6 Transcending the Cold War: Borders, Nature, and the European Green Belt Conservation Project along the Former Iron Curtain

Abstract This chapter highlights the connections between borders and the natural environment, taking the European Green Belt as an example. It highlights the project’s dual origins along the Finnish-Russian and the inter-German border. The authors argue that the opportunities for nature protection provided by the end of the Cold War and the subsequent push for European integration are best understood if considered alongside a parallel paradigm shift in nature conservation itself: a move towards the creation of ecological networks and corridors that required transboundary cooperation. This chapter addresses this synchronism in a case study of transboundary conservation along the Czech, German, and Austrian borders, focusing on the national parks of the Bavarian Forest/Sumava and Thayatal/Podyjí. The European Green Belt ‘invented’ neither transboundary collaboration nor ecological networks, but its symbolic valence as a profoundly European space, both in historical and political terms, has made it a prime example of these approaches and has helped popularize them.

Keywords European Green Belt; nature conservation; ecological networks and corridors; Iron Curtain; nature and borders

In September 2004, seventy conservationists from seventeen European countries gathered in the Fertő-Hanság National Park on the Hungarian side of Lake Neusiedl. Capitalizing on the success of the German Green Belt project along the former inter-German border, they announced what they considered a watershed project for nature conservation in Europe: a plan to create a corridor of protected landscapes along the entire course of the former Iron Curtain, reaching from the Arctic Circle down to the Balkan Peninsula.¹ Aside from the primary goal of preserving sensitive biotopes that had benefited from the seclusion the Iron Curtain had provided, the European Green Belt was, in the words of the President of the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (Bundesamt für Naturschutz), supposed to “harmonize human activities with the natural environment”, “foster transboundary cooperation between the old and new EU member states”, and “enhance sustainable regional development” in Europe’s border areas.² The

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The idea of the Green Belt is tied to the end of the Cold War like no other European nature protection effort. For a start, it is part of a larger conservation windfall brought by the end of the Cold War. The termination of the global conflict and its permanent state of military preparedness freed up some 1.5 billion hectares of military training ground in Europe, a significant portion of which was transitioned into protected areas although (or rather because) they were contaminated with unexploded ordnance.³ The collapse of state socialism also ushered in new political regimes in formerly socialist countries that provided a boost to nature conservation. New protected areas thus became part of the “peace dividend” of the concluded conflict. Further, the Green Belt occupies the space where the Iron Curtain once stood.⁴ The Iron Curtain was the iconic symbol of Europe’s Cold War division: it separated military blocs and competing ideologies and was a deadly obstacle for anyone seeking to migrate westward. By protecting the strip of land where this infamous border once meandered, the Green Belt leverages significant symbolic capital for its marketing efforts. Its stakeholders have skillfully harnessed the prevalent post-Wall optimism and pro-European sentiment of the 1990s with slogans such as “From Death Strip to Life Line” and “Borders Separate, Nature Unites”. Whereas the first slogan references the political transformation of Europe after the events of 1989–1990, the second evokes the continent’s subsequent political and economic integration. The conservationists reconnected here to earlier plans from 1990 that had considered ecologically valuable areas along state borders in Central and South-West Europe as the “ecological bricks” for a new “House of Europe”.⁵ Not coincidentally, the conference at the Fertő-Hanság National Park was convened in 2004 when the first Eastern Enlargement of the European Union extended European environmental legislation to the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Tying their nature conservation project so closely to the political project of European integration should not come as a surprise because from the beginning the founders of the European Green Belt looked to the European Union for future funding.⁶ Still, the initiative points beyond “political” Europe since it tied together member and non-member states.

Today, the European Green Belt (EGB) presents itself as a 12,500 kilometres long ecological corridor that runs from the northern tip of the Norwegian-Russian border to the Adriatic Sea near Trieste, and on through the Balkans along the eastern border of former Yugoslavia, forking eventually at the border between Bulgaria and Greece toward the Black Sea in the east and at the border between Greece and Albania toward the Adriatic in the west (see figure 1). The European
Green Belt consists of four organizational units: the Fennoscandian part, the Baltic coast, the Central European stretch, and the South-Eastern European, or Balkan, segment. It touches 24 countries and runs for the most part along current state borders, thus creating the need and opportunity for transboundary cooperation among protected areas within a circa 25 kilometres deep zone on either side of the respective borders.

