

## Case Study 5 The National Natural Heritage: Contributing to private engagement in nature conservation in Germany



Guelp Lake is managed by NABU-Stiftung Nationales Naturerbe, the German partner of BirdLife International @ Thomas Stephan / Bundesamt für Naturschutz

**Gisela Stolpe**, BfN Vilm, **Karin Reiter**, BfN Bonn and **Tilmann Disselhoff**, NABU

*In 2005, Germany began a national project to transfer large tracts of federally owned land to the federal states (Länder), conservation NGOs and foundations in order to protect these properties for nature conservation in perpetuity. This large-scale land transfer called the National Natural Heritage (NNH) has considerably advanced the role of environmental NGOs and foundations as managers of conservation land in Germany. This case study illustrates a range of best practices primarily from Section 2 of the guidelines relating to mechanisms to ensure and monitor the quality, effectiveness and coherence of conservation approaches.*

### History of the National Natural Heritage

With the ending of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany in the 1990s, many military and lignite mining sites and areas along the inner-German border between the east and west ('Green Belt') no longer had a use. The lack of agricultural or other intensive land uses resulted in much of this area having a high conservation value with many rare and/or threatened species. Moreover, land use such as military exercises had caused habitat disturbance (e.g. fire, tank tracks, etc.) that enabled threatened pioneer species to colonise the sites. In consequence, the federal

government of Germany decided to create a project for transferring free of charge federally-owned land of high nature conservation value to the federal states, conservation NGOs and foundations (Best Practice 1.2.1). This so-called National Nature Heritage<sup>141</sup> (NNH) approach was unique since by law federally owned land has to be privatised if no further need or .use exists

Between 2005 and 2013 the government transferred free of charge about 156,000 ha of federal land (120,000 ha of which was former military land) to nature conservation (BMUB, 2017). The programme was renewed in the coalition agreement of 2018 and will eventually comprise about 186,000 ha of conservation land in total. Using a strategic set of selection criteria together with the other measures outlined below has helped increase the integrity of existing protected areas, conserve sites of high conservation value and contribute to the establishment of wildlife corridors throughout Germany.

The largest owner of NNH sites is the German Federal Environmental Foundation (Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt, DBU). DBU was founded by the German government in 1990 with the proceeds of the privatisation of a state-owned steel company. The DBU now owns about 70,000 ha of NNH land. Conservation NGOs and foundations own 25,000 ha, while 28,000 ha have been transferred to the federal states

and 33,000 ha have remained in federal ownership under supervision of the Federal Ministry of the Environment. All these areas are now managed according to strict nature conservation requirements. NNH owners sign contracts binding them to adhere to the project's objectives, to implement adequate management measures and to establish regular reporting procedures (see below).

## Objectives, management and monitoring

The main objective on NNH sites is for any commercial use of woodland to be discontinued, with the speed of the phase-out depending on the state of the forests. While active forest management is ended immediately from the date of transfer on all (near) natural forests, in other forest habitats, short-term to mid-term 'conversion' management is allowed to help re-establish natural vegetation communities. This supports the goals set for wilderness areas in the German Biodiversity Strategy (to reach a surface area of 2 per cent for large wilderness areas and 5 per cent for forest areas with no forestry use respectively by the year 2020). Some forest types that have developed particular conservation values due to former traditional management practices, such as former wood pastures, some oak and oak-hornbeam forests or coppiced forests, need continuous active management. Also, some safety measures are continued in order to protect visitors.

While natural processes and dynamics are the long-term conservation vision for all forests, wetlands and freshwater habitats require continuous active stewardship and appropriate land uses (e.g. extensive grazing) is required on all valuable 'man-made' habitats (e.g. grasslands, heathlands, etc.) for preserving their conservation value. As some NNH sites have been impacted and/or partially degraded or polluted by previous land uses, restoration or preservation measures are often needed to accelerate their transformation into more valuable habitats or to conserve them.

NNH owners have to develop a vision for every site (Best Practice 2.2.1), undertake annual reporting and develop management plans for large NNH sites in consultation with the Ministry of the Environment and the Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (Best Practice 2.5.4 and Principle 3.5). Monitoring is included in the management plans in order to evaluate the success of all management measures and allow for adjustments of site management when needed (Best Practice 2.2.2 and Principle 2.4). A 'modular' monitoring methodology is currently in development that allows NNH owners to choose between basic and more detailed monitoring protocols for different man-made and natural habitats and species groups. At many NNH sites (in particular those owned by conservation NGOs), volunteers are involved in this site monitoring (Best Practice 2.5.3).

## Summary

- A window of opportunity has been used to transfer federally-owned land free of charge to the federal states (Länder), conservation NGOs and foundations resulting in areas being effectively conserved across Germany of which some can be considered as PPAs (Best Practice 1.2.1).
- Transferred land is conserved in perpetuity, in contracts as well as easements (for conservation NGOs and foundations) (Best Practice 4.1.1).
- Detailed and binding directions are given by the government to the new owners with regard to nature conservation management (Best Practices 2.1.1).
- The government maintains a strong role in the governance of the sites since there are annual reporting duties by the owners of the NNH sites (Best Practices 2.4.1).



About 6,000 ha of the National Natural Heritage belong to the Green Belt along the former German-German border © Klaus Leidorf