

Protecting Biodiversity in the Balkans - Strengthening cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt

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Antragstitel **Grenzüberschreitende Umweltkommunikation zum Erhalt der Biodiversität entlang des Balkan Green Belt**

Stichworte Balkan Green Belt

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24 months	07.12.14	30.11.18	

Zwischenberichte	3
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Objectives

The project aims at the conservation of a transboundary ecological network along the border of Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey and Romania through enhancement of cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt. In addition, the project aims at strengthening the cross-border exchange and collaboration between CSOs working along the Balkan Green Belt.

Objectives of the project are as following:

- To raise the profile of the Balkan Green Belt and the awareness of the importance of biodiversity conservation and ecological networks in the region and beyond.
- To improve transboundary cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt through increased regional support to the initiative and its objectives by coordinating a regional process with particular involvement of partner organisations.
- To improve the basis of decision-making and awareness-raising on biodiversity and protected areas along the Balkan Green Belt.

The foreseen activities will contribute to improved protection of the biodiversity along the Balkan Green Belt and will foster stability among Balkan countries through cross-border cooperation.

Working steps and methods

In order to reach these objectives the following activities had been identified and were implemented by EuroNatur, in cooperation with IUCN:

1. Elaboration and implementation of communication and awareness raising activities,
2. Organisation of different events in the Balkan region in the frame of the European Green Belt Initiative,
3. Analyses and presentation of information about protected areas and spatial connectivity along the Balkan Green Belt.

The implementation of these activities is based upon a close cooperation with local partners and involvement of local people. During all activities a strong coordination will take place with the European Green Belt Initiative in order to guarantee compatibility with envisaged similar activities on the European level.

Results and Discussion

Overall the communication and awareness raising activities can be assessed as successful. In the last 3 years, the broad public and key stakeholders in the countries along the Balkan Green Belt were regularly informed about the European Green Belt Initiative through various activities and communication channels. For example since 2016, a total of 26 events for celebrating the European Green Belt Days were implemented along the Balkan Green Belt. The celebration of the European Green Belt Days is an important tool to promote the vision and mission of the European Green Belt Initiative. Each event helped to increase the visibility of the initiative. The cross-border character of most events contributed to a large extent to local and regional transboundary dialogue. This is of high importance in a period of growing nationalism.

Throughout/During the project EuroNatur had the opportunity to be very active in its role as regional coordinator along the Balkan Green Belt and thus strengthen its role. Different events and meetings were successfully used to sensitize key stakeholders and decision makers for the value of the Balkan Green Belt and the importance of its long-term conservation.

In the frame of the project, the knowledge base regarding protected areas, different habitats as well as potential connectivity along the Balkan Green Belt was increased through different analyses. The gathered information will be used for further analyses as well as for communication purposes. In addition, the results are valuable to improve the decision-making processes for nature protection as well as awareness-raising activities.

Through different activities conducted and materials produced within the frame of the project, information about the Balkan Green Belt and its importance for biodiversity conservation as well as about the European Green Belt Initiative was distributed to governmental key stakeholders as well as the general public in the region. Through the variety of activities such as the photo contest, several European Green Belt Days and conferences, different stakeholders were successfully be reached. The diverse measures provided different information contents as well as awareness raising effects, but especially the combination of both as well as the frequent presence of the topic is important to sensitize people in a long term.

Public Relations and Presentations

The results of the project were published and spread through different media in order to reach a broad public:

EuroNatur (www.euronatur.org) and the NGO partners especially used their websites and facebook pages in order to announce activities and inform about results. Also articles provided by the NGO partners were published on different websites of the respective countries. Furthermore the NGO partners had public appearances in radio and television, in order to promote and inform about the project and the Balkan Green Belt. In addition, the project activities and results were published regularly in the EuroNatur magazine. Moreover the digital newsletter of the European Green Belt Association, the website of the European Green Belt Initiative (www.europeangreenbelt.org) and the European Green Belt chat on facebook were used to inform the community of the European Green Belt Initiative about activities and results of the project. In addition, the project activities and results were regularly presented to the community in the frame of meetings and conferences.

Conclusion

The approach of the project was useful and has led to good project results. As overall conclusion the project helped to raise the profile of the Balkan Green Belt and the awareness of the importance of biodiversity conservation and ecological networks in the region and beyond. In addition, it improved the transboundary cooperation as well as the basis of decision-making and awareness-raising on biodiversity and protected areas along the Balkan Green Belt. Nevertheless it is necessary that the European Green Belt Initiative continues to be active and present along the Balkan Green Belt.

The structure of the project was very useful, because EuroNatur could be very active in its role as regional coordinator. The increased regional support to the initiative and its objectives by coordinating a regional process with particular involvement of partner organisations led to an increase of transboundary cooperation and visibility of the European Green Belt Initiative.

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List of abbreviations

BBF	Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation
BPSSS	Bird Study and Protection Society of Serbia
CDDA	Common Database on Designated Areas
CNVP	Connecting Natural Values & People Foundation
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
CZIP	Center for Protection and Research of Birds of Montenegro
DAYKO	Foundation of Protection of the Natural Life Turkey
DBU	Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (German Federal Environmental Foundation)
Dol	Declaration of Intent
EEA	European Environmental Agency
ERA	Environmentally Responsible Action Group Kosovo
ESA	The Explorers Speleological Association Romania
FYR	Former Yugoslav Republic
GIS	Geoinformationssystem
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GO	Governmental organization
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
METT	Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool
MES	Macedonian Ecological Society
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PA	Protected Area
PPNEA	Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania
R+D project	Research and Development Project
SPP	Society for the Protection of Prespa Greece
UNSCR	United Nation Security Council Resolutions

*In accordance with UNSCR 1244 and opinion of ICJ

1. Summary

The project “Protecting Biodiversity in the Balkans - Strengthening cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt” was implemented by EuroNatur and IUCN Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia from December 2014 until November 2018, and financially supported by the DBU. The project aimed at the conservation of a transboundary ecological network and its biodiversity along the Balkan Green Belt through awareness raising as well as the enhancement of cross border cooperation and exchange between relevant stakeholders from different sectors.

