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Windfall for East and West: “boundless” Love of Nature

2017 German Environmental Prize: Tribute to Environmental Prize Recipient “Green Belt”

Osnabrück. “The ‘Green Belt’ is the first and largest pan-German nature conservation project. Only through the loving commitment of many friends of nature could the approximately 1,400-kilometer-long former inner German border be preserved for the plant and animal world, which has now found a haven within the one-time ‘death strip’. With the Green Belt in Germany, the vision of a European Initiative for a Green Belt in Europe, as the longest habitat network on the continent, was brought to life as a symbol of the surmounting of the Cold War!” – With these words today, Prof. Dr. Werner Wahmhoff, Assistant General Secretary of the German Federal Environmental Foundation (Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt, DBU), celebrated the award of the DBU’S 2017 German Environmental Prize to three persons who were instrumental in the realization of the Green Belt: Inge Sielmann (87), Dr. Kai Frobels (58), and Prof. Dr. Hubert Weiger (70). German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will present the award on October 29th in Braunschweig. Financial prize: € 245,000.

The initiator: Dr. Kai Frobels

“Dr. Kai Frobels is considered to be the initiator and ‘namegiver’ of the ‘Green Belt’”, says Wahmhoff. Long before German reunification, he laid the foundation for the Green Belt through his groundwork and his contacts to colleagues in the former GDR. His mapping and his degree dissertation demonstrated in both German states, as early as the 1970s and 1980s, the great natural potential and the major significance of the border strip using a 140-kilometer segment. With the first interregional press briefing “Death Strip as Haven” (“Todesstreifen als Zufluchtsort”) and a major conference with 400 participants from both East and West Germany, he set the metaphorical cornerstone for the Resolution for the Protection of the Green Belt. In 1998 the Nuremberg-based geocologist founded the nationally and internationally active “Project Office Green Belt” of the Friends of the Earth Germany (Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland, BUND) and remains its coordinator – and the result has been that it has also become a model project for cooperation between conservation groups and the governmental sphere. For his work on the Green Belt Frobels received, together

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with others, the Silver Medal of the Bavarian Constitution (2009), the important Binding Prize for the Conservation of Nature and the Environment (2010), the Gerhard Thielke Conservation Prize (2011), and the Bavarian Europe Medal (2015). In addition to his leading position at the Green Belt Project, the Nuremberg resident fills a teaching position at the Chair for Biogeography of the University of Bayreuth, and is Speaker for the Federal Working Group on Conservation (Bundesarbeitskreis Naturschutz) of the BUND association, as well as a member of the BUND Scientific Council.

The visionary: Prof. Dr. Hubert Weiger

According to the DBU, Prof. Dr. Hubert Weiger, Chairperson of the BUND, has advanced the pan-German "people-binding" character of the project, which is oriented to interdisciplinary dialogue, in cooperation with Frobel. "Furthermore, he thought across the borders of Germany to envision a European Green Belt," according to Wahmhoff, "which he announced in 2002 on the occasion of the opening of the project 'East-West Gate' (Westöstliches Tor)." This project involves an artistic competition for the dissemination of information on conservation of the environment and nature. It was supported technically and financially from 2000 to 2002 by the DBU. This served as an impulse for the initiative Green Belt Europe, which at 12,500 kilometers is today the continent's longest habitat network. Since the initiative for the first pan-German nature conservation conference in December 1989 following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Weiger has consistently earned special merit as a member of numerous boards and committees of associations at the environmental-political level, in working for the preservation of the Green Belt. The Fürth resident is a guarantor for the commitment of the organization BUND to the Green Belt – in both Germany and Europe. He has constantly held a "protective, demanding and supportive" hand over it – even when it was difficult to do so. At the same time, this biotope network serves as a memorial to the surmounting of the Cold War, and as a model for the creation of a European green infrastructure.

The benefactor: Inge Sielmann

"Inge Sielmann's dedication is inseparable from the initiatives of her husband – DBU Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award recipient Heinz Sielmann (2005). Since his death, we have her to thank for the fact that what he began has been resolutely continued, and that related new projects, above all in the area of environmental education, have been undertaken," Wahmhoff emphasized. She deserves special recognition for her work, as Chairperson of the foundation council of the Heinz Sielmann Foundation, on the biotope network along the former border between the two Germanies – for example, by securing additional natural sites. The initiative "Biotope Network Harz-Eichsfeld-Werratal" has been a model for the maintenance and development of the habitats in the Green Belt. In addition, the Munich resident has done great work in the field of environmental education. With the film "Tiere im Schatten der Grenze" (Animals in the Shadow of the Bor-

der) in 1988 the couple drew attention to the distinct and substantial conservation-related value of the border area between the Federal Republic and the former GDR. With the decision by the Sielmann Foundation to locate at Gut Herbigshagen near Duderstadt – only one kilometer from what was, at that time, the inter-German border – Inge Sielmann demonstrated her commitment to the Green Belt and underlined, with unmistakable emphasis, her dedication to the educational task associated with the Green Belt. The various initiatives from kindergartens through elementary schools, all the way to the program “Tomorrow’s Researchers” (Forscher für Morgen) provided ample evidence of her worthiness to be recognized for the protection of biological diversity via the Green Belt. Among other achievements she assumed “godmotherhood” of the Inge Sielmann Kindergarten in Fuhrbach near Duderstadt and the Inge Sielmann Elementary School in Milow. In this sense she has rounded off the initiatives of Frobel and Weiger, with many activities in the field of environmental education, to form a holistic approach.

The “Iron Curtain” – symbol of an anti-human system

“The Iron Curtain was a symbol of the anti-human system of socialist dictatorships in the East and impacted Germany with particular force, because an entire population was divided,” says Wahmhoff. This connection should not be ignored or glossed over when we address the subject of conservation in the former border area between East and West. Border fortifications, minefields, orders to shoot, and spring-guns took the lives of many persons attempting to flee. Seen from an economic perspective as well, the GDR’S policy of partition was a border between prosperity and economic downturn. Wahmhoff: “But it is also a fact that many animals found protected areas of withdrawal and migratory corridors within the ‘Death Strip.’” For this reason, the “Green Belt” has remained close to nature and is characterized by great diversity in terms of structure, natural habitats and species. “There are 150 protected natural areas along the Green Belt. In comparison to other protected areas, this in itself is a unique mark of distinction,” according to the Assistant DBU head.

The “Green Belt” – nature recognizes no borders

However it is not only in this sense that we can measure the significance of the biotope network, but also in terms of its historical-political symbolic power, which has been transformed through and since reunification. Wahmhoff: “Out of this border which once divided a people, isolating and even killing them – opened by a peaceful popular uprising of citizens – has come a green binding line dedicated to nature and natural experiences: a living monument!” Securing an approximately 1,400-kilometer-long, 50- to 200-meter-wide swath of terrain for nature can only come about through active and energetic support from government and associations, from specialists and volunteers. “In the sense of a holistic approach involving conservation, development and education, the three Environmental Prize recip-

ients embody the natural-ethical and people-binding initiative 'Green Belt,'" says Wahmhoff.

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