

ESTONIAN GREEN BELT – PEARL IN THE EUROPEAN GREEN BELT

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For decades, many coastal strips along the former socialist countries were completely or partly closed to public access. Not only did these strips demark national borders, but even constituted a barrier separating two systems. This former separating line formed the basis for the European Green Belt.

Similar to the terrestrial border strips, these areas preserved vast, almost pristine stretches of coastland. Some of them were successfully designated as nature reserves or national parks after the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, many pearls of nature up to now grace the water line both above and below the water surface largely undiscovered, unrecognised and unprotected.

Many of these treasures of nature are presented in Estonia which agreed in 2006 to include their coastal areas in the North European section of the European Green Belt project. Although a lot of important preparatory work was done within the European Green Belt project, the real work began in 2009 when the subproject Baltic Green Belt, targeted directly to the Baltic States, was started.

Historically, before World War II, Estonia's coastline was neither heavily populated nor a recreational area for the wealthy elite. The main economic activity along Estonia's lengthy coastline occurred at trading ports (Tallinn, Narva and Pärnu) and the local fishing industry. The Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1944 put an abrupt end to the free access to the sea. Estonia's entire coastline, mainland and islands became de-populated exclusion security zones. Over the next 47 years, Estonia's coastal areas experienced three forms of activity: fishing kolkhoz, mineral extraction and the presence of the Soviet Red Army and Air Force. In 1992 the legacy of these activities was represented a paradoxical combination of natural areas with a well-preserved and intact biodiversity as well as vast areas of land contaminated by toxic waste, industrial and military, and derelict buildings. Estonia's coastal areas have a rich biodiversity in a variety of landscapes, areas of natural beauty, semi-natural habitats and wetlands, which, lying on the East Atlantic Flyway, are hugely important to some 3 million migratory birds on an annual basis (Vollmer *et al.*, 2010).

Despite state-sponsored environmental protection policies and the establishment of numerous nature and landscape reserves during the 1990s, societal and economic developments are beginning to put the coastal areas under severe pressure. In order to avoid inauspicious developments, the coastline must be protected now for the future. It is important not to turn coastal areas into restricted zones again - management has to go hand in hand with nature protection and human activities. To designate the areas according to their value, an inventory must be carried out to find the most interesting objects and sights in Estonian coast. The Baltic Green Belt project gives a great opportunity to find out more about the coast, to develop methods for protecting it and to establish a network of stakeholders.

References

Baltic Green Belt homepage: <http://www.balticgreenbelt.uni-kiel.de/>

Estonian Green Belt homepage: <http://www.estoniangreenbelt.eu/>

European Green Belt: <http://www.greenbelteurope.eu/>

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