Using the European Green Belt as an example, this chapter highlights the connections between borders and the natural environment. It addresses the dual origins of the Green Belt on Finland’s border with Russia and along the inter-German border that laid the groundwork for the European dimension of the project (for the Baltic see chapter 10 by Laakkonen/Räsänen). We argue that the opportunities that the end of the Cold War and the push for European integration provided for the protection of nature are best understood if considered alongside a parallel paradigm shift in nature conservation itself: a move toward the creation of ecological networks and corridors that requires transboun-
dary cooperation. In this context, it is worth remembering that many protected areas that became subsumed under the Green Belt label predate this pan-European initiative and have deep individual histories. This chapter therefore offers a case study for transboundary conservation along Czech borders, focusing on the national parks of the Bavarian Forest/Šumava and Thayatal/Podyjí. Their stories also highlight both the achievements and challenges of transboundary conservation. The European Green Belt ‘invented’ neither transboundary environmental collaboration nor ecological networks, but its symbolic valence as a profoundly European space, both in historical and political terms, turned it into a prime example of these approaches and helped publicize them to a wider public.

1 Borders and the Environment

The last decade has brought increasing scholarly attention to the interplay of geopolitical borders, borderlands, and the environment. The character of a border, the degree to which it is enforced and securitized, signifies the political relationship of neighbouring states. For example, the borders within the Schengen area are intended to be fully permeable, whereas those delimiting EU territory are not. The nature of the relationship between neighbours that is embodied in shared borders influences their transboundary environmental entanglements as well. Negotiations over the damage of environmental goods, from the infringement of fishing rights to the release of sulphur dioxide plumes or spills into transboundary waters, are more likely to be amicably resolved by good neighbours than by hostile neighbours. In Nancy Langston’s words, “many pollutants ignore national borders but the effects of exposure are still mediated by those borders”. As the global coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has shown all too well, borders do indeed play a key role in mediating exposure; across the globe, they snapped shut.

Yet borders not only mediate environmental engagement between neighbours in a diplomatic and legal sense. They also play an ecological role on the ground. More often than not, politically demarcated territory and biogeographical regions do not coincide, and borders themselves cut across terrestrial and marine habitats. Since state borders demarcate the extent of state sovereignty, they frequently also delimit different (national) practices of land use and natural resource exploitation, as well as water and fire management, differences that can literally inscribe the border into the landscape as changes in vegetation. The effects of a border’s presence in the terrain vary according to landscape type, species, and the border’s physical appearance. Border fences, designed to control human movements, fragment habitats and inevitably hamper
and even prevent wildlife migration and biological exchange. Tightly patrolled contemporary borders like the one between the United States and Mexico bring military-grade infrastructure into remote areas, from off-road vehicles to flood-lights and helicopters. But even a non-militarized border like the one between Canada and the United States is starkly visible in the landscape: a denuded 20-foot deep zone known as “the slash” is continuously kept free of trees even within the transboundary Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park.

Historically, governing authorities have regularly designated topographic features such as coastlines, mountain ranges, and rivers as boundaries in order to “naturalize” territorial claims. Historians have debunked such claims across time and space, all but gutting the idea of “natural borders”. For example, the idea of the Hexagon as the natural and therefore legitimate shape of France betrays late eighteenth-century geopolitical goals, since such ideal(ized) limits marked by the Rhine in the east and the Pyrenees in the southwest still presupposed further expansion at the time. Instead of settling territorial competition and pacifying mutual relations, the allegedly “natural” border river with Germany – the Rhine – became a bone of contention among nationalists on both sides. Indeed, rivers make remarkably bad “natural” borders because they move with the flood season, expanding and contracting, even giving rise to temporary islands. “When such wandering rivers come to mark an international border”, Willem van Schendel writes, “they are bound to create mayhem”. If, in turn, the river is forced into a corset to contain its movements and make it play its role as a border more reliably, the riverine ecology is irretrievably altered.

The historical penchant for topographic features as border markers helps explain, however, why border areas are likely to be of ecological interest: they are by definition ecologically significant landscapes. They preserve their ecological value because economic activity and population density decrease in the vicinity of state borders, making many borderlands both a geographic and an economic periphery. Regardless of individual national trajectories, there is a global trend that buffer zones tend to emerge alongside international boundaries.

