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10 achievements that would not have been possible without dedicated environmental policy

Over the past 40 years, environmental policy has repeatedly come under fire. These days, it is often portrayed as a supposed hindrance to progress. Yet environmental policy has made our country a healthier, safer and better place to live. It has made our economy stronger, more innovative and more resilient. This has been possible thanks to the combination of international, European, German and local environmental policies. The following ten achievements show that commitment pays off, even during difficult times. They give us the courage to resolutely tackle current and future challenges.

It has never been policies alone that has brought about change. Accomplishments, particularly in environmental policy, are largely shaped and driven by the dedication of many people throughout the country. When we talk about environmental policy here, we are including all of these people.

The ozone hole is closing

Environmental policy has ensured that the ozone hole is closing once again. This protects people and animals all over the world from ultraviolet radiation, which can cause skin cancer and eye damage. This has been achieved by banning chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) worldwide and introducing alternatives. In 1985, the international community adopted the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer. This was followed by the Montreal Protocol in 1987, the first agreement to be signed by every single member state of the United Nations. This set a precise timetable for the global phase-out of CFCs, which had been used, for example, in aerosol cans and refrigerators. The regulations have since been tightened and expanded several times – and they are working! The production and consumption of ozone-depleting substances have fallen sharply. The ozone hole has become significantly smaller.

Renewable energy provides clean, safe and cheaper electricity

Environmental policy has helped new technologies make a breakthrough: renewable energy is now making it possible for the world to move away from coal, oil, and gas. These new technologies did not just appear out of thin air. They are the result of environmental laws like Germany's Renewable Energy Sources Act, which came into force in 2000. The law provided the initial impetus for the global energy transition and has been replicated in over 80 countries. What began as a niche phenomenon later became a global technological revolution.

In the first half of 2025, renewable energy overtook coal in global electricity generation for the first time ever. In 2024, renewable energy accounted for around 90% of all newly installed electricity generation capacity worldwide. In Germany, the share of renewable energy in gross electricity consumption was approximately 55% in 2025. Countries around the world have recognised the many advantages renewable energy offers over oil, gas, and coal. They are not just clean and climate-friendly, they are also the cheapest forms of electricity generation thanks to their low production costs. In addition, costs for solar installations have decreased by over 90% and for wind turbines by 70%, thanks in no small part to the Renewable Energy Sources Act.

Mountains of rubbish are now sources of raw materials

Environmental policy has put an end to landfilling. Toxic and foul-smelling landfills are now a thing of the past. Since 2005, it has been prohibited to dispose of untreated municipal waste – particularly household and commercial waste – in landfills. Since then, waste has been subject to stricter collection and sorting protocols. Our air and water have become cleaner as a result and our soil healthier. And more and more resources have been recycled as a result of waste separation by German households. Raw materials are created from waste.

Today, we have turned this approach into a true circular economy. The idea is that, ideally, waste should not be produced in the first place. Instead what would otherwise end up as waste should be converted to raw materials. To this end, products are designed to be durable and easily recycled at the end of their life. Measures such as the deposit on single-use beverage containers ensure that parks remain clean and streets free of litter. However, circular economy is good for more than just the environment. It also strengthens the economy because keeping raw materials in circulation contributes to the security of supply and paves the way for new business models.

Damaged natural environments are being restored

Environmental policy has ensured that damaged natural environments are now being restored in many places. Acid rain, the main cause of dying forests in the 1980s, is now a thing of the past thanks to better air quality legislation. Today, forests are facing new challenges due to climate change. That is why we are now supporting forest restoration on an unprecedented scale and setting aside spaces where nature can recover. Rivers that were once polluted and contaminated are now clean enough to swim in. Animal species like the white-tailed eagle and the crane that were once almost extinct in Germany have returned. The air is cleaner, and towns and villages are greener. This has improved the quality of life for local communities and increased local value creation – while strengthening cohesion within the regions. Even though there is still a lot to do, the effects of nature conservation are clear: a healthy, intact natural environment brings people together because everyone has access to it.

Global cooperation that works

Environmental policy has created effective international organisations that enable progress around the world. Rivers, forests, oceans, the climate, soil and our air: to protect them, we must work together internationally and across borders. This is because many environmental problems can only be solved together and with overarching strategies. Multilateral cooperation is crucial, particularly in times of political uncertainty. There are many successful examples in the history of environmental policy. The 1973 Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species has placed more than 6,000 animal and nearly 35,000 plant species under protection. Since the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Summit, the Convention on Biological Diversity has been the world's most comprehensive agreement for protecting nature and safeguarding the natural foundations of life on Earth. The 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change provides an indispensable framework for international climate policy and is driving progress worldwide. This year, the UN Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement came into force. For the first time, there will be uniform environmental rules for the high seas to protect the marine environment. These negotiations and international agreements enable alliances that steadily bring us closer to the goal of better protecting our shared planet.

