

75 years of Naturefriends International – 75 years of commitment to a future worth living

Resolution of the 11th Annual Conference of Naturefriends International (NFI)

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For 130 years, Naturefriends have been committed to sustainable development and a good future. During this time, society and the economy have undergone profound changes – and with them the tasks and objectives of the Naturefriends movement.

As it did at the time of its founding, the organisation continues to focus on promoting sustainable tourism and outdoor activities that are accessible to all, involve the local population, respect human rights and protect the natural resources. Naturefriends raise awareness of fair travel and socially and ecologically compatible leisure activities in nature. Their commitment to mountain huts, Naturefriends Houses, hiking trails and a wide range of activities help to enable everyone to experience nature.

The other major focus is on climate justice: meeting international climate targets must go hand in hand with sufficient support for the Global South, which is particularly affected by the climate crisis, in order to enable the population to live in dignity. Since 2017, the Naturefriends Climate Fund has been making a concrete contribution to this by financing partnership-based climate projects in African countries that offer new prospects for the population, contribute to concrete improvements in living conditions and mitigate the effects of the climate crisis.

In their fight for a good future for people and our planet, Naturefriends cooperate closely with other organisations. Naturefriends International is part of the Green 10, the network of the 10 most powerful environmental organisations in Europe, lobbying for sustainable development in the EU and beyond.

1895–1950: Foundation, ban, new beginning

The Naturefriends movement was founded as autonomous organisation of the workers movement in Vienna in 1895 – as an international organisation from the outset. Local groups in France, Germany, Switzerland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire were members of the *Central Committee* in Vienna.

Naturefriends have played a pioneering role in advocating for rights for working class people such as the right to leisure and holidays, recognizing equal opportunities to enjoy nature as a foundation for a dignified life. From their earliest days, they promoted the idea that access to rest, recreation, and nature is not a privilege but a right for all. The movement was closely linked to the workers' movement, contributing to campaigns that led to the introduction of paid holidays in several European countries in the 1920ies. Affordable Naturefriends Houses and organized excursions gave working-class families their first opportunities to enjoy holidays in nature.

During fascism, the Naturefriends were banned, and many members lost their lives in the resistance. Only the branches in Switzerland and the USA survived this dark period, and the Swiss Naturefriends offered the Central Committee a safe refuge.

After the Second World War, independent national associations were re-established in many European countries. In 1950, the *Central Committee* that remained in Switzerland was transformed into *Naturefriends International (NFI)*.

1950–1990: Reconstruction and environmental protection

In the first decades, the focus was on rebuilding a strong international movement. Soon, membership was higher than ever before, and the establishment of international focus groups (mountaineering, hiking, winter sports, photography, Esperanto, camping) promoted exchange across borders.

From the 1970s onwards, environmental protection became a central concern, triggered by the *Club of Rome's* report "*The Limits to Growth*". This was followed by important milestones such as:

- the first international conference of nature conservation consultants in Stuttgart in 1972,
- the international conference on environmental protection at Lake Constance in 1973,
- the adoption of the guiding principles for environmental protection with 23 demands in Innsbruck in 1975,
- the "Save the Alps" programme in 1981, and
- the Alpine Protection Concept of 1990.

Another important step was the founding of the *International Naturefriends Youth (IYNF)* in 1975, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year and is providing important impetus for the future of the Naturefriends movement through the international networking of young Naturefriends and a wide range of activities.

From 1989: opening up, new impetus, sustainable development

With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the international Naturefriends movement experienced an important turning point. Naturefriends associations were founded or re-established in many Eastern European countries. The international secretariat was moved to Vienna.

At the same time, the environmental theme was expanded to include the aspect of sustainable development, particularly in relation to tourism. With the model project "Sanfter Sommer Saar" (Gentle Summer Saar), adopted by the 1987 Congress in Brighton, the Naturefriends were the first organisation to adopt the concept of gentle tourism developed by Robert Jungk. The same Congress also adopted the Declaration of Cross-Border *Landscapes of the Year* to support sustainable regional tourism development and at the same time promote cooperation between member associations. The first Landscape of the Year was Lake Constance in 1989, followed by Lake Neusiedl in 1990, the Eifel-Ardenne region in 1991/1992 and many more, including the first African Landscape of the Year in Senegal and the Gambia in 2018/2020¹.