The report at hand shortly illustrates the activities implemented throughout the project, comprising communication and awareness raising activities, events in the frame of the European Green Belt Initiative as well as collection of information and analyses related to protected areas and spatial connection along the Balkan Green Belt. In addition, the results of the project as well as general challenges faced during its implementation are shown. In the last section, the project results are discussed and general conclusions from the project are drawn.

The project focused mainly on the implementation of a variety of communication and awareness raising activities, targeting the broad public as well as different actors along the Balkan Green Belt. Thereby, at least one NGO per country along the Balkan Green Belt was directly involved in the implementation of the project. During the project EuroNatur actively contributed to the project and enhanced its role as regional coordinator along the Balkan Green Belt.

Overall the project implementation can be assessed as successful. In the last 4 years, the broad public and actors in the countries along the Balkan Green Belt were regularly informed about the European Green Belt Initiative through various activities and communication channels. In addition, key stakeholders and decision makers were sensitized for the value of the Balkan Green Belt and the importance of its long-term conservation. Also, the knowledge base regarding protected areas and different habitats along the Balkan Green Belt was increased in the frame of the project.

2. Introduction and objectives of the project

The Balkan Peninsula is a hot spot for biodiversity in Europe. The Balkan Green Belt has developed as valuable retreat for rare plant and animal species, due to its history as border zone between East and West for four decades with limited access and reduced land-use pressure. The effective implementation of biodiversity protection and sustainable development is therefore an important contribution to preserve the unique values of the Balkan Green Belt.

Precondition for the protection of the Balkan Green Belt is close cross-border as well as cross-sectoral cooperation between all relevant stakeholders. General awareness of the value of the Balkan Green Belt and its biodiversity is an important factor for support and acceptance of activities at all levels. In addition, the increased awareness about the importance of the European Green Belt Initiative and its vision is required.

The project “Protecting Biodiversity in the Balkans - Strengthening cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt” aims at the conservation of a transboundary ecological network along the border of Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey and Romania through awareness raising and enhancement of cooperation among stakeholders from governmental (GOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs). In addition, the project aims at strengthening the cross border exchange and collaboration between CSOs working along the Balkan Green Belt.

Objectives of the project were defined as following:

- To raise the profile of the Balkan Green Belt and the awareness of the importance of biodiversity conservation and ecological networks in the region and beyond.
- To improve transboundary cooperation along the Balkan Green Belt through increased regional support to the initiative and its objectives by coordinating a regional process with particular involvement of partner organisations.
- To improve the basis of decision-making and awareness-raising on biodiversity and protected areas along the Balkan Green Belt.

In order to reach these objectives the following activities had been identified and were implemented by EuroNatur, in cooperation with IUCN:

1. Elaboration and implementation of **communication and awareness raising** activities,
2. Organisation of different events in the Balkan region in the frame of the **European Green Belt Initiative**,
3. **Analyses and presentation of information** about protected areas and spatial connectivity along the Balkan Green Belt.

The implementation was based upon a close cooperation with and involvement of local NGOs and actors. Furthermore an intense dialogue with relevant authorities, such as ministries and administrations of protected areas took place. During all activities, a strong coordination with the European Green Belt Initiative took place, in order to guarantee compatibility with envisaged similar activities on the European level.

3. Working steps and methods

In the following sub-chapters, the working steps and methods for the implemented activities within the project duration from Dec. 2014 to Oct. 2018 are shortly described. Thereby the chapters are subdivided by the topics: Communication and awareness raising, Strengthening the European Green Belt Initiative as well as analyses and presentation of information along the Balkan Green Belt as these were the main aspects focused on during project implementation.

The following 11 **NGO partners** supported the implementation of the project:

- Albania Protection and Preservation of Natural Environment in Albania (PPNEA)
- Bulgaria Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (BBF) and Green Balkans
- Greece CALLISTO and the Society for the Protection of Prespa (SPP)
- Kosovo* Environmentally Responsible Action Group (ERA Group)
- North Macedonia Macedonian Ecological Society (MES)
- Montenegro Center for Protection and Research of Birds of Montenegro (CZIP)
- Romania The Explorers Speleological Association (ESA)
- Serbia Bird Study and Protection Society of Serbia (BPSSS)
- Turkey Foundation of Protection of the Natural Life (DAYKO)

3.1 Communication and awareness raising

Different activities were carried out in order to improve the communication and awareness about the values of the Balkan Green Belt as well as the European Green Belt Initiative and its vision:

- Implementation of a **Balkan Green Belt photo contest** in 2016 and 2017
- Implementation of the **European Green Belt Days** in 2016, 2017 and 2018
- Development of a **manual for celebrating the European Green Belt Days**
- Identification of **pearls along the Balkan Green Belt**
- Development of **communication materials**
- Development of a **communication concept**

