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# In Germany, a child's dream of restoring the Havel River to its natural state is realized by generations of collaborative conservation

*Eva Vayhinger—Project Manager NABU e.V. and Lily Robinson—ILCN News and Creative Content Editor  
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*This story narrates the exemplary research and writing of Eva Vayhinger, who created Lincoln Institute's case study, *Restoration of the Lower Havel River in Northeast Germany*. The piece is part of a profile series on land trusts as climate change solution providers and was excerpted in *From the Ground Up*. Vayhinger holds a master's in Integrated Natural Resource Management from Humboldt University in Berlin and is a project manager for NABU e.V. To read her full work, visit the International Land Conservation Network's ["Land Trusts & Climate Change"](#) page, where you can access stories of innovation in land conservation from*

As a boy, Rocco Buchta spent long days on the Havel River in northeast Germany, fishing with his father and grandfather. As he grew up, the waterway and surrounding land become increasingly industrialized until, one day, in the 1970s, the little boy looked on as his grandfather gazed at the coopted river, despondent. The once verdant and wild landscape that had captured his heart had taken all it could and finally given in to the pressure to conform. Its straightened banks and abandoned habitats were unrecognizable to the older man. With youthful ambition, the boy made a promise. "Grandpa, when I grow up, I'll fix it!"

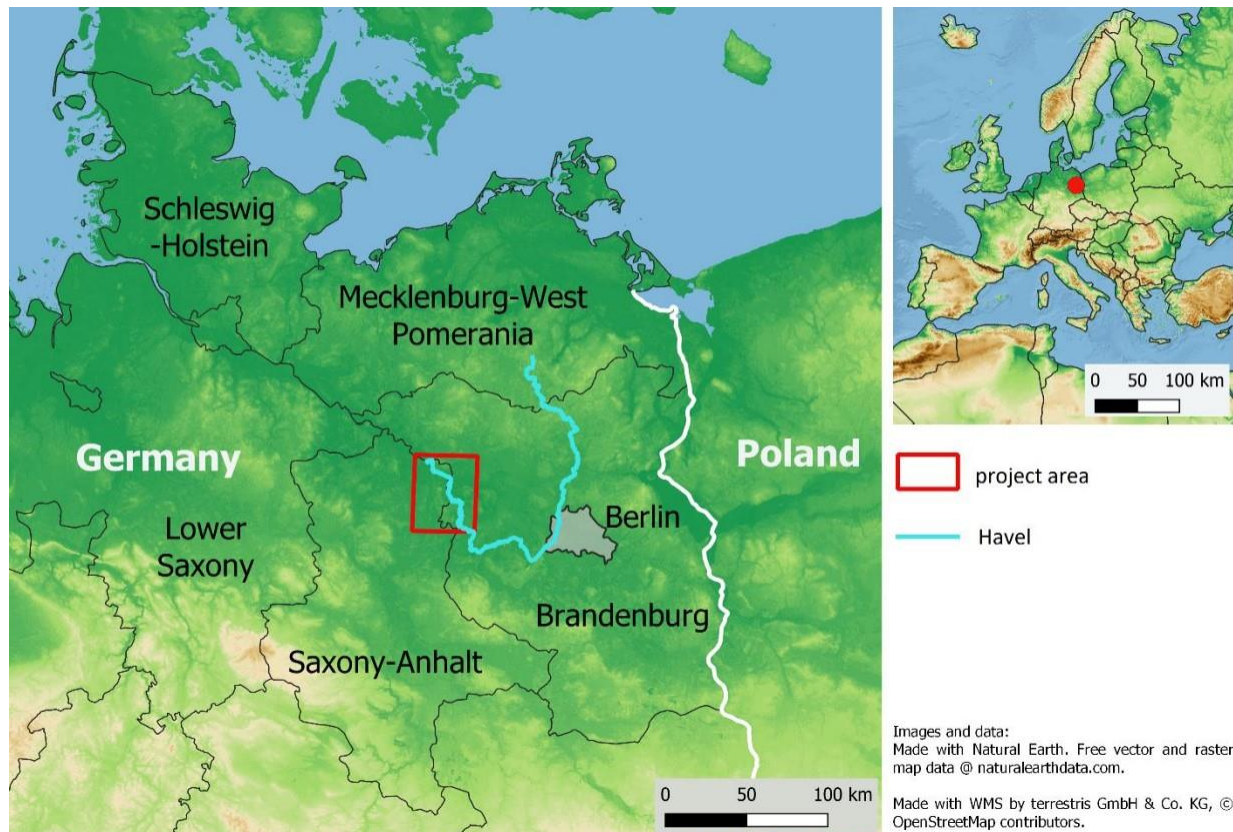


*Rocco Buchta led the Havel River restoration project in Germany, working through a large civic sector organization. Photo: NABU.*