Alongside environmental sustainability, Naturefriends have consistently underlined the social dimension of sustainable development: fair working conditions in tourism, equal access to leisure opportunities, and solidarity across borders remain at the heart of our activities.

In the course of the negotiations to form a European Union, the Naturefriends adopted the "*Manifesto for a New Europe – Ecological, Open, Social*" in 1990 and demanded, among other things:

"The new Europe must assume its global environmental responsibility and initiate an ecological restructuring of the economy."

¹ 1993/1994 "The Oder Estuary", 1995/1996 "The Alps", 1997/1998 "The Meuse", 1999/2000 "The Bohemian Forest", 2001/2002 "Old Flanders", 2003/2004 "Lebuser Land", 2005/2006 "Jura", 2007/2009 "The Danube Delta", 2010/2012 "Slovakian-Hungarian Karst", 2013/2014 "The Upper Rhine", 2018/2020 "Senegal/the Gambia"

And further: "*The new Europe must abandon a militarised approach to security. Armament does not bring more security, but less and less.*"

Joint campaigns

In the run-up to the 100th anniversary celebrations in 1995, an international campaign was launched for the first time: *100,000 trees for Europe*. The target was exceeded by a wide margin – around 160,000 trees were planted by local Naturefriends groups. This was the starting signal for a series of successful international initiatives:

- 1997: *Blue Rivers for Europe*
- 1998: *Green Paths for the Future*
- 2001: *Preserve the Landscape – Experience Europe*, which gave rise to the *Natura Trail Campaign*, in which countless local groups throughout Europe have participated to this day.

To mark its anniversary in 2020, the NFI launched the *Global Naturefriends Days*. Since then, Naturefriends around the world have been participating in activities on the theme of "*Nature and Solidarity*" around the anniversary date in September.

Tourism and sustainability

The Naturefriends movement played a central role in the development of workers' tourism as a social achievement. For the first time, it gave workers and their families the opportunity to travel affordably, experience nature, and find relaxation — something that had previously been reserved mainly for the wealthy. Naturefriends Houses emerged as important meeting places: they not only offered accommodation, but also served as spaces for communal learning, political and cultural education, and international exchange. To this day, they embody the idea of solidarity, participation, and active community in tourism.

While tourists in the early 20th century travelled mainly on foot, by bicycle, paddle boat or train, the rapid increase in mobility by car and aeroplane has massively worsened the environmental balance of tourism. What was once taken for granted as *gentle tourism* has become a conscious decision by individuals. Mass tourism focused on comfort at the lowest possible price – at the expense of the local population and the environment.

The negative consequences are obvious: exploitation of workers, human rights violations, destruction of ecosystems and, finally, the significant contribution of air travel to climate change. Popular destinations are increasingly suffering from overtourism, while fair participation of the local population in the benefits of tourism remains the exception.

The NFI recognised the undesirable developments in global tourism at an early stage. In 1997, it drafted the position paper "*Tourism and Sustainability*" for the 7th United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development in New York and the "*Memorandum for a Sustainable Tourism Strategy in Europe*". Its commitment to sustainable tourism led to the creation of the *RESPECT* working area, which is dedicated to the in-depth examination of the developmental, social and ecological aspects of tourism and to raising awareness of fair travel and respectful behaviour in nature.

New impetus from Africa

In 1983, a Naturefriends organisation was founded in Dakar (Senegal) dedicated to environmental protection and nature conservation, environmental education and, in particular, reforestation initiatives in the Sahel region, for which its own tree nursery was established. In 2002, Naturefriends Senegal was accepted as a full member of the NFI. In 2004, thanks to support from the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and committed Naturefriends, the first African Naturefriends House and Environmental Education Centre was opened in Dakar.

Since then, numerous other African member associations and partners have joined, and the concept of partnership-based Naturefriends trips to African countries has developed, promoting exchanges between European and African Naturefriends. Today, the Naturefriends Africa Network consists of 17 member and partner associations that are in close contact with the European associations and cooperate on equal terms.