The **Balkan Green Belt photo contests** were implemented by the NGO partners in the respective countries. The contest was promoted through national TV and radio stations, the respective NGO websites and facebook pages as well as mailing lists. For the photo contest a joint poster design (see annex **A1**), conditions of participation (annex **A2**) and a general frame (annex **A3**) were developed by EuroNatur in order to promote the competition with similar rules and appearance in all countries along the Balkan Green Belt, so that the national contests were also visually linked with each other. Each country had 3 to 5 jury members for selecting the national winner pictures, involving additional persons in the contest, including professional photographers, GO representatives, tourist providers and other stakeholders. Subsequent to the

national photo contests, the board of the European Green Belt Association selected five international winners out of the national Balkan Green Belt winner pictures. The winners of the national contest in each country received a certificate (see annex A4) as well as a small price. In addition, many NGO partners presented their national as well as the international winner pictures in a photo exhibition during the European Green Belt Days. The winner of the international contest was awarded during the European Green Belt Days event organised by EuroNatur.

The idea of the “**European Green Belt Days**” event was elaborated with support of the NGO partners in the frame of this project. The first European Green Belt Days were celebrated on 24th of September 2016 in all nine countries along the Balkan Green Belt. Thereby the date originates back to the official foundation of the European Green Belt Association on 24th of September 2014. Today the European Green Belt Initiative celebrates each year the biological diversity and cultural heritage along the former Iron Curtain during the European Green Belt Days from 18th to 24th of September. In addition – until now - each year EuroNatur took over the lead of organizing one cross-border event, which was financially supported by the European Green Belt Association (see report of the European Green Belt Days 2017 and 2018 in annex B1 + B2).

For the promotion of the European Green Belt Days, EuroNatur developed a **leaflet** (see annex B3) which could be used by the NGO partners. The leaflet was prepared in English and was – if needed - supplemented and later on translated by the NGO partners.

EuroNatur processed the experiences and lessons learned regarding the implementation of the last European Green Belt Days in 2016 and 2017. Main result was the development of a **Manual for celebrating the European Green Belt Days** in order to improve the next European Green Belt Days and provide background information and tips for the organisers (see Annex B4).

During a workshop in September 2015 the participants identified **pearls along the Balkan Green Belt** (see old version the map annex C). A revision of the map is necessary, but this could not yet be done due to a two month sick leave of the responsible person, but will follow soon. These pearls are mostly cross-border areas which deserve the special attention of the partners along the Balkan Green Belt. The pearls were identified in order to present and communicate the natural values along the Balkan Green Belt to the broad public. The pearls are also sections which are attractive as travel destination for nature lovers to experience the Balkan Green Belt.

In order to develop of a **communication concept** for the European Green Belt Initiative, analyses regarding the inventory as well as an assessment of needs for communication tools within the initiative were conducted with support of experts. During the 10th Pan-European Green Belt Conference on October 2018 intermediate results were present to the European Green Belt Initiative as well as discussed and further elaborated in the frame of working session (see annex D).

3.2 Strengthening the European Green Belt Initiative

In the frame of this component, different meetings and events were implemented, in order to increase the exchange and communication between the different key stakeholders relevant for the protection of the Balkan Green Belt as well as to raise awareness about the European Green Belt Initiative and its vision:

- Balkan Green Belt Workshop, September 2015 in Greece (see annex E1)
- Balkan Green Belt Regional Conference, April 2016 in Romania (see annex E2)
- Balkan Green Belt Workshop, February 2017 in Bulgaria (see annex E3)
- Meeting with the Greek Ministry of Environment, May 2017
- Balkan Green Belt Regional Conferences, June 2018 in North Macedonia (see annex E4)

In addition, further meetings took place in the frame of the European Green Belt Initiative, which were not part of the project, but key stakeholders of the Balkan were present:

- 9th Pan-European Green Belt Conference, November 2016 in Finland
- 10th Pan-European Green Belt Conference, October 2018 in Germany

During the whole project period, EuroNatur as regional coordinator of the Balkan Green Belt was in regular contact and exchange with representatives of governmental institutions of all countries, i.e. the respective Ministries of Environment and protected area management bodies, and other key stakeholders.



Fig. 1 Participants of the Balkan Green Belt Regional Conference 2018

3.3 Analyses and presentation of information along the Balkan Green Belt

The third component of the project was supposed to be implemented by IUCN with the main aim to develop an interactive web platform and the analysis of management effectiveness of protected areas. Despite best efforts, IUCN did not succeed in raising the required own funds in the first two years of the project which were necessary in order to implement the activities. Because of great interest in the implementation of the full project EuroNatur has successfully achieved to acquire the funds needed. It was agreed with IUCN that EuroNatur will therefore be in charge of the respective component as well as take over most of the planned budget of IUCN and start the implementation in 2017 (see agreement annex **H**).

It was necessary to adapt the activities for the third component of the project, based on the latest developments and requirements of the Balkan Green Belt. The adaption was done in the beginning of 2017. The first two years of the project – with focus on awareness raising and public relation – had shown that the knowledge regarding the natural value and biodiversity of the Balkan Green Belt within the initiative is still low and only exists for certain areas. This has a direct impact on the content of the communication as well as argumentation of the initiative. Thus, EuroNatur and IUCN jointly decided to focus in the third component on increasing the knowledge about protected areas and biodiversity within the Balkan Green Belt, which can be used to strengthen the communication as well as the decision-making processes. In addition, the project team considered it very important to continue the communication activities in the frame of the project, especially the celebration of the European Green Belt Days. Therefore, some budget of the third component was allocated to grants for the national project partners in order to implement the European Green Belt Days as well as the photo contest also in 2017.

