

Biotope networks - networks of life: a corridor network for the wildcat with a European perspective

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Since 2004, the German environmental group Friends of the Earth Germany/BUND is working together with government authorities, landowners and hunters to develop 20,000 kilometres of migration corridors for the endangered European wild cat (*Felix sylvestris*). Because of increased traffic intensity, development of settlements and agricultural intensification, the wild cat has disappeared from a large part of its original habitat. Remaining populations in central and southwest Germany are genetically distinct. Under the BUND initiative, connectivity between existing and potential habitats will be restored through the planting of trees and shrubs along migration routes and the construction of 'green bridges'. A first corridor has been realised between the Thuringian Forest and the Hainich National Park (in the Thuringia region) after years of careful preparation and studies. Many more corridors are currently under construction in Germany, for example in Rhineland Palatinate which hosts almost half the German wild cat population. In cooperation with scientific partners new monitoring methods based on hair samples and genetic analysis were developed and improved. Although the wild cat is the target species of the initiative, many other species such as badgers, beetles and tree frogs will benefit, thereby improving the health of entire forest ecosystems. In 2010, the BUND started an accompanying publicity campaign to raise public awareness and garner support for what has become one of the largest conservation projects in central Europe. The campaign is funded by the EU (Life+). In addition, proposed corridors in Thuringia will be financed by EU ELER Fund. BUND is now searching for partners for the next stage of the Wildcat network – the international linkage. Countries with similar conditions like France, Czech Republic, Austria, and others may join the interconnection which one day may reach from Spain to the Balkans – the natural range of the European wildcat.

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