The Iron Curtain fits well with this trend because a buffer zone was actually an integral part of the Soviet border security model. The security template, developed in the 1920s for the western border regions (pogranichnyye rayony) of the Soviet Union, called for a restricted zone along the border that was at least seven kilometres deep. The border zone came under intense surveillance and was cleansed of “unreliable” residents. After the Second World War, this border security regime made an appearance along the fault line of the budding Cold War. On the 1,250 kilometres long border between Finland and the Soviet Union, the security belt was at least 30 kilometres deep, hindering logging efforts
in old-growth boreal forests on the Soviet side. In divided Germany, the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) introduced a rigid security regime along the inter-German border in May 1952 that entailed a five kilometres deep prohibited zone. From here, too, allegedly unreliable residents were deported, entrance to the zone was strictly regulated, and economic development was kept to a minimum. Czech authorities had militarized their border with Bavaria a few years earlier. After the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia in 1948, they installed high-voltage electric fences and planted landmines more than ten years before the East Germans did. The borderlands on the Czech side had already undergone a major demographic shift at the end of the war when ethnic Germans (Sudeten Germans) were forced to leave, thinning out the population along this part of the Iron Curtain. The border between Bulgaria and Greece, established after 1919, lost its permeability already during the Second World War. After the war, Bulgarian authorities joined the effort to remove people they considered untrustworthy, especially those with relatives in Greece or Turkey, from the border areas while Greece maintained a 15–45 kilometres deep “surveillance zone” on its side of the border. From the western side, the Iron Curtain also acquired a buffer zone, albeit a rather unintentional one. There were no prohibited zones and no one was deported from border regions. But the border traversed areas that were often rural and had been economically weak and hence sparsely populated in the first place. It thus exacerbated peripheral tendencies in regions like the Harz Mountains and the Bavarian Forest in West Germany and the Oberes Waldviertel in Austria, adding to a perception that these regions had literally become “dead ends”.

2 Dual Origins: The Finnish-Soviet Border and the Inter-German Border

Protection of nature along stretches of the Iron Curtain started before the fall of state socialism, and in the case of Finland and the Soviet Union even in a trans-boundary setting. Although sharing the same Precambrian bedrock geological formation and thus the same flora and fauna, the political border between Finland and the Murmansk Oblast and the Karelian Republic inscribed itself into the landscape due to variances in forest management. Differences in land use along this border were exacerbated during the Soviet era when agriculture and forestry in the Karelian Republic were collectivized and its forests slated for paper production according to centrally determined needs. Yet Karelia’s remoteness from processing facilities saved some of the primeval taiga forests
from being logged. What made this outcome a visible line especially from an aerial perspective was the contrast to forests on the Finnish side, where post-war logging had been paired with reforestation and subsequent industrial forest management. The Finnish evenly-aged economic forests formed a stark contrast to the unintentionally preserved old-growth backwoods on the Soviet side. Old-growth forest on the Finnish side, by contrast, survived only in patches, and more so in the north where forests were state-owned than in the southern part of the country where private ownership and smaller parcellation prevailed. Not surprisingly, the differences in forest age and stocking along the border also translated into differences in biodiversity. The Karelian forests and bogs featured different wildlife communities and a higher overall species diversity than the managed forests on the Finnish side. Equally important, the security zone on the Soviet side of the border “functioned effectively as a huge nature reserve” and played a key role as a “source zone” for wildlife (re)appearing on the Finnish side.

Already in the 1980s, conservation concerns centred on the indigenous boreal forests because they were considered the only standard by which to judge the human impact on the forest environment. In the mid-1980s, Finnish and Soviet conservationists began joint studies of mammal migration. This collaboration paved the way for the creation of a transboundary Friendship Park in 1990. The largest part of the shared park is the Kostomuksha Nature Reserve on the Russian side that had been founded as early as 1983 as a zapovednik, a strictly protected area accessible only to scientists. The Kostomuksha zapovednik owed its existence to a Soviet-era push for the industrial modernization of the Republic of Karelia. As part of the effort to modernize the region, a new industrial town named Kostomuksha was established in 1977, some 30 kilometres from the border with Finland. From 1982 onward, the Karelskiy Okatyshevskiy iron ore mine became the town’s main employer and, incidentally, its main polluter too. Granting a zapovednik only a year after the start of iron ore production should be understood as a compensatory measure, albeit a substantial one: Kostomuksha Nature Reserve covers 47,000 hectares and is twice as large as the five Finnish reserves combined that make up the western side of the Friendship Park.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the boreal taiga forests of Karelia came under immediate pressure. Finnish companies were allowed to start logging in Russian Karelia, including in the previously closed border zone. At the same time, however, state-employed conservationists in both Finland and Russia went public with the idea of preserving the border zone as a “green belt” (vihreä vyöhyke) in January 1994, thus introducing the term to a wider public for the first time. Based on forest inventories assembled by environmental NGOs, activists like the now defunct Taiga Rescue Network (TRN) launched a publicity campaign
with the goal of convincing the leading Finnish forest companies to stop logging the old-growth forests in Karelia and to stop purchasing timber from there. When the leading Finnish company Enso-Gutzeit agreed to a moratorium in 1996, other companies fell in line. The moratorium bought time for the conservationists to develop the idea of a green belt at a moment when EU funding (Finland joined in 1995) was becoming available for this purpose. Thanks to these funds, the initial idea of a Green Belt of Karelia evolved into the Fennoscandian Green Belt that also included the 195 kilometres of border between Norway and Russia. These developments were independent of the simultaneous launch of the Green Belt concept along the former Iron Curtain in Germany. In view of the special relationship between Finland and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Finnish conservationists actually reject the Iron Curtain label for their border.