In the frame of the third component of the project, the following different analyses were conducted:

- **Spatial analysis** along the Balkan Green Belt
- Implementation of the **Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool** (METT-analyses)
- Implementation of the **diagnostic tool for transboundary conservation** (TB-analyses)

Through these analyses detailed information and data about the protected areas as well as the spatial conditions along the Balkan Green Belt were collected and assessed.

The **spatial analysis** was carried out by the University Kassel in close cooperation with EuroNatur (see annex **F1**), with the aim to get more spatial information about the network of protected areas as well as about the connectivity of the landscape along the Balkan Green Belt.

The **METT- and TB- analyses** were conducted during personal meetings of IUCN, the NGO partners as well as the protected area administrations of the respective country (see annex **F2+F3**) for the following areas:

Tab. 1: Overview of areas where the METT- & TB-analyses were conducted

METT-analyses	TB-analyses
Belasitsa Nature Park, BG	Albanian Alps, AL
Standzha N2K, BG	Buna, AL
Bjeshket e Nemuna National Park, KS	Belasitsa, BG
Lake Prespa Nature Monument, NMK	Bjeshket e Nemuna, KS
Ezerani National Park, NMK	Prespa-Ohrid region, AL
Galicica National Park, NMK	Prokletie, ME
Lake Ohrid Mature Nonument, NMK	Skadar, ME
Pogradec Protected Landscape, AL	Iron Gates, RO
Prespa National Park, AL	Labudovo Okno, RS
Prokletije National Park, ME	Djerdap, RS
Iron Gates Natural Park, RO	Igneada, TR
Labudovo Okno Special Nature Reserve, RS	
Djerdap National Park, RS	
Rhodopes Mountain Range National Park, GR	

The assessment was initiated during the Balkan Green Belt workshop in February 2017. From May to September 2017 IUCN conducted several meetings with relevant stakeholders in each country along the Balkan Green Belt in order to finalize the analyses.

In addition, the possibilities for an **interactive web platform** for presenting relevant GIS data on biodiversity and protected areas along the Balkan Green Belt as part of the website: www.europeangreenbelt.org were assessed.

4. Results and challenges

In this chapter the results as well as encountered challenges of the different activities implemented within the project are presented. The sub-chapters are as previously subdivided by the topics: Communication and awareness raising, strengthening the European Green Belt Initiative as well as analyses and presentation of information along the Balkan Green Belt.

4.1 Communication and awareness raising

Overall the communication and awareness raising activities can be assessed as successful. In the last 3 years, the broad public and key stakeholders in the countries along the Balkan Green Belt were regularly informed about the European Green Belt Initiative through various activities and communication channels. The detailed results and challenges of the specific activities are presented in the following sub-chapters.

4.1.1 Balkan Green Belt photo contest

The following table 1 illustrates the results of the Balkan Green Belt photo contests in the years 2016 and 2017 (see detailed results in annex [A5 + A6](#))

Tab. 2: Overview of the results of the Balkan Green Belt photo contest

Country	NGO	Results of the Balkan Green Belt photo contests					
		No. of pictures		No. of participants		No. of winner pictures	
		2016	2017	2016	2017	2016	2017
Albania	PPNEA	120	51	53	40	7	3
Bulgaria	Green Balkans	67	106	22	39	5	3
Greece	SPP/ CALLISTO	120	68	32	18	3	3
Kosovo*	ERA group	53	41	13	8	5	4
North Macedonia	MES	115	25	23	8	5	3
Montenegro	CZIP	114	63	31	18	5	3
Serbia	BPSSS	49	122	11	46	5	3
Turkey	DAYKO	37	40	24	8	5	3
Romania	ESA	36	-	9	-	5	-
TOTAL		711	516	218	185	45	25

In most countries the concept of conducting photo competitions for the broad public was new. Even though media coverage of the photo contest was good in most countries, the number of participants was rather small with an average of around 24 persons per country each year. Nevertheless, in total 70 pictures won the Balkan Green Belt photo contest, which can be further used for public relation by the NGO partners as well as EuroNatur. The photo contest was a good tool to draw attention to the beauty of the Balkan Green Belt and collect a variety of great pictures illustrating this. The pictures were already used for different materials, especially for the

European Green Belt Days, and help to increase the visibility of the natural beauty along the Balkan Green Belt.

Through the jury the photo contest actively involved different stakeholders and thereby they were informed about the Balkan Green Belt and saw the beauty of the region.

It was decided to not implement the photo contest in 2018, because the implementation is time consuming and a good number of great pictures were already collected. All partners assessed the communication tool “photo contest” a very useful one, but also identified the need for a development of a strategy for the implementation of the Balkan Green Belt photo contest, in order to make it more successful. The plan is to integrate the photo contest as a tool in the communication concept of the European Green Belt initiative. The project made it possible to initiate the first photo contests and to introduce this tool to the partners along the Balkan Green Belt.



Fig. 2: Fox in the Snow, Serbia -1st place of the International Balkan Green Belt photo contest 2017

4.1.2 European Green Belt Days

Since 2016, a total of 26 events for celebrating the European Green Belt Days were implemented along the Balkan Green Belt. In the following table 2 the different locations of the events are listed (see detailed overview in annex B5, B6, B7). Noticeable is that most events took place within areas identified as pearl (marked in green).

