Interreg
Danube Transnational Programme
SaveGREEN

Preparatory Actions for Implementing the Local Cross-sectoral Operational Plan – Kobernausser Forest Pilot Area, Austria

Part of Output T2.3

Environment Agency Austria & WWF Central and Eastern Europe
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December 2022

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1. Introduction

The location of the Kobernausser Forest pilot area was chosen based on ongoing preparation work of the Austrian Motorway Company ASFINAG for the construction of a green bridge along the area of A8 Innviertel motorway. In this region, the ecological corridor leading from the Kobernausser forest up to the Czech Republic is subject to improvements. This important international ecological corridor is at risk due to the A8 motorway that is not permeable enough and a lot of uncoordinated economic development in the region additionally hampers connectivity.

We started a comprehensive programme according to the Cross-sectoral Operational Plan (CSOP, Output T2.2), engaged with stakeholders and set up a monitoring system that allowed us to draw up suggestions for measures that would minimise the impact of the motorway on wildlife migration. A detailed description of the pilot area can be found in the CSOP Kobernausser forest uploaded to the project website (www.interreg-danube.eu/savegreen/outputs).

The most important task was to define the ecological corridors in the area surrounding the green bridges, as well as the threats, and raise awareness among the local public where there is no collaboration between the different sectors as well as between the different levels of government with regard to spatial planning. Recommendations were elaborated and presented to local stakeholders.

2. Stakeholder analysis and results, description of contact effort and methods

The Austrian project partners Environment Agency Austria and WWF Central and Eastern Europe set up a small working group together with our Associated Strategic Partner, the Ministry of Climate Change (BMK), the Austrian Motorway Company (ASFINAG), and a consultancy company that was monitoring the area sub-contracted by ASFINAG. In the beginning, we primarily met online to coordinate our efforts and reached

out to local players later in the course of the project, when Covid restrictions became looser.

We therefore met the former mayor of the community Aistersheim outdoors to discuss the location of the green bridge and the community's attitude and concerns regarding such a construction. Elections delayed further cooperation. Fortunately, the successor shared the same opinion as the former mayor and subsequent activities like meetings with the ASFINAG to discuss technical aspects of the green bridge including the erection of noise panels and the organisation of the info day were well supported.

In parallel, we contacted the local hunting association to inform them about the project and to ask for collaboration related to the monitoring activities. It turned out that the Environment Agency Austria had to officially ask the 26 landowners of concern for permission to set up camera traps and to enter their land for the monitoring of wildlife traces. In this way, we had the chance to get some insights of the perception of wildlife and crossing structures, and also some knowledge about wildlife behaviour around the underpasses of the motorway. Some of them refused collaboration, while some individuals were met directly in the field and offered support.

When organising the info day, we extended our contacts in the region and engaged with the LEADER Group Mostlandl-Hausruck who supported our event and also promised to rank project submissions according to the intended efforts to protect wildlife corridors, and to the local primary school where we delivered a workshop on ecological connectivity for the kids. In addition, we invited all municipalities that have a share along the motorway to join the info day for a discussion of the subject.

Furthermore, in collaboration with the LE Insects project, the Environment Agency Austria created and updated an online platform displaying the results of data harmonisation on ecological connectivity in Austria (https://lebensraumvernetzung.at). The platform was introduced to the local stakeholders during the info day.

3. Communication activities

3.1 List of meetings held with main outputs thereof

19 October 2020: Introduction of the project to WWF Austria, exchange of experience with regard to communication, media and public events

22 March 2021: Introduction of the project and planning of common activities hampered by Covid restrictions. BMK, ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, EAA online

12 April 2021: Instead of the planned field trip, adaptive planning meeting. BMK, ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, EAA online

11 May 2021: Field trip. Meeting with the former mayor of Aistersheim to introduce the project and related activities in the area. BMK, ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, mayor at the highway service station Aistersheim and surroundings

31 August 2021: Discussion with a consultancy company on the exchange of data on monitoring. ASFINAG, EAA, WWF-CEE, Kofler Environmental Planning Office, online

9 September 2021: Planning meeting together with BMK (both departments: transport infrastructure and biodiversity), ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, EAA at WWF-CEE, Vienna

24 September 2021: Hunters meeting in Michaelnbach, on-site. EAA, WWF-CEE

3 November 2021: Preparation call for the meeting in Aistersheim the next day. ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, EAA, online

4 November 2021: Discussion about noise protection in the frame of the green bridge construction, organisation of info day. ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, Municipality of Aistersheim, on-site

3 February 2022: Meeting at the Municipality of Aistersheim, introduction of monitoring activities, preparation of info day. ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, EAA, Municipality of Aistersheim, field biologist.