The inter-German border had a very different character than the Finnish-Soviet one. As a fresh border between two antagonistic states, it was militarized and continuously refined from the 1950s onward. Yet before any “respite” came to the border areas, the construction of the military infrastructure significantly degraded its environs. With the ground ripped up and corridors cut through thick forests, western observers perceived the border in the 1960s as a “scar” in the landscape. The ecological footprint of the ever-evolving infrastructure differed by species and landscape type. Ground-breeding birds benefited from the lack even of foot traffic in the immediate border areas. The genetic exchange of large mammals, on the other hand, was hindered by the border’s fences and, during the 1960s, such mammals frequently died in the minefields. That the border-induced landscape changes were eventually appreciated for their ecological value needs to be understood against the backdrop of growing environmental concerns during the 1970s and 1980s. Familiar landscapes and species once common in West German regions fell victim to industrialized agriculture and urban sprawl. The “discovery” of the biodiversity alongside the border was thus predicated on a growing sense of loss. The border, usually vilified in West German political discourse for its violence and illegitimacy, turned into an unlikely mirror of these developments as conservationists began to use the biotopes along the divide as control areas.

The discovery of the unintended ecological consequences of the border regime started in the late 1960s. The ornithologist Rudolf Berndt made the first effort to protect a landscape because it had been altered by the border regime. In 1968, he proposed turning the western part of a wetland, the Drömling, into a nature reserve. The Drömling, located in northern Germany east of the city of Wolfsburg, had been converted into agricultural land from the late eighteenth century onward and required continuous hydrological management to remain arable. The introduction of the East German border regime divided the wetland...
and made this hydrological management impossible. By the late 1960s, western farmers gave up on their fields and the wetland was allowed to return to a less disturbed state.\textsuperscript{42} Berndt seized the opportunity to propose the protection of the wetland’s extensive reed beds, native pines, spruces, and grey alders, as well as its littoral vegetation alongside boreal flora. Although his proposal was ultimately unsuccessful, the example reveals that the border was starting to be recognized as an agent of landscape change that offered possibilities for nature conservation.\textsuperscript{43}

Up and down the inter-German border, western conservationists began to focus on border habitats over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. NGOs like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Bund Naturschutz (BN) started to purchase select tracts of land on the demarcation line. In 1988, the wildlife documentary filmmaker Heinz Sielmann dedicated a whole episode of his popular TV show Expeditions into the Animal Kingdom (\textit{Expeditionen ins Tierreich}) to “animals in the shadow of the border” to highlight the border’s ecological role.\textsuperscript{44} But western conservationists were not the only ones who came to appreciate the border’s diverse ecological communities. On occasion, East German border guards engaged in birding and made some regionally significant discoveries, like the confirmation of the return of the eagle-owl (\textit{Bubo bubo}) as a breeding bird in Eisenach county.\textsuperscript{45}

By the mid-1980s, nature in the border strip became an issue in West German politics as well. Uwe Barschel, the governor of the northernmost federal state of Schleswig-Holstein, launched a conservation programme on the south-eastern edge of his state that shared 132 kilometres of border with the GDR. The language in which this programme was announced was not unlike later conceptions of the Green Belt. The partition of Germany, it stated, resulted in “enforced tranquillity”, thereby creating “spaces of refuge and retreat for those plants and animals [that were] endangered in other regions”. With the same biota on both sides of the fence, Barschel hoped that the East German government would consider designating the corresponding eastern sections as protected areas. Barschel’s initiative was picked up on the federal level and became part of an official West German proposal to develop cross-border nature preserves as part of the strategy to improve inter-German relations. These relations, however, were more acrimonious than those between Finland and the Soviet Union; the East German Politbüro swiftly rejected the idea of shared nature conservation.\textsuperscript{46}