Tab. 3: Overview of the locations of the European Green Belt Days

Location	Border area	No. of events		
		2016	2017	2018
Prespa Lakes	Albania, North Macedonia, Greece	2		
Shebenik-Jablanica	Albania, North Macedonia		1	
Canyon of the river Cijevna	Albania, Montenegro			1
Bjeshket e Neumna/ Prokletije/Albanian Alps	Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro	1	2	2
Srandzha	Bulgaria, Turkey	1	2	1
Sakar Mountain	Bulgaria, Turkey	1	1	1
Belasitsa Mountain	Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Greece	1		
Osoгово	Bulgaria, North Macedonia	1		1
Rhodopes	Bulgaria, Greece			1
Skopje	North Macedonia		1	
Thessaloniki	Greece		1	
Salina Ulcinj	Montenegro	1		
Labudovo okno	Romania, Serbia	1		
Iron Gates	Romania, Serbia	1	1	
Nera river	Romania, Serbia			1
Total		10	8	8

The celebration of the European Green Belt Days is an important tool to promote the vision and mission of the European Green Belt Initiative. Each event helped to increase the visibility of the initiative. The cross-border character of most events contributed to a large extent to local and regional transboundary dialogue. This is of high importance in a period of growing nationalism.

In addition the events help to support and strengthen the involved communities in their efforts and commitment for nature protection. For example during the European Green Belt Day in 2018 the municipality Peja in Kosovo was awarded as “Model municipality at the European Green Belt” by the European Green Belt Association especially due to their outstanding efforts and success in preventing the construction of unsustainable and environmentally-damaging hydropower plants in a protected area, specifically in the National Park Bjeshket e Nemuna.



Fig. 3 Awarding of the municipality Peja as “Model municipality at the European Green Belt” (© Fatlum Hasani)

The celebration of the European Green Belt Days met great interest within the initiative and since 2017 events are taking place also along the Central European Green Belt. In addition, the European Green Belt Association included the celebration of the European Green Belt Days in their programme of work. Therefore, the event is now established within the European Green Belt Initiative. The events along the Balkan Green Belt serve as model cases for the entire European Green Belt Initiative.

4.1.3 Communication analyses

The current situation regarding the communication of the European Green Belt Initiative was analysed by an expert (see annex **D1-3**). The communication already includes several elements in order to address different target groups like key stakeholders and decision makers as well as the broad public to sensitise them for the value of the European Green Belt.

At the moment there are four typical common narratives of the European Green Belt Initiative, which reappear in the communication:

- Natural treasure
- Living memorial
- Border-crossing activism
- Europe's largest nature conservation initiative

The reporting, descriptive and documenting language predominates in the communication and becomes often very formal with little dramaturgy or positioning with own demands. In addition the EGB logo is the only unique design element. Also mostly professional photos are used.

Based on the situation analyses, the experts identified communication needs, like:

- A change of perspective – tell stories about the short-term goals so that people can connect with the initiative
- Creation of a “we” identify, with a lively personality, values and goals
- Specification of the narrative
- Development of a communication strategy and respective trainings
- Creation of a visual identify in order to make strong statements and to form emotional connections

In addition, four different statements ideas for the European Green Belt Initiative (annex **D4**) were developed:

- Connecting cultures to conserve green corridor through Europe
- Connecting cultures to conserve Europe's largest ecological network
- Preserving a green corridor through Europe where our shared heritage can thrive
- Conserving a thriving green monument to our continent's heritage

In addition the experts elaborated self-description statements (annex **D5**) for the initiative.

The results of the communication analyses as well as the development of ideas for statements and self-descriptions of the European Green Belt Initiative are a necessary base for the development of a communication strategy for the initiative. The results will be discussed with the members of the initiative and used for the further improvement of the communication as well as the development of a communication strategy.

4.2 Strengthening the European Green Belt Initiative

During the project EuroNatur had the opportunity to be very active in its role as regional coordinator along the Balkan Green Belt and thus strengthened its role. Different events and meetings were successfully used to sensitize key stakeholders and decision makers for the value of the Balkan Green Belt and the importance of its long-term conservation.

During the last years representatives of the Ministries of Environment (MoE) of Albania, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Romania, Serbia and Turkey were involved in **workshops and conferences** regarding the European Green Belt. In addition representatives of the protected area management body of many areas along the Balkan Green Belt were present. In some countries governmental representatives were also involved in different activities like the photo contest and the European Green Belt Days. Consequently, the project led to an increased awareness and knowledge about the European Green Belt initiative and its vision within the GO sector.

Especially the **Balkan Green Belt Regional Conferences** contributed to a joint understanding of the European Green Belt among the different stakeholder, because the events offered a platform for knowledge exchange and the strategic approach for the Balkan Green Belt region could be further developed. In addition these kinds of events are important to form collaborations between different actors along the Balkan Green Belt. Nevertheless the success and effect of events is always dependent on the participating persons.

The conference offered the possibility for **personal meetings** between actors along the Balkan Green Belt on annual basis. Thus, the network experienced a significant strengthening, due to regular exchange and joint work on various topics. In addition, the initiative was very present through the different events and as one result positively noticed by other institutions active in the region (e.g. GIZ, CNVP) who were not yet involved with the initiative.

Despite different attempts of EuroNatur, until now there is no official response to the signing of the **Declaration of Intent** (DoI) on behalf of Greece and Turkey. For Turkey, the difficult political situation is probably one of the main reasons why the actions did not show any major success. Nevertheless, during most of the meetings, representatives of the MoE or the administration of the protected area management body were present. The clear message of the meeting with representatives of the Greece Ministry of Environment was that they will sign the DoI and also consider a membership in the European Green Belt Association. Unfortunately nothing happened since then.

In addition, the main results and outcomes of the project activities were on regular basis presented in the board of the **European Green Belt Association** as well as through the newsletter of the association and thus shared with the other regions, in order to use them to further develop the European Green Belt initiative.

