

National Natural Heritage Sites as “Peace Memorials”

DBU: Fostering consciousness of our
responsibility in
addressing their natural,
cultural-historical and political significance
– focus on Peenemünde

Peenemünde. “There were times when no one would have thought that sites with a military history such as Peenemünde would someday become ‘peace memorials’. It is up to us to preserve their significance, both in terms of nature conservation and of cultural history. We want to protect this natural heritage with all of its ecological diversity and beauty, and continue its development, but we also want to remember the historical legacy and come to terms with it.” With these words, the General Secretary of the German Federal Environmental Foundation (Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt, DBU), Dr. Heinrich Bottermann, who is also Managing Director of the DBU Natural Inheritance, greeted more than 70 representatives of various specialist disciplines. On the occasion of an event involving the National Natural Inheritance he emphasized that Peenemünde, like no other DBU natural heritage site, is closely associated with national and international history. Bottermann: “As owners, we have a responsibility to ensure the significance of these sites from a holistic perspective for future generations.”

Bombardment with the “V2”, made in Peenemünde

In the 25-square-kilometer Peenemünde armaments complex the National Socialists operated, beginning in 1936, a military testing site (Heeresversuchsanstalt, HVA), in order to develop, manufacture and test weapons of wholesale destruction such as the “V2” long distance rocket. Seminar speaker and antisemitism expert Dr. Günther Jikeli Jr. of Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana USA: “These flying bombs, known as ‘weapons of retaliation’ in National Socialist propaganda, were designed from the beginning to be aimed at major cities. The V2 rocket alone claimed the lives of

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some 8,000 civilians, particularly in London and Antwerp." Substantially involved in the development of the rocket was the missile engineer Wernher von Braun, who later became famous through the American moon landing of 1969. Beginning in 1937 he worked as Technical Director at the HVA.

Development and testing took the lives of even more human victims

Even more catastrophic than the many human victims of bombardment, and the weapons' integration in the criminal system of the Nazis, were the manner and methods, says Jikeli, in which these weapons were manufactured and tested. In Peenemünde alone there were as many as 18,000 laborers, including many forced laborers, from Poland in particular. In addition to the camps for slave labor there were also two concentration camps. Jikeli: "The testing site in Peenemünde was directly connected to the serial production facility for the V2, the concentration camp Mittelbau-Dora in Thuringia. A total of about 60,000 prisoners worked there, mostly in the production of the V2, but also on the V1 and other weapons. According to conservative estimates, about 20,000 prisoners died there." They included many of the concentration camp prisoners who, in October 1943, were deported from Peenemünde to Dora.

Great historical significance, which requires a new kind of recognition

During the Second World War the Peenemünde site was subjected to massive bombing by the allies, in order to prevent development of the rockets. Following the end of the Second World War, the (German Democratic Republic) National People's Army took over the site until the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990. "The destruction of the extensive research and testing facilities after the war represents a distinct historical phase of its own", according to Prof. Leo Schmidt of the Chair for Monumental Preservation of Brandenburg Technical University in Cottbus. He continues: "It transformed Peenemünde into a secretive ruin, which was gradually reclaimed by nature." Today, out of this combination archaeological site, ruin landscape and natural preservation space, a high monumental value has evolved, which requires new and creative strategies for management, and which demands intercession.

"Peace Memorial" through reunification and a stable EU

Today the Historical-Technical Museum at Peenemünde, in which the event took place, reminds us of this history, according to Museum Director Michael Gericke. The fact that the area is no longer used for military purposes, but can be permanently secured for the protection of nature and for coming generations as a habitat for diverse biological species, can be attributed, says Bottermann, in large measure to the peace process of recent decades. Without the peaceful reunification, but also without the construction of a stable Europe via the European Union, the peace which has now lasted more than 70 years could not have been achieved.

“Through this stability brought about by peace, military exercise grounds too, for example, were no longer needed and could be given back to nature”, said the DBU’s General Secretary. Thus, he indicated, the natural heritage sites are also “Peace Monuments”. The event was conceived as the beginning of a process of recognition and appreciation of the sites’ cultural history.

Interdisciplinary approach to all National Natural Inheritance sites

In the event program, Dr. Nils M. Franke of the Leipzig Scientific Agency (Wissenschaftliches Büro Leipzig) extended the challenge which the DBU is addressing to the entire natural inheritance: “The spaces of the National Natural Inheritance often have a very complex history. In order to do that history justice, an interdisciplinary approach is required. My experience tells me that, in particular, the perspectives of nature conservation, historic preservation, historiography and political education must be included. Only by means of the scientific linkage of relevant fields of knowledge can we achieve, in the present day, a reasonable approach to our relationship with the National Natural Inheritance.” Around 156,000 hectares of valuable natural spaces owned by the federal government were not privatized, but were put under the care and supervision of – besides the DBU subsidiary – federal states or nature conservation organizations named by them in the coalition contracts of 2005, 2009 and 2013, in order to secure them permanently for the protection of nature.

Collective commitment and partnership are crucial

Through its non-profit subsidiary, the DBU Natural Inheritance, the DBU administers on a trust basis some 69,000 hectares of natural space, divided among 70 large-scale estates and properties in Germany. All of the spaces belong to the National Natural Inheritance and were previously in the possession of the federal government. The goal of transferring these spaces is to secure them for the protection of nature and for coming generations as biological diversity habitats. By and large, they are areas which were once used for military purposes. For the DBU, this previous use brings a special responsibility, but a special challenge as well. “Many of the spaces have, from a modern perspective, a very negatively-charged history”, emphasized Prof. Dr. Werner Wahmhoff, Assistant General Secretary of the DBU and Technical Director and authorized representative of the DBU Natural Inheritance, on the excursion to Test Stand VII. Coming to terms with the spaces cannot, therefore, take place without reflection. “The special case of Peenemünde makes it clear that, for a permanent securing of the natural heritage sites, both a conservation perspective and a cultural history perspective are essential. Only through a collective commitment and a partnership among the various disciplines is preservation of the natural heritage sites as ‘peace monuments’ possible.”

Conservation significance for coming generations

In spite of the impact on nature through its military use, there remain on the DBU Natural Heritage site at Peenemünde major stretches of valuable forest, which survive in patches on old barrier beaches and dune slacks: old oak and beech woods, pine forests on dunes, moist alder- and downy birch swamps. In a few cases, nature developed *because of* the military use: when, for example, combat tanks packed the earth down to such an extent that small pools were formed, in which the spawn of the rare yellow-bellied toad could develop. In this manner, small bodies of water and wetlands pools developed in bomb craters and gullies. Brackish water reed beds, small sand islands, seagrass and salt grass beds serve many aquatic birds as important places to rest, and to hunt mice and other food.

Lead **1.072** Zeichen mit Leerzeichen
Resttext **7.089** Zeichen mit Leerzeichen

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