21 April 2022: Meeting at the Municipality of Aistersheim, director of primary school Aistersheim, and company Mader for the production of the spinning tops.

4 May 2022: Preparation of the info day related to the content together with the ASFINAG team. ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, EAA, online

9 May 2022: Preparation of the info day together with the ASFINAG communication team. BMK, ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, EAA, online

16 May 2022: Meeting with LEADER Local Action Group, restaurant at the motorway service station for setting up the posters after the InfoDay, visiting 8 municipalities to invite them to the info day and hand over posters for the advertisement. WWF-CEE, on-site

24 May 2022: Planning meeting for the info day together with the ASFINAG communication team. ASFINAG, WWF-CEE, online

31 January 2023: Event sharing monitoring results and recommendations. EAA, WWF-CEE, municipality of Aistersheim and local stakeholders, on-site

3.2 Article in municipal newspaper

In order to increase the reach of our invitation to the SaveGREEN Info Day and communicate the aims of the project to as many people as possible in the pilot area, the Austrian SaveGREEN team published articles in the local municipal newspaper of Aistersheim, in which the future green bridge is most likely to be erected, as well as in the regional newspapers “tips” and “Bezirksrundschau”.

The articles laid out the importance of ecological connectivity and its relevance for healthy biodiversity, the value of the SaveGREEN pilot areas, which, due to their geographical location, are of particular significance for connectivity at the national as well as transnational scale, and described the measures that are currently being implemented, or need to be implemented, in order to safeguard and improve ecological connectivity.

3.3 Info Day

The Austrian SaveGREEN Project Partners WWF Central and Eastern Europe (WWF-CEE) and the Environment Agency Austria (EAA) joined forces with the Austrian Motorway Company ASFINAG and the Austrian Ministry of Climate Action, both Associated Strategic Partners of SaveGREEN, to organise an Info Day on the project's aims and activities on 10th of June 2022.. Around 50 people attended the event.

The Austrian SaveGREEN project partners presented the value of ecological connectivity during a SaveGREEN Info Day in the Kobernausser Forest Pilot Area. In the course of the morning, 24 schoolchildren were introduced to the challenges facing migrating wildlife in Austria and learned how to identify various species of mammals based on their tracks. The afternoon saw a public information event on the main square of Aistersheim, a panel discussion on ecological connectivity in Upper Austria and possible measures to improve the current status quo. Panellists were representatives of the Environmental Ombudsman of Upper Austria, Federal Ministry for Climate Action, ASFINAG and the Environmental Agency Austria.

Due to its location right in the centre of the Kobernausser corridor, the organisers selected the municipality of Aistersheim as a suitable location for the Austrian Info Day. The Kobernausser corridor is the last remaining connection for wildlife seeking to migrate between the Kobernausser forest, and behind it the Alps, and Bavaria and the Czech Republic to the north. However, the highway A8 cuts right through this corridor, representing an insurmountable barrier for many animal species seeking to migrate through it. Another reason why Aistersheim was chosen for the Info Day is the fact that the municipality lies along a stretch of the A8, between Haag am Hausruck and Meggenhofen, in which a green bridge is to be built in the near future to improve the permeability of the Kobernausser corridor.

Figure 1 Info Day in Aistersheim © Christophe Janz, WWF-CEE

3.4 Local giveaways - contact with local producers

To promote the aims of the SaveGREEN project among the wider general public, the Austrian project partners created 3 branded giveaways, all with a connection to the pilot areas in which the project was being carried out.

These included small packages of seeds of locally occurring wild flowers, sourced from an organic seed producer, wooden spinning tops handmade in the Kobernausser Forest pilot area, and apple juice, produced with fruit from an organic orchard, likewise situated in the Kobernausser Forest pilot area.

While the spinning tops were created to captivate the youngest members of our target audience, the other two were more broadly applicable, and were displayed at all public outreach events organised by the Austrian SaveGREEN team in the course of the project. The juice and seed packages were selected due to their suitability as promotional materials for ecological connectivity as both, traditionally managed meadow orchards

and flower strips of biologically diverse local flower species, contribute to improved connectivity in the pilot area.

Both the bottles of fruit juice and the seed packages received a specialised design depicting wild animals crossing a green bridge across a motorway, and were not only used for the Info Day but also for the Transnational Experience Exchange Workshop in Austria and the Czech Republic, at the IENE Conference and the Final Conference.