4.3 Analyses and presentation of information along the Balkan Green Belt

In the frame of the project, the knowledge base regarding protected areas, different habitats as well as potential connectivity along the Balkan Green Belt was increased through different analyses. The specific results are illustrated in the following sub-chapters. The gathered information will be used for further analyses as well as for communication purposes.

4.3.1 Interactive web platform

It was planned to develop an interactive web platform for presenting relevant GIS data on biodiversity and protected areas along the Balkan Green Belt as part of the website: www.europeangreenbelt.org. Therefore, EuroNatur identified different possibilities. In the process it was decided that the concrete elaboration will be connected with the relaunch of the website www.europeangreenbelt.org in 2018.

The results of the awareness raising activities as well as conferences of the European Green Belt Initiative clearly showed that it is essential to have a common language and appearance in all countries along the European Green Belt in order to visualize the connection and cross border character of the initiative. An interactive web platform is a good idea to illustrate the European Green Belt, but only if it includes similar information for the whole European Green Belt and not just focusses mainly on one region. In addition, the presentation of protected areas – which is available for all regions - is difficult, mainly due to the volume of data. The idea of an interactive web platform needs further development on pan-European level. Due to this situation it was decided to focus on the improvement of the communication in the frame of this project.

Nevertheless, the pearls along the Balkan Green Belt will be presented with a short description (i.e. main biotope type, species, status of protection, nearest cities) on the website www.europeangreenbelt.org. This could not yet be implemented due to sick leave of the responsible person, but will follow soon.

4.3.2 Spatial analyses

The different analyses regarding the spatial scope of the Balkan Green Belt were a milestone. For the first time spatial information for an area along the Balkan Green Belt (research area: 75 km on both sides of the national border) were analysed and illustrated, covering parts of the nine Balkan Green Belt countries as well as Hungary and Croatia as neighboring countries (see result report in annex **F1**).

The analyses showed that the research area has a large number of small protected areas, but in addition also a couple of very large protected areas. Thereby, the country borders (thus the Balkan Green Belt line) are spiked with large-sized protected areas, which often reach quite far into the country. With increasing distance towards the Balkan Green Belt line, the number of protected areas is increasing, while the percentage of coverage is decreasing.

Regarding the habitat types, the forest habitat with around 34 % covers the largest parts in the research area. The grassland habitats are the second strongest in the total area coverage, with

around 18 %. Thereby the distribution of the grassland habitats is more dispersed than the forest habitats. Wetlands cover around 2 % of the research area, with the majority of wetland habitats being spatially isolated within the Balkan research region. The results of the analyses provide a first picture of the potential connectivity of habitats for the research area, while providing a data base for further analysis on habitat connectivity along the Balkan Green Belt.

The surface of protected areas is mostly covered by forest habitat (55 %), which is probably affiliated with the high occurrence of forest in the research area. But on the other hand, only 35 % of the forest area is protected. In contrast the area coverage of wetlands is small, but they are very often under protection (over 60 % of the total amount).

Depending on the processing scale as well as available and used data, the results are only an approximation of the reality. In addition, no statements can be made about the ecological quality of the areas. For this purpose, comprehensive high-resolution land use data as well as inclusion of topographical information are required.

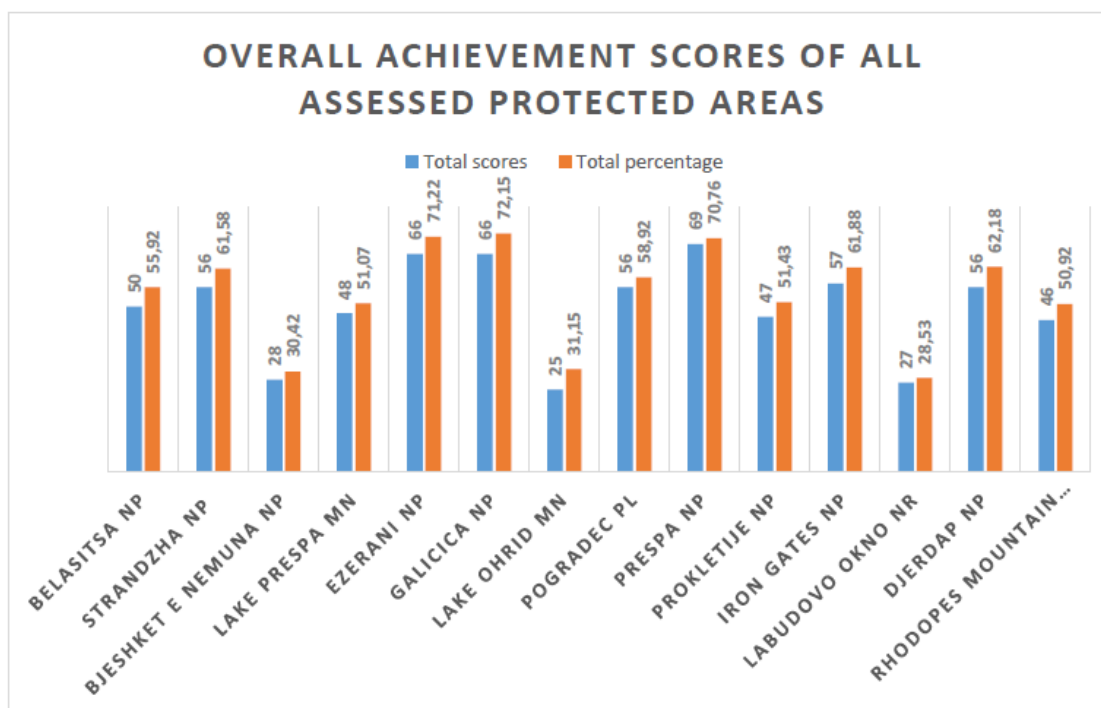
The finalization of the report had a delay, due to the volume of the analyses as well as necessary time-consuming consultations between EuroNatur and the University Kassel.

