



## 9<sup>th</sup> Pan-European Green Belt Conference

31<sup>st</sup> October – 03<sup>rd</sup> November 2016 in Koli, Finland

### Green Infrastructure

The vision of a functioning and coherent ecological network across Europe has been mandated in 2013 by the Green Infrastructure Communication from the EU Commission<sup>1</sup>.

The European Commission defines Green Infrastructure (GI) as a “strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas with other environmental features designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services”. It incorporates green spaces (or blue if aquatic ecosystems are concerned) and other physical features in terrestrial (including coastal) and marine areas. The backbone of this network is formed by the Natura 2000 areas spread throughout Europe. At the same time GI will help improving the connectivity between sites in the Natura 2000 network as required by the Habitats Directive.

The underlying principle of GI is that each area of land can frequently offer multiple benefits – if its ecosystems are in a healthy state. Only a healthy ecosystem can provide ecosystem services such as clean water and air, carbon storage, reduction of climate change effects, pollination, recreation and many more. GI can provide natural solutions in a cheap, durable and multifunctional way. Thus GI is able to facilitate not only conservation but also socio-economic benefits e.g. job opportunities, and social wellbeing, ranging from the local scale to EU level.

A good example is given by flood prevention which nature can give for free as an ecosystem service if dunes at the sea or floodplains along a river are kept in a healthy state. The same effects can be achieved by dykes but as opposed to dunes they do not harbour any wildlife or provide social benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> COM(2013) 249 final of 6.5.2013: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Green Infrastructure (GI) — Enhancing Europe’s Natural Capital; [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d41348f2-01d5-4abe-b817-4c73e6f1b2df.0014.03/DOC\\_1&format=PDF](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:d41348f2-01d5-4abe-b817-4c73e6f1b2df.0014.03/DOC_1&format=PDF) (October 2016)

## **The potential of Green Infrastructure for European Biodiversity**

Currently, the presence of grey infrastructure in Europe is immense, e.g. in the form of housing and roads. In addition, traditional land use activities, such as farming, forestry and logging, have become more intensive. These types of land use have severely impacted our wildlife and the ecosystem services that benefit us. GI provides a solution to our growing list of biodiversity issues brought about by the way we use our land.

Consequently, the concept of GI and the need of enlarging GI has been widely accepted and the European Commission actively promotes the adoption of GI across Europe. GI is recognised as a mean to meet the requirements set out by different policy goals of the EU. Policies that aim at improving regional and rural development, lowering climate change effects, improving disaster risk management, decreasing the negative effects of intensive agriculture and forestry, and finally at meeting the target of the EU Biodiversity Strategy are many examples in which GI can play a key role.

However, apart from noticing the importance of GI, financial instruments that will support GI projects, such as reconnecting fragmented landscapes, greening practices (e.g. agriculture) and restoring damaged ecosystems, are required. The European Commission as well as other EU bodies have observed a pressing need to develop a financial instrument for GI projects. The financial instrument that is currently in development is called TEN-G (Trans European Network for GI). Moreover, the additional integration of GI into projects funded through other financial mechanisms such as LIFE, Horizon 2020, or the European Regional Development Fund seems to be a promising approach. Apart from financial instruments provided by the EU, the private sector might also be a potential partner for implementing

## **European Green Belt and Green Infrastructure**

The European Green Belt (EGB) is an example of an EU-level GI project which is highlighted by the European Commission. The EGB Initiative aims at creating an ecological network connecting high-value natural and cultural landscapes along its course from North to South whilst respecting the economic, social and cultural needs of local communities. Due to the variety, quality and structure of its natural and traditionally cultivated landscapes the European Green Belt supports the implementation of GI. Along the EGB there are still many opportunities to restore habitats and to improve the state of ecosystems in order to integrate them into the European GI. This would lead to increased provision of the aforementioned benefits of GI. TEN-G provides an ideal opportunity for financing projects along the EGB which will fit in the large scope of aims which the EGB and GI share.