of the Green Belt – identify a path running the entire length of Europe.**
- 2006 – Focal area projects are running/applied for in each of the Green Belt sub-regions. These will act as high profile projects (although can be local or regional scale), to draw attention to the Green belt.**
- 2007 – Regional Flagship species identified and monitored for the Green Belt habitats.**
- 2010 – The Green Belt is established throughout Europe.**



The Meeting participants at the Fertő-Hanság National Park

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