Part of the results were already used for a continued spatial analyses of the European Green Belt and its contribution to the implementation of Green Infrastructure within the framework of the R&D project "The Green Belt Europe as part of the Green Infrastructure" funded by the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN).

4.3.3 METT- and TB analyses

The Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT) analyses were conducted by IUCN Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia for 14 protected areas (see annex F2). The analyses provides insight into the management effectiveness of existing protected areas, including governance arrangements, technical aspects, institutional setup, legal gaps, human resources and equipment. The overall scores of the METT-analyses of the assessed protected areas are presented in the following table 4. As overall conclusion it can be said that there is still a lot of room for improvement of the management of protected areas along the Balkan Green Belt.

Tab. 4 Overview of the archived scores of the protected areas through the METT-analyses



The “Diagnostic tool for transboundary conservation planners” (TB) analyses was conducted by IUCN for eleven transboundary areas in order to identify the most important issues for initiating new transboundary conservation processes along the Balkan Green Belt (see annex F3).

The report provides results of the transboundary conservation assessments of targeted protected areas presenting several aspects such as: (1) Reasons and needs for transboundary conservation; (2) Opportunities that could speed up or be generated by the transboundary process; (3) Stakeholders; (4) Capacity for initiating TBC; (5) Risks.

Due to several personnel changes within IUCN and the discontinuity of the tasks some of the knowledge got lost in the process of the analyses.

5. Discussion

Overall the objectives of the project were successfully achieved.

Through the activities conducted and materials produced within the frame of the project, information about the Balkan Green Belt and its importance for biodiversity conservation as well as about the European Green Belt Initiative was distributed to governmental key stakeholders and the general public in the region. Through the variety of activities such as the photo contest, several European Green Belt Days and conferences, different stakeholders were successfully reached. The diverse measures provided different information contents as well as awareness raising effects, but especially the combination of both as well as the frequent presence of the topic is important to sensitize people in a long term.

The project fostered the exchange and cross-border cooperation between the involved NGO partners, mainly due to joint activities and the opportunity to meet at least once a year. EuroNatur coordinated the activities in the frame of the project and actively involved the partner organizations and thus ensured regular exchange and cooperation.

The collaboration with the NGO partners of the project worked mostly very well. Most of the involved NGO were very motivated, active and committed to the European Green Belt, which is mandatory in order to strengthen the initiative. Differences in the intensity of cooperation and involvement occurred due to personnel capacity of the respective organisations. With the project funding most partners were able to secure sufficient capacity. During 2016 we were able to win CALLISTO (based in Greece) as further NGO partner of the project. Unfortunately the Explorers Speleological Association (ESA) had to reduce their engagement after 2016 due to lack of staff.

Unfortunately IUCN was not able to raise the required own contribution for the project. Therefore their participation in the project was limited and most of the activities were conducted without involvement of IUCN. Nevertheless, IUCN was always well informed about the project activities by EuroNatur and still had the opportunity to get involved. In addition, towards the end of the project there have been a couple of personnel changes at IUCN which influenced the implementation of their project activities directly and led to a less extensive processing of the results.

Through the project, a variety of information about the biodiversity and protected areas along the Balkan Green Belt was collected. Due to the fact that the finalization of the different analyses was delayed, the results are not yet made available in the extent as planned. Nevertheless, some of the data was already used for continuing analyses for the European Green Belt. In addition, the results are valuable to improve the decision-making processes for nature protection as well as awareness-raising activities.

6. Public Relations

The results of the project were published and spread through different media in order to reach a broad public.

EuroNatur (www.euronatur.org, <https://www.facebook.com/euronatur>) and the NGO partners especially used their websites and facebook pages in order to announce activities and inform about results (see also: <https://www.euronatur.org/unsere-themen/projektgebiete/projektgebiete-a-z/gruenes-band-balkan/>). Also articles provided by the NGO partners were published on different websites of the respective countries. Furthermore the NGO partners had public appearances in radio and television, in order to promote and inform about the project and the Balkan Green Belt.

In addition, the project activities and results were published regularly in the EuroNatur magazine (see annex G), which is sent to sponsors, donors and friends of EuroNatur (around 3,500 copies per magazine). Also the magazines can be downloaded on the website of EuroNatur (<https://www.euronatur.org/ueber-uronatur/publikationen/uronatur-magazin/>).

Moreover the digital newsletter of the European Green Belt Association, the website of the European Green Belt Initiative (www.europeangreenbelt.org) and the European Green Belt chat on facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/377893754872/>) were used to inform the community of the European Green Belt Initiative about activities and results of the project. In addition, the project activities and results were regularly presented to the community in the frame of meetings and conferences.



Fig. 4: Group picture during the European Green Belt Days 2018 in Peja, Kosovo
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7. Conclusions

The general design of the project was useful and has led to good project results. The overall conclusion: the project contributed significantly to raise the profile of the Balkan Green Belt and the awareness of the importance of biodiversity conservation and ecological networks in the region and beyond. In addition, it improved the transboundary cooperation between stakeholders on different levels and from various public and private sectors as well as the basis of decision-making and awareness-raising on biodiversity and protected areas along the Balkan Green Belt. Nevertheless it is necessary that the European Green Belt Initiative continues to be active and present along the Balkan Green Belt.