The unexpected opening of the inter-German border in winter 1989 exposed the previously restricted security areas to human activity. Convoys of cars rolled across improvised border crossings, farmers ploughed grassland, borderland politicians called for economic development, and hikers explored the formerly forbidden zone. “From the Baltic to the Frankenwald”, wrote an observer at
the time, “the excursionists are chugging and traipsing through an almost intact flora and fauna”. Given the threats to the biotopes along the border, West and East German conservationists initiated cross-border alliances that advanced the efforts begun in the 1980s. The initiative of the Bund Naturschutz (BN) and the German Friends of the Earth (Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland, BUND) became the most influential one. In December 1989, these two groups issued a resolution that called for the conservation of the border strip as a “green belt”. The initiative benefited significantly from the East German National Park Programme that the first freely elected East German government created shortly before reunification in October 1990. Some of the 14 areas the programme protected, such as the Harz National Park, the Biosphere Reserve Middle Elbe, the Rhön Biosphere Reserve, and two nature parks at Schaalsee Lake and in the Drömling wetland, were right on the border. Despite significant local opposition and challenges, the conversion of the border strip into a green belt moved ahead swiftly. Today, the Green Belt is Germany’s most prominent nature conservation project and has garnered numerous accolades, from being named National Nature Heritage (2005) to being honoured with a postage stamp (2020) (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The German Green Belt was honoured with a postal stamp in March 2020. Photo: Klaus Leidorf; Design: Annette le Fort and André Heers.
3 Late Twentieth-Century Shifts in Nature Conservation

The beginnings of the Green Belt coincided with a slow-forming paradigm change in nature conservation – a shift from the preservation of culturally significant landscapes in nature reserves to the preservation of biodiversity in connected habitats and biotopes (see chapter 16 by van de Grift/van Meurs). The shift sought to address the causes of biodiversity loss, namely intense land use and the fragmentation of landscape that gave protected areas the character of inaccessible islands. “Our nature preserves”, lamented the German conservationist Horst Stern in 1990, “are hopelessly isolated, trapped between chemically contaminated landscapes of intensive use and therefore ineffectual for migratory species and their essential genetic exchange”.

Since vast protected areas on the scale of American national parks were not an easy proposition in densely populated Europe, in the 1980s the Netherlands, Denmark, and Czechoslovakia started to experiment with the idea of ecological networks: buffer zones around protected core areas would soften transitions between natural and semi-natural biotopes, and these areas would then be connected with corridors, greenways, and “stepping stones” to provide landscape connectedness and biological connectivity between them. The concept gained further traction in view of climate change that renders habitats unsuitable and that forces many species to adapt by moving to different ranges.

Although the concept of ecological networks was not without its critics, the idea caught on politically. A number of network initiatives and programmes emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s. The Council of Europe used the Bern Convention of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (1979) to establish the Emerald Network in 1989 to safeguard biodiversity beyond national boundaries. In 1992, the European Union launched Natura 2000, a programme based on the Birds Directive (1979) and the Habitat Directive (1992). Since its inception, Natura 2000 has grown into the largest network of protected areas worldwide, covering some 18 per cent of EU territory. However, national and regional ecological networks do not automatically jell into a European network. Additional players, like the European Centre for Nature Conservation and its Pan-European Ecological Network (PEEN), therefore seek to promote a certain coherence across the continent.

The fall of the Iron Curtain burst into these ongoing policy developments. In Germany, the GDR border regime had unwittingly produced an arrow, 1,393 kilometres long north-south corridor that connected different landscape types. Fully attuned to the network approach, the founders of the Green Belt wanted to turn it...
into the “ecological backbone of Central Europe”.\footnote{57} Observers in the West German Environmental Ministry instantly thought of the new project as the German contribution to the EU agenda: “[The] inter-German border strip with its adjacent areas is predestined to provide a major contribution to NATURA 2000.”\footnote{58} Similarly, once the project moved onto the European scale, stakeholders pitched the initiative as “backbone of a European habitat network” and a “valuable contribution to the Natura 2000 network”\footnote{59}. The European Green Belt was an obvious fit for both the new paradigm in nature conservation and the policies that sought to implement it. These developments again put borders front and centre and provided a significant push for transboundary cooperation in nature conservation.

\section*{4 Transboundary Conservation}

Due to its location, the European Green Belt inadvertently marked the seam between different national approaches to nature conservation and the site of efforts to achieve coherence in conservation practice.\footnote{60} It was both a tool of and a potent symbol for transboundary cooperation, although the impetus for cooperation across borders often developed independently of the European Green Belt initiative. In fact, as the examples of the Bavarian Forest and Šumava national parks on the Czech-German border and the Thayatal and Podyjí national parks on the Czech-Austrian border show, many instances of cooperation along the former Iron Curtain pre-date the Green Belt initiative and have deep national, regional, and local histories. Yet they have been subsumed under the Green Belt label. Their history challenges the notion of the European Green Belt as a European landscape, suggesting instead that its history might in fact be more of a history of regions. The parks also highlight both the achievements and the challenges of transboundary conservation.

