



Environmental Protection Beyond Borders: The 1987 Inter-German Environmental Pact

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"Air and water [...] as we know, do not stop at borders. Therefore, especially regarding preventive environmental protection and above all in maintaining air quality, cooperation with the GDR [is] urgently needed." These were the words of West German Minister for the Environment, Klaus Töpfer, commenting on the country's [environmental pact](#) enshrined on 10 June 1987 with East Germany. Thus, when Erich Honecker traveled for the first and last time to the Federal Republic as East German state and party leader on 7 September 1987 – 30 years ago – for a "working visit," he brought along three agreements ready to be signed, along with the ministers under whose authority the deals were negotiated: One of those pacts regulated joint environmental protection.

Specialists from East and West had negotiated for two years on a topic that was not new. Indeed, it had been on the inter-German agenda for some time. Industrial pollution had become a global public issue by 1970 at the latest, when acid rain caused by trans-border air pollution was found to have seriously affected Scandinavian lakes and rivers. Industrialized states responded to these problems by establishing new administrative structures, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), founded by the United States in 1970. The two German states



likewise participated in the international trend. West Germany established an environmental action program and added an environmental protection division to the Ministry of the Interior. The GDR created an entirely new Ministry for the Environment and Water Management in 1972.

Although infrastructure had been put in place and the issue of the environment even singled out in the inter-German [Basic Treaty](#) as a topic for supplementary negotiations, no notable progress was made between the FRG and the GDR on the issue in the 1970s. Why did the two German states encounter the limits of what they could achieve here?

First of all, the [Four-Power Agreement](#) of 1971 had not managed to resolve a core dispute. Differing standpoints continued to exist regarding the "ties" between West Berlin and the Federal Republic. While East Germany demanded their dissolution, Bonn continued to expand existing bonds. With the founding of the Federal Office for the Environment in West Berlin in 1974, West Germany provided its neighbor with a convenient excuse to break off further discussions on the environment. This institution was intended to bolster existing "ties" with the Federal Republic, something East German functionaries were trying to prevent, and as such talks with West German representatives on environmental issues were suspended indefinitely. Moreover, harassment of the new Federal Office's employees along the transit routes through East Germany prompted the Bonn cabinet to break off "all ongoing official negotiations with the GDR" ([Der Spiegel 32/1974](#)) in retaliation. Furthermore, environmental protection cost money: Through the mid-



1970s, East Germany was unwilling to make greater investments, at least not at the levels its leaders believed the West Germans would demand. Accordingly, interest in such negotiations was low in East Berlin. In the wake of the energy crisis of 1973, however, environmental protection became less of a priority for Bonn as well.

Nonetheless, public pressure on the West German government to do something against pollution coming from the East did not diminish. Indeed, public awareness of the problem kept growing. Environmental issue number one for West Germans was the salinization of the Werra River by East German potash works, which dumped saline waste water directly into the Werra, leaving the river with a salt content higher than that of the North Sea ([Der Spiegel 22/1982](#), [Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte Januar 2014](#)). Not only did the inter-German border repeatedly cross the Werra; the river also flows directly into the Weser, and with that deep into West German territory. The results were the destruction of the river's ecosystem and the endangerment of drinking water sources. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, awareness also grew about cross-border air pollution and forest dieback, in addition to pollution of the Elbe River and waste disposal from West to East Germany.

Further complicating matters, from 1982 onwards, East Germany classified its environmental data as "confidential" and stopped publishing it. Simultaneously, however, the two sides succeeded in narrowing the gap between them through "small steps:" They reached an agreement on the Berlin lakes and waterways (1982) and the Röden



River, which flows from Thuringia into northern Bavaria ([Der Siegel 33/1983](#)). In both cases, modern water treatment facilities were built in East Germany.

The real kickoff for a [joint environmental agreement](#) came when Helmut Kohl and Erich Honecker met in Moscow in 1985. After two years and 14 rounds of talks at the expert level, a text had been finalized that all sides could accept. The pact would last for five years; the disputed inclusion of the Federal Office for the Environment was resolved through compromise, as were the "ties" to West Berlin that the East Germans so disliked. The two sides hammered out joint working plans and agreed to exchange information on environmental protection, addressing mutual problems including air pollutants, rational use and protection of waterways, waste removal, and the treatment of forest dieback.

This pact began yielding results in June 1989. Klaus Töpfer signed an additional treaty with Hans Reichelt, East German Minister for the Environment and Water Management, on [six additional environmental projects](#). They were to be carried out in the GDR with additional West German funding, chiefly to reduce mercury levels in the Elbe. While slow progress was being made even before reunification, salinization of the Werra remains a [problem](#) to this day – only now, it's a domestic German one.

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Recommended Citation:

Sophie Lange, Environmental Protection Beyond Borders: The 1987 Inter-German Environmental Pact , 09/26/2017,
<http://www.berlinerkolleg.com/en/blog/environmental-protection-beyond-borders-1987-inter-german-environmental-pact> (please add the date of the last call to this page in brackets).