The approach to have a well organised set of activities for **awareness raising and information distribution** was useful. The photo contest and the celebration of the European Green Belt Days proved to be a good tool to increase the visibility of the Balkan Green Belt to the general public as well as decision makers and other stakeholders. In addition it supports the involved communities in its activities and commitments to nature protection. In addition the activities were often interlinked with each other, which strengthened and increased the overall effect of the activities.

Only if society in general as well as key stakeholders and decision-makers from all sectors understand that the European Green Belt, its biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides, are the basis for their livelihoods they will support its conservation and further development. The finalized project initiated the necessary societal dialogue and prepared the ground to intensify and continue it.

Nevertheless additional tools are needed in order to spread knowledge of the European Green Belt Initiative further and to different target groups. Therefore, it is essential to create a joint language and appearance in all countries along the European Green Belt in order to visualize the connection and cross-border character of the initiative. Within the frame of the project the participatory development of a comprehensive communication strategy has been kicked off. However, the process to get the buy-in of all members of the European Green Belt Initiative along the Balkan Green Belt and beyond will take more time and efforts.

It is important to enlarge the work on the communication concept for the whole European Green Belt Initiative. In addition, it is necessary to carry on with the implementation of awareness raising activities like the European Green Belt Days in order to increase awareness about the ecological, social and cultural value of the Balkan Green Belt. The European Green Belt Initiative will continue the elaboration of the communication concept as well as the implementation of awareness raising activities.

The collected **information** about the biodiversity and protected areas along the Balkan Green Belt – in the frame of spatial analyses as well as management effectiveness analyses of protected areas - was important in order to have a better picture of the region as biological network. This information is necessary to improve the decision-making processes for nature protection along the Balkan Green Belt as well as to enhance the general communication. In addition, the results are a base for further analyses.

The results of the different **meetings and conferences** confirmed how important a regular exchange, discussion as well as the joint work on specific topics is. Exchange and joint work is important to develop a common identity and to strengthen the network. In addition, meetings of key stakeholders including public and private sector along the Balkan Green Belt are important to strengthen the transboundary cooperation and support the protection of the biodiversity.

Active participation and contribution of stakeholders in activities or events in the frame of the European Green Belt secures the support of the initiative. Also the further improvement of transboundary cooperation between different countries and sectors is important, to increase the information distribution and support for the European Green Belt Initiative.

The structure of the project strengthened the role of EuroNatur as **regional coordinator**. The increased regional support to the initiative and its objectives by coordinating a regional process with particular involvement of partner organisations led to an increase of transboundary cooperation and visibility of the European Green Belt Initiative in the Balkans and of the Balkans within the initiative. EuroNatur used the opportunities of the project to initiate, navigate and support joint cross-border activities during the whole project period and thereby increase transboundary exchange and cooperation.

The grants made available to NGO partners through this project, empowered the participating NGO partners along the Balkan Green Belt and they had the opportunity to actively contribute, participate and implement different activities in the frame of the European Green Belt Initiative. This kind of project design led to a significant strengthening of the civil society in the Balkans. All these NGOs declared they will continue their work on the topic of the Balkan Green Belt and this commitment guarantees that the initiative is present also while implementing other projects or activities. The perpetuation of the topic in the daily work of organisations along the Balkan Green Belt is a basic condition in order to make the initiative successful in the long term.

Finally, EuroNatur was again confirmed as regional coordinator at the latest Balkan Green Belt Regional Conference in 2018 and therefore will continue the task to coordinate regional activities and support the exchange and cooperation between different partners along the Balkan Green Belt for at least another two years. In addition, EuroNatur works with most of the NGO partners together in the frame of other projects along the Balkan Green Belt and will stress the communication of this topic. Furthermore EuroNatur and NGO partner in the Balkans are involved in the development of a LIFE-application for the Pan-European level.

8. Annex

Annex A1	Poster of the Balkan Green Belt photo contest
Annex A2	Conditions of the Balkan Green Belt photo contest
Annex A3	Frame of the Balkan Green Belt photo contest
Annex A4	Certificate of the Balkan Green Belt photo contest
Annex A5	Results 2016 of the Balkan Green Belt photo contest
Annex A6	Results 2017 of the Balkan Green Belt photo contest
Annex B1	Reports 2017 of the European Green Belt Days
Annex B2	Reports 2018 of the European Green Belt Days
Annex B3	Leaflet of the European Green Belt Days
Annex B4	Manual for celebrating the European Green Belt Days
Annex B5	Overview of the European Green Belt Days 2016
Annex B6	Overview of the European Green Belt Days 2017
Annex B7	Overview of the European Green Belt Days 2018
Annex C	Old version of the map of the pearls along the Balkan Green Belt
Annex D	Communication analyses of the European Green Belt Initiative
Annex E1	Balkan Green Belt workshop 2015
Annex E2	Balkan Green Belt Regional Conference 2016
Annex E3	Balkan Green Belt workshop 2017
Annex E4	Balkan Green Belt Regional Conference 2018
Annex F1	Result report of the spatial analysis of the network of protected areas and the connectivity of the landscape along the Balkan Green Belt
Annex F2	Result report of the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool
Annex F3	Result report of the Diagnostic Tool for Transboundary Cooperation
Annex G	EuroNatur Magazine illustrating the project activities
Annex H	Agreement between IUCN and EuroNatur