In the early 1990s, the number of transboundary conservation projects increased noticeably. In 1988, the inventory of transboundary parks listed 70 such sites, but by 2007 this number had grown to 227.\footnote{61} As prominent organizations such as IUCN, EUROPARC, Peace Parks Federation, and UNESCO became involved, by the turn of the millennium transboundary cooperation began to look, in the words of geographer Juliet Fall, like “the current Big Thing in nature conservation”. However, as Fall notes, the personal and institutional complications of transboundary cooperation have been underestimated and poorly understood. Cooperation itself has too often been identified in abstract terms that offered little assistance in actually practicing cooperation.\footnote{62}

Within the Central European segment of the European Green Belt, two projects showcase the successes and the challenges of transboundary coopera-
tion: the Bavarian Forest/Šumava national parks on the Bavarian-Czech border and the Thayatal/Podyjí national parks between Austria and the Czech Republic. They are the most prominent parts of the 800 kilometres long Czech section of the European Green Belt, which accounts for about 9.5 per cent of its total length. More than half of this section, or approximately 550 kilometres, consists of protected areas. The two national parks on the Czech side were both established in 1991 as part of the conservation windfall after 1989. Their origins, however, reach farther back in time.

The Podyjí and Thayatal national parks extend for 40 kilometres along the Thaya/Dyje River valley in the Czech region of South Moravia and the Austrian federal state of Lower Austria. Although the river’s ecology is affected by a dam several kilometres upstream of the national parks, the Thaya valley still represents one of the last unregulated river segments in Central Europe. The steep wooded slopes of the valley and the surrounding moorlands are home to rare plant and animal life. After 1945, the largely German-speaking population of the South Moravian borderlands was expelled from Czechoslovakia, leading to a dramatic regional depopulation. Moreover, the Thaya valley soon became part of the largely inaccessible border zone between Czechoslovakia and Austria. In 1978, the Czech side was turned into a protected landscape area. Ten years later, the Czechoslovak government slated the Thaya valley to become a national park, a process that could have taken many years. The opening of the border, however, accelerated the creation of the Podyjí national park: it was founded in 1991. The Austrian side of the valley followed suit: Austria declared two nature reserves in the area in 1988 and 1991, and a national park connecting with its Czech counterpart in 2000.

Before state governments became involved, the Czech-Austrian cooperation began with informal contacts between Czech conservationists and Austrian activists in the 1980s following their joint opposition to the Czechoslovak government’s plan of building a dam in the area. After the creation of the Austrian park, bilateral relations grew closer. Although the two parks at one point even contemplated a joint management of the area, their cooperation has not been unproblematic. This is partly because the parks have played different roles for tourism in each country. While the rather remote Austrian Thayatal has struggled to attract tourists, the Czech Podyjí has sometimes been overwhelmed by its function as a recreation area for the nearby city of Znojmo. Other recurring issues have been the uncertainty of continued government support on the Czech side, lack of timely information about projects the “other side” was planning, a conflict over the management of fishing in the Thaya valley, and differences in management policies that have plagued the relationship between the two parks for the last two decades.
The commitment of these two parks to the European Green Belt project has been lax at best. The initiative barely plays a role in the parks’ day-to-day operations or their self-description.\textsuperscript{70} Their history highlights several “lessons” in transboundary cooperation of protected areas: first, that cooperation often grows out of and relies on personal contacts rather than formal treaties; second, that despite official proclamations, actual cooperation on the ground often proves difficult when it comes to specific measures like park policies; and finally, that the pan-European initiative often seems irrelevant in protected areas that have been established with the idea of conserving a specific space in a specific region.

The European Green Belt along the Czech-German border has always been overshadowed by the “original” Green Belt at the former inter-German border, at least in the German perception. The 358 kilometres of the Bavarian-Czech border mostly consist of protected areas on the Bavarian side, like the nature parks of the Upper Palatinate Forest (\textit{Oberpfälzer Wald}) and the Bavarian Forest (\textit{Bayrischer Wald}). On the Czech side, the borderlands feature the spacious protected areas of the Bohemian Forest (\textit{Český les}) and Šumava. Similar to the Czech-Austrian case, this large swath of protected landscapes includes two adjacent national parks: the Bavarian Forest and Šumava. Both parks consist of forested mountain landscapes that offer refuge for endangered species such as the Eurasian lynx (\textit{Lynx lynx}) and the western capercaillie (\textit{Tetrao urogallus}).