The Havel River, which stretches 334 kilometers through northeast Germany was once a dynamic inland delta, flowing into the Elbe River and composed of vast flood plains, river bends, meanders and islands, sandbanks, and more. It was rich with biodiversity and beloved by surrounding communities. But, beginning in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Havel fell victim to increasing industrialization in the region. The

waterway was frequently modified to better accommodate commercial river traffic. Weirs, water gates, and summer barrages were installed to regulate water levels; parts of the river were straightened; its cross-section was expanded; and stone bank reinforcements were installed.

It wasn't just sentimental value that had been lost as the river's abstract edges were packed into an industrial mold; the engineering measures had major ecological impacts as well. The changes caused severe disturbances to natural river dynamics and spurred biodiversity loss. Even so, nature was never fully tamed, and—even in its compromised state—the area maintained many unique habitats and housed over 1,100 threatened and endangered species.



*Geographic location of the Havel River project area. Courtesy of Elena Wenz*

Even before Buchta made his promise, there were people working on behalf of the Havel. The first legal protections for the area were established in the 1960s and a Ramsar site for watershed protection was established in 1978. In 1989, after German reunification, Buchta joined the intergenerational fight to restore the river and helped catalyze the first large-scale effort to restore the river.

At this point, Buchta had earned an advanced degree in engineering and was working for Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU), one of the nation's largest civic sector conservation organizations. With Buchta at the helm, NABU embarked on a decades-long mission to restore a near-natural watershed. If successful, the project would promote natural flood prevention, improve water quality, ramp up carbon storage potential, and increase the area's recreational value.

There were several complicating factors to consider as NABU developed its restoration strategy. The river received heavy commercial traffic and restoration was restricted by laws associated with its status as a waterway. To make real progress, conservationists would need to lobby to re-categorize the river. They would also need to prove to policymakers that restoration would not further exacerbate flooding. These barriers were heightened by limited financial resources and changing eligibility criteria for public funding.

Moreover, the project areas spanned two federal states with different planning authorities. Within each state, were myriad interest groups, all clamoring to have their concerns prioritized.

A policy window opened in the 1990s, when the importance of the lower Havel waterway as a shipping corridor declined slightly due to other infrastructure developments in the region. The conservation group leapt on the opportunity and began lobbying for a large-scale restoration project. The Association for the Lower Havel River was founded and the regional group developed the first comprehensive plan to restore riparian strips along the Lower Havel River. The association demanded the waterway be shut down for freight transport and eventually created enough pressure to spur the German Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure to redesignate the river to a less restrictive legal category.



*Havel River in Brandenburg, Germany. Source: Getty Images/hsvr*

What ensued was a two-phased project, beginning in 2005 and continuing today. Phase one was the creation of a maintenance and development plan. By 2009, the association had identified measures to increase the ecological value of the site, given the restrictions posed by the waterway's use as a piece of

infrastructure. The resulting plan consisted of six main goals and six subgoals, prioritized based on the results of a feasibility study.

Phase two was the planning and implementation stage. Financial and legal restrictions kept the association from implementing all the restoration measures it aspired to in phase one, but the plan has resulted in significant ecological improvements, regardless. The project area covers 18,700 hectares (ha) and work that was ongoing through 2021 included removing 30 kilometers of stone bank reinforcement, dismantling two dykes to create about 500 ha of flooding area, removing 17 smaller dams adjacent to the river to facilitate natural flooding, reconnecting 49 flooding channels and 15 oxbow lakes that had been separated from the main river, and planting 90 ha of floodplain forest, as well as developing sustainable maintenance and conservation plans.

The Havel River restoration is a living project, slated to be completed in 2033. Its budget is now roughly 80 million Euros, financed mainly by the German Environmental Ministry the federal states of Saxony-Anhalt and Brandenburg, and NABU, and supplemented by a quilt of smaller donors, including stakeholder municipalities and private companies.

Even with a decade to go, the project has already had a notable impact on the health of the region. Project managers have observed the return of certain flora and fauna and aesthetic changes to the river environment. Most management and development plan measures have been implemented and a detailed three-year ecological assessment was slated to begin this year.

Long term, the plan is expected to improve navigability and natural river dynamics, enhance habitat for native species, and restore the riverbed to a near-natural state. While there are, undoubtedly, many challenges ahead for the team, the Havel River restoration project creates hope that, one day, a little boy's promise will be made good.