4. Overview of monitoring actions

The monitoring methods to assess corridor permeability focused on evidence of red deer, roe deer and wild boar.

The monitoring of animal activity was conducted by the following stationary monitoring devices:

- Camera traps
- Light sensors
- Sound sensors

Field mapping was done by mapping direct species observations, track observations and other activity signs. Additionally, the data of roadkill was collected.

In addition, the quantity and quality of over- and underpasses was monitored as well as the number, location and expansion of landscape elements (linear/punctiform), as well as existing barriers in the field.

In total, 21 monitoring sites were equipped with camera traps, data collection took place from 16.12.2021 - 13.06.2022 in a first phase and was continued until the end of 2022. The day and night activated cameras were triggered by wildlife and other movements in the closer surroundings. This resulted in 14.294 specific sightings for this first phase of monitoring.

4.1 Conclusions on status quo and next steps based on the monitoring

In the pilot region, the A8 highway can currently only be crossed via several, rather narrow underpasses; individual smaller bridges for road traffic are of little significance. The underpasses studied are located at suitable sites in the bottleneck area and they clearly have structural and functional connectivity to support animal migration. However, with not a single recorded crossing the existing underpasses do not support the migration of the target species red deer and wild boar. The implementation of an appropriately designed green bridge in the immediate vicinity can therefore be clearly underlined, in accordance with the results of previous studies. However, the section remains easily passable for a wide range of wildlife - with particular suitability of the underpasses close to Renhartsberg/Gotthaming as well as Schachenreith/Rampersdorf .

To allow migration of target species, the existing very narrow underpasses, which were designed for human use and are frequented accordingly, are not sufficient. The construction of a green bridge integrated into the landscape is therefore urgently required. The embedding in existing and ideally enhanced landscape structures must go hand in hand with the erection in order to make the structure also accessible and usable for wildlife. In addition, the designated corridors should be included in the wildlife corridor map of Upper Austria.

The high level of human activity shown by the monitoring measures also demonstrates the need for corridors and crossing aids to be appropriately equipped to prevent disturbance.

The entire monitoring set up and results are available in the SaveGREEN document “Deliverable T2.3.2 Monitoring report”, available in the library on the project website (www.interreg-danube.eu/savegreen) and in the GIS database(metadata.savegreen.at/geonetwork/srv/eng/catalog.search#/metadata/c5330f07-5933-4fb4-a5c1-932c97715f57).

QR code to the GIS database:

5. Lessons learnt

Within the project, we focused on awareness raising on the importance of ecological connectivity for local communities, representatives of different sectors concerned and decision makers, and sought for the implementation of measures outlined in the Cross-sectoral Operational Plan (Output T2.2). We provided scientific maps of ecological corridors to be taken into account for future strategic planning. This was done through activities addressing hunters and landowners.

It was difficult to get in touch with hunters and landowners and to properly bring across our concerns regarding habitat connectivity. When landowners were asked to give their consent to wildlife monitoring on their land, this was sometimes seen as a control measure and as an intrusion into private property and therefore was accordingly often refused or only allowed after a period of persuasion.

Related future endeavours should ensure sufficient preparation time for monitoring and measures derived from it. As a basic action local contacts need to be built up in the region, allies supportive of the cause need to be identified and personal levels of discussion must be established in order to reduce the feeling of being patronised and restrictions then being issued.

As we learnt, it is not common knowledge that ecological connectivity goes beyond the construction of over- and under passes and landowners are reluctant to agree on certain measures that would be necessary to keep or improve the functionality of ecological connectivity. From this bottom-up perspective, we noticed that landowners do not want to be restricted in their activities on their property; from top-down we experienced that competences for implementing respective legislation

with regard to spatial planning is spread across different hierarchical levels (federal administration has only few competences, while federal states and municipalities are endowed with most of them) and thus very complicated.

Two very positive experiences were made. One was about our collaboration with LEADER Local Action Group Mostlandl-Hausruck who was willing to rank projects submitted to their funding line with an eye on the improvement of ecological corridors, e.g. related to planting orchards, trees or bush lines. The other one was that the mayor realised that in his function of permitting changes in land designations he should take into account the ecological corridors.

Nevertheless, without specific legislation in place aimed at protecting ecological corridors, priority must be given to voluntary implementation within the existing legal framework. Therefore, it is necessary to meet with relevant stakeholders from all sectors, such as spatial planning, rural development, agriculture, forestry and hunting, and discuss how to safeguard or improve ecological connectivity.