The Bavarian Forest and Šumava national parks have a history that long predates the European Green Belt. Nature protection on the Czech side of the border goes back to the nineteenth-century private initiatives of aristocratic landowners who put parts of their land under an early form of conservation. The idea of creating a national park first appeared in the 1910s and kept resurfacing during the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{71} The post-war expulsion of the German population and the inclusion of large parts of the Šumava mountain range in the border zone had a similar effect as in the case of Podyjí: it forcibly depopulated large areas and thus opened them up for potential protection. This development led to the establishment of a protected landscape area in 1963 and of the Šumava national park in 1991.\textsuperscript{72} The Bavarian state’s first attempts at conservation also date back to the early twentieth century. The Bavarian Forest national park was designated as such in 1970, mainly as a measure to attract tourists to the remote region.\textsuperscript{73}

Although the two national parks together form one of the largest continuous forest areas in Central Europe, their cooperation was marred almost from the start. Official memoranda did not prevent U-turns in the management policy of the Šumava national park which, in 1995 and again between 2011 and 2014, chose not to adhere to cooperation agreements signed with the Bavarian side, problematizing any notions of linear development of cooperation from zero to
The status of Šumava as a symbolic and highly prominent landscape where conflicts about conservation and environmental protection are habitually fought out within the Czech Republic made its management difficult and dependent on the politics of the day. At times, the transboundary cooperation almost came to a halt due to differences in management policies, especially when dealing with bark beetle infestations. The Czech side resorted repeatedly to aggressive measures including chemical spraying and clear-cutting to control the spread of the insects. This met with disapproval of the Bavarian park management which, after much conflict with the forestry industry and local landowners, has been pursuing a non-interference policy since the early 1980s. Since 2014, however, cooperation has improved significantly, brought about by a new government in the Czech Republic and, in its wake, by changes to the park’s leadership. Both parks have taken part in numerous international conservation initiatives, including Natura 2000, the Ramsar Convention, and EUROPARC. The European Green Belt, however, seems as if it is merely an afterthought to the park management on both sides of the border. Although they are formally part of the initiative, their focus lies much more on transboundary cooperation than on their role as a link in the European Green Belt chain. Activities related to the initiative take place outside the national parks, for instance in the Austrian village of Leopoldschlag close to the Czech border or at the Centrum Bavaria Bohemia in the border community of Schönsee. In Czech public discourse, the European Green Belt is largely understood as a scheme aimed at attracting tourists to remote border regions rather than as a conservation effort. The national parks are almost never perceived through the lens of the European Green Belt. “People don’t come to Šumava to see its Iron Curtain heritage”, remarks ecologist Michael Bartoš, “but to enjoy its nature”.

5 Conclusion

The idea of a green belt in the space formerly occupied by the Iron Curtain positioned this conservation project as a temporal node between the continent’s past and its future. Whereas the national segments of the Green Belt were propelled forward by the collapse of state socialism, the European Green Belt aligned itself closely with the continent’s subsequent political and economic integration. Facilitating cooperation between old and new EU member states has been part of the European Green Belt’s rationale from the beginning. For good or ill, the initiative is closely tied to European Union politics, a connection that has thus far benefited its trajectory “from vision to reality”. Whether the sharp uptick in anti-EU sentiments from 2015 onward will affect European programmes for
nature conservation in general, and this pan-European effort in particular, remains to be seen. However, the recent conflict between Poland’s governing Law and Justice (PiS) party and the EU over logging in the old-growth Bialowieża Forest – a Natura 2000 and UNESCO World Heritage Site – suggests that anti-European politics can play out in nature reserves, too.⁷⁹

Although the metaphor of a green belt implies a coherent corridor, geographer Jarmo Kortelainen points out that the European Green Belt consists of “scattered protected areas in the vicinity of the border”. Rather than a “material thing on the ground”, Kortelainen sees the strength of the project in its conceptual framework as a tool of transboundary environmental governance.⁸⁰ As the examples of protected areas along the Czech borders to Germany and Austria indicate, transboundary cooperation in nature conservation comes with regionally specific challenges, not least because individual parks and preserves along the former Cold War divide have their own histories and regional identities to which the Green Belt label can appear ancillary. Still, it is not hard to see that the evocative name of the European Green Belt and its marketing metaphors contribute significantly to the success of this pan-European initiative. As Brendon Larson reminds us, metaphors in environmental science – including “alien species”, “ecological integrity”, and “ecosystem services” – influence our perceptions, guide our inquiries, and catalyse anticipated outcomes.⁸¹

Harnessing the symbolic power of the erstwhile Iron Curtain, Green Belt stakeholders regularly refer to the European Green Belt as a “living memorial landscape” that allows people to commemorate the continent’s partition through the material traces that the militarized border left in the landscape.⁸² Scholars have thus far followed these cues and frequently discussed the conservation project as a Cold War relic and as a memorial landscape.⁸³ Here, too, differentiation by countries and regions would be advisable since the Iron Curtain and its meaning were not uniform throughout Europe. The border regime between Finland and the Soviet Union was not as confrontational as the one between the two German states, and the borders between Czechoslovakia and its western neighbours (or between Greece and Bulgaria) have deep histories that predate the Cold War. Perhaps the most promising approach to the understanding of the Green Belt as a site with both historical and ecological meaning has been taken by the geographers David Havlick and Sonja Pieck who have merged conservation ecology and memory studies into a new concept called “mnemonic ecosystems” to address the particular challenges of an “emotional geography” like the former Iron Curtain. They argue that conservation projects in memory-infused landscapes need to take those memories on board to foster local acceptance and, ultimately, to be successful. In fact, through the lens of the mnemonic ecosystem
approach, the restoration and conservation efforts themselves turn into memory work.\textsuperscript{84}