Improved safety thanks to the nuclear phase-out

Environmental policy has helped ensure that we have not had a nuclear accident in Germany and that we have become a safer country. Following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, the Federal Environment Ministry was established – partly as a political response to the nuclear risks to people and the environment. Since then, radiation protection, regulatory oversight and safety standards have been steadily strengthened. Nearly four decades on, Germany phased out nuclear energy. The nuclear power stations that had been put into operation in Germany since 1962 have now all been decommissioned. The nuclear phase-out has reduced the risks of serious accidents, helping to protect the environment, human health and the population.

Nuclear safety and radiological emergency preparedness will remain key priorities of environmental policy even beyond the nuclear phase-out. Decommissioning power stations, identifying and constructing safe repositories for nuclear waste and implementing strict radiation protection regulations ensure that the public and the environment continue to be protected in the long term.

Clean air, healthier lives

Environmental policy has ensured cleaner air and is helping us live longer. Air pollution has fallen significantly. As recently as the 1980s, high levels of sulphur dioxide and particulate matter regularly led to smog alerts, driving bans and a massive increase in respiratory diseases among children. The summer smog of the 1990s, caused primarily by ground-level ozone, is a thing of the past. Ozone peak levels have decreased significantly since then. The fact that the air has become much cleaner in recent decades is due to targeted reductions in emissions. Between 2005 and 2023 alone, Germany has reduced particulate matter (PM2.5) by 41% and nitrogen oxides by as much as 50%. Factors that have contributed include the introduction of the catalytic converter in the 1980s, stricter emission limits for vehicles and industry and the expansion of renewable energy and clean tech. Electric cars are also an important factor: they reduce both CO₂ emissions and pollution levels. Compared to the 1990s, the improved air quality in Germany today prevents tens of thousands of premature deaths every year. However, air quality must be further improved to reduce health risks even further.

Clean water from the tap

Environmental policy has helped ensure that in Germany we can drink water straight from the tap – a privilege that is the envy of much of the world. Water is essential for life. In Germany, it is one of the most strictly monitored and affordable resources. The high quality and uninterrupted supply of drinking water is the result of a success story. The foundations were laid more than 50 years ago with Germany's Federal Water Act and its Drinking Water Ordinance. Limit values for substances harmful to health, such as lead or microplastics, drinking water protected areas and wastewater treatment in sewage treatment plants are just some of the measures that help protect our water. To this day, laws, regulations and directives that are regularly updated define the high standards required for water quality.

The water quality of many lakes and rivers has also improved visibly and measurably. This is true for western Germany, but even more so for eastern Germany. Today, it is safe to swim in most bathing waters and along the coasts of Germany. More than 90% have even been rated "excellent" under the EU Bathing Water Directive. Our National Water Strategy ensures that there will continue to be enough clean water available in the future.

E-mobility saves money

Environmental policy has advanced electric mobility, thereby making it possible to reduce our dependence on expensive fuels that harm the climate. This is because electric cars run on cheap electricity. The market is booming: globally, one in five new cars sold is already electric. Electric cars offer many advantages: their drive systems are efficient, they are quieter – and they are more climate-friendly. As the share of green electricity increases, so does the benefit for the climate. Batteries are getting better and cheaper all the time.

Germany, and not least the Federal Environment Ministry, has made decisive progress in advancing electric mobility – from initial research funding to active support for the expansion of the charging infrastructure and the creation of attractive conditions for businesses and employees. The new means-based grant scheme for electric vehicles for private individuals will provide an additional boost: a total of three billion euros is available for an estimated 800,000 subsidised vehicles between 2026 and 2029.

Environment and economy go hand in hand

Environmental policy has created millions of jobs. Thanks to environmental policy, there is a thriving green tech sector that already employs well over three million people. Environmental technologies make a disproportionately large contribution to growth and employment. As the GreenTech Atlas shows, this sector has grown faster in Germany than other key sectors since 2010, at an average of 4.7% per year. The sector is booming internationally. German companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, have a strong presence in all key markets. Germany is one of the top three countries when it comes to green tech patents. This success story is set to continue as we implement the National Circular Economy Strategy.