

Dear TKTKTK,

I would like to write an eBook for *TKTKTKTk* on two men who overcame a wall to rewild a continent.

The East German border guards were convinced the boy in the green parka and Wellington boots was a spy. Why else would he lurk in the bushes focusing his binoculars on the no man's land? In truth, Kai Frobel was simply fascinated by the diversity of life he found in the overgrowth separating his native West Germany from the East. In 1975, he documented an abundance of nightjars, whinchats, and other birds that were rarely seen elsewhere. His work remains a seminal study on the border zone's ecologic wealth and the first call to protect what is now the German Greenbelt.

Several kilometers away on the opposite side of the border, an East German teen shared Frobel's fascination. Gunter Berwing noticed that crows from his village flew across the border into West Germany each morning. He was curious to know how the birds spent their days and enquired through family living in the West if anyone could tell him. The two boys became pen pals and, miraculously, met for birding expeditions when Frobel was allowed to cross the border.

Days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Frobel and Berwing began organizing environmentalists from East and West Germany to conserve the undeveloped space that once separated their countries. Today more than 85 percent of the German Greenbelt is protected. Lynx and wolves travel along this ecological corridor as they reestablish territories they hadn't occupied in centuries.

Now, as the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain approaches, Frobel and Berwing seek to radically expand the Greenbelt into a pan-European nature reserve some 5,000 miles long. Their goal is to create a contiguous ribbon of green stretching from the boreal forests of the Arctic to the shores of the Black Sea in what is one of the most ambitious conservation projects ever attempted.

Success, however, remains uncertain. For forty years the guns of opposing superpowers protected this "death zone". A unique ecosystem flourished because anyone caught inside it was shot dead. Now that the military imperative for the no man's land has passed, it remains unclear if Frobel and Berwing can protect it.

In Albania, for example, the fall of the Iron Curtain had a devastating effect on the country's wildlife. Prior to 1989, the no-man's land encircling the poor, isolated country harbored one of the largest populations of lynx and brown bears in all of Europe. Over the past quarter century, however, corrupt officials and armed thugs clear cut the region and decimated its wildlife. Today, few wild cats remain. The best place to now see a brown bear is in the restaurants of Tirana, the nation's capital. A fellowship I am currently applying for from the Society of Environmental Journalists would allow me to join Albanian biologists as they search for the last remaining lynx and fight to end the widespread practice of keeping caged bear cubs on display.

Far to the north along the Norwegian-Russian border, brown bears thrive. Their success, however, is due to a military zone that remains as inaccessible today as it was during the Cold War. Tomorrow I will travel north of the Arctic Circle to the northern terminus of the European Greenbelt. There I will meet with a geneticist who can see Russia from his house, but, unlike the bears he studies, is unable to enter.

In Central Europe, the Greenbelt is neither as lawless as it is in Albania nor as secure as it is in the far north. This past winter I trudged through knee deep snow in Harz National Park, a forested landscape that once separated the two Germanies. A biologist led me to a pile of skin and bones; all that remained of a deer killed by a young female lynx. It was a sight that, until recently, hadn't been seen in the region for 200 years and a sign that the endangered cats are returning. To ensure their long-term survival, however, lynx will have to move hundreds of kilometers along the Greenbelt to breed with other members of their species.

Halfway between the two lynx populations, Frobels and Berwing continue their work to protect a small section of the Greenbelt that they first discovered as teenagers. Their work is painstaking: negotiating with a farmer to purchase an individual field, for example, or working with transit agencies to build a land bridge over a new highway. Little by little, however, they are filling in the last remaining gaps of the German Greenbelt while spearheading an international effort to help colleagues in other countries do the same.

As a teenager, Frobels used to sneak inside the no man's land where he'd imagine himself in the heart of a vast wilderness. Decades later, his vision for the death zone may yet become reality.

Please let me know of your interest and if you would be willing to write a

letter to the Society of Environmental Journalists on my behalf.

Sincerely,

Phil McKenna

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