Notes

2 Hartmut Vogtmann cited in ibid., viii.
4 The path of the Green Belt on the Balkan peninsula does not fully correlate with the former Iron Curtain but still coincides with state borders.
8 In 2009, over 3,200 protected areas were clustered within this 25-kilometre zone. See ibid., 18.

14 These issues antedate the most recent efforts by the Trump administration to extend the border wall but received renewed attention because of them. Robert Peters et al., “Nature Divided, Scientists United: US-Mexico Border Wall Threatens Biodiversity and Binational Conservation”, *BioScience* 68, no. 10 (October 2018): 740–743.


Ibid., 185–188; Eeva Berglund, “From Iron Curtain to Timber-Belt: Territory and Materiality at the Finnish-Russian Border”, Ethnologica Europaea 30 (2010): 23–34. Both Lehtinen and Berglund raise the issue that much of the forest activism was carried out by actors from outside the region.

On Norway, see Lassi Karivalo and Alexey Butorin, “The Fennoscandian Green Belt”, in The Green Belt of Europe, 43.

The Green Belt marketing frequently refers to a 30-year-long “respite” for nature along the inter-German border. The metaphor is misleading in that it projects a narrative of human non-interference with the land that is ahistorical. For a “respite” reference, see e.g. “Das Grüne Band: Vom Todesstreifen zur Lebenslinie”, https://www.bund.net/gruene-band/ (accessed 23 March 2021). For perceptions of the land as being “scarred”, see for example David Shears, The Ugly Frontier (New York: Knopf, 1970), 9; Sepp Binder, “Die Narbe der Nation: Zwischen Touristen und Tretminen”, Die Zeit, 13 June 1969, 8.


Sandra Rientjes and Mihály Végh, “Ecological Networks: From the Continental Level to the Regional, and Back”, ibid., 49–54; the distinction between landscape connectedness and biological connectivity in Otars Opermanis et al., “Connectedness and Connectivity of the Natura 2000 Network of Protected Areas Across Country Borders in the European Union”, Biological Conservation 153 (2012): 227–238, here 228. On the scientific basis behind the network idea,
see Marie Bonnin et al., *The Pan-European Ecological Network: Taking Stock* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2007), 14–16.

53 Ibid., 9, 15.


57 Frobel, Riecken, and Ullrich, “Naturschutzprojekt Deutsche Einheit”, 400.


60 The Habitat Directive calls for cross-border coherence of Natura 2000 sites. The creation of the Natura 2000 network has, however, by no means been a “coherent” process, since the Habitat Directive remains vague on some core concepts and definitions. For a useful documentation of the myriad challenges, see Leibenath, ed., *Crossing Borders*.


70 In the case of the Austrian park, the EGB is mentioned on its website among other cooperating initiatives, including the IUCN and Natura 2000, but it seems to play next to no role in the park’s day-to-day functioning or in its self-image. There is no mention of the EGB on the website of the Czech park, except for an article about a cycling trail that traces the route of the Iron Curtain. See “Kooperationen”, Nationalpark Thayatal, https://www.np-thayatal.at/de/pages/koperationen-41.aspx (accessed 23 March 2021); “Projedte se kolem železné opony, první kilometry celeoevropské trasy jsou vyznačeny v Podyji” [Ride along the Iron Curtain, the first kilometres of the pan-European route are marked in Podyji], Správa Národního parku Podyjí, last modified 9 April 2013, https://www.nppodyji.cz/projedte-se-kolem-zelezne-opony-prvni-kilometry-celeoevropske?highlightWords=zelen%C3%B3+p%28C3%29%BD+p%2C3%2CA%2C1s.
75 Saska Petrova, Communities in Transition: Protected Nature and Local People in Eastern and Central Europe (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 132–133.

78 The volume documenting the conference constituting the European Green Belt bears this name. See note 1.

79 Eunice Blavascunas, Foresters, Borders, and Bark Beetles. The Future of Europe’s Last Primeval Forest (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 153–186; see also Case C-441/17: EU Commission vs. Poland (Białowieża Forest), 17 April 2018. To clarify, the Białowieża Forest is not part of the European Green Belt but is located on Poland’s border with Belarus.


82 The term is part of the mission statement of the EGB, https://www.europeangreenbelt.org/ (accessed 23 March 2021).


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