Climate crisis and climate justice

As early as 1979, the first World Climate Conference in Geneva warned of the consequences of unchecked fossil fuel combustion: global warming, changing ocean currents, extreme weather events, melting polar ice caps, rising sea levels and advancing desertification. What is now a sad reality was already predicted by scientists back then. International climate negotiations began in 1992 with the *Rio Earth Summit* and led to the *Kyoto Protocol* (1997) and the *Paris Climate Agreement* (2015), which aimed to limit global warming to below 2 degrees Celsius.

Today, we know that this goal probably will not be achieved. Measures are lagging and climate financing remains inadequate, especially for countries of the Global South. With the rise of right-wing and populist parties and the Trump presidency, measures that have already been decided upon are facing massive headwinds.

The Naturefriends have been campaigning for climate protection for decades. In 2011, the call for climate justice was enshrined in the Naturefriends Climate Charter at the NFI Congress in Graz. It focuses on the fact that it is primarily the resource-intensive lifestyle in the Global North that is driving the crisis, while those most affected in the Global South have far too few resources to adapt to the devastating effects.

Naturefriends Climate Fund

The Naturefriends Climate Fund, launched in 2017, collects donations from individual Naturefriends and Naturefriends organisations in the Global North to finance climate projects run by African Naturefriends organisations. To date, a total of nine projects has been implemented in six African countries in collaboration with the local population – with the aim of mitigating the effects of climate change, improving living conditions and protecting the climate.

This benefits local people in Africa and donors in industrialised countries, who make a transparent and effective personal contribution to climate justice with their donations. The Climate Fund also makes it possible to offset unavoidable air travel.

Furthermore, the Climate Fund raises awareness of the global consequences of the lifestyle of people in industrialised countries, which has a far too large ecological footprint – at the expense of people in the Global South and future generations.

Peace as a shared responsibility

Since its foundation, the Naturefriends have been committed to opposing war and armament. The German Naturefriends were co-founders of the Easter March movement and, with their peace walks, send a clear signal for peaceful coexistence.

As early as the 1980s, the NFI opposed the rearmament of Europe. In 1984, the Congress in Strasbourg adopted the resolution *"Save Peace"*. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine since 2022 now poses a renewed threat to the European peace order – with a dangerous new militarisation whose consequences cannot yet be assessed.

For Naturefriends, one thing is clear: war and violence must not be used as political tools! The commitment to peace remains a central component of the international Naturefriends' work and is also reflected in the resolution *"Naturefriends for Peace"*, which was adopted at the 2024 Annual Conference in Heerlen, the Netherlands.

"Berg frei – Mensch frei – Welt frei²": Together for a good future for all!

Naturefriends see themselves as part of the civil society movement working for a just, peaceful and sustainable coexistence. Because one thing is obvious: endless growth at the expense of people and nature is no option – the climate crisis and the dramatic loss of biodiversity, as well as the increase in inequalities, social tensions, conflicts and wars, demonstrate this impressively. The danger of military escalation – especially in view of nuclear armament – makes democratic change even more urgent.

Throughout their history, Naturefriends have always taken a firm stand against ethnic and racist tendencies, promoting instead a vision of understanding, solidarity, and friendship. This self-image was and remains a conscious counter-model to exclusion, nationalism, and hatred. Today in particular, in view of the rise of right-wing populists and extreme right-wing positions worldwide, Naturefriends reaffirm this commitment to openness and humanity. Alois Rohrauer, one of the founders of the Naturefriends movement, already formulated the guiding principle in the 1920s: *"Naturefriends want to be and remain friends of humanity."* This statement remains highly relevant and is still a clear message from NFI today — a call to work together in solidarity and build bridges between people across borders.

Democratic change begins in the minds and continues in action. The Naturefriends are actively shaping this change based on their individual members' voluntary commitment: through Climate Fund projects, through their commitment to sustainable and social tourism, through environmental education, through peace work and countless other activities.

After 130 successful years, the Naturefriends' commitment to a united, just and peaceful future is more necessary than ever. Together, we can actively shape change – to enable all people, including future generations, to live in dignity on our shared planet.

² The traditional Naturefriends greeting referring to free mountains accessible to everyone, free people and a free world.