

Our Virginia



The Three-Legged Stool

The Nature Conservancy and many of our partners often use a metaphor to explain why we work the way we do—and the *why* really matters. Picture a three-legged stool. When all three legs are sound, the stool is balanced and provides a safe, stable platform. But what if any one leg is short, or wobbly or breaks? Then the stool and anything (or anyone) on it can topple over.

Similarly, effective conservation depends on three legs: nature, community and economy. Throughout my career, I have been passionate about the intersection of land conservation, sense of community and people's livelihoods. It's never been easy to balance all three concerns, but TNC's commitment to doing the difficult but right thing was in large part what drew me to this organization.

Climate change only makes it more urgent that we rise to the challenge. TNC has some big goals in front of us and a limited time to get there. So, how do we bring together all of our partners, provide leadership in a respectful way, and engage the communities in which we work? And thinking beyond just our traditional allies, how do we encourage *all* the voices that should be heard to join us and help move us forward? While science guides *where* we work and *what* we need to achieve, grappling with questions like these reminds us *why* we must prevail.

We can't get where we need to go alone. But, of course, we never have. From the Appalachians to the Atlantic, every conservation success has depended on the power of partnership. If, as is often said, the best predictor of the future is past performance, then I hope you can be as optimistic as I am about our ability to work together when it matters most and effect the change we need.

This report highlights just a few of the many people who are agents of that change across Virginia and beyond. As a TNC supporter, you, too, are forging a better future for nature and people. Your contribution is an investment in all three legs—nature, community and economy—that sustain life today and for future generations. We are deeply grateful for your commitment to conservation!



Bettina K. Ring, State Director

P.S. You can make a difference today! Scan the QR code to give online or mail the enclosed envelope with your year-end gift.



The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

ON THE COVER Rock climber © Travis Dove; INSETS, LEFT TO RIGHT Elk herd © Daniel White/TNC; Cumberland Forest Community Fund grant recipients from towns of Coeburn and Lebanon © Kyle LaFerriere; THIS PAGE Bettina K. Ring © Daniel White/TNC; MAP © Chris Bruce/TNC and Danielle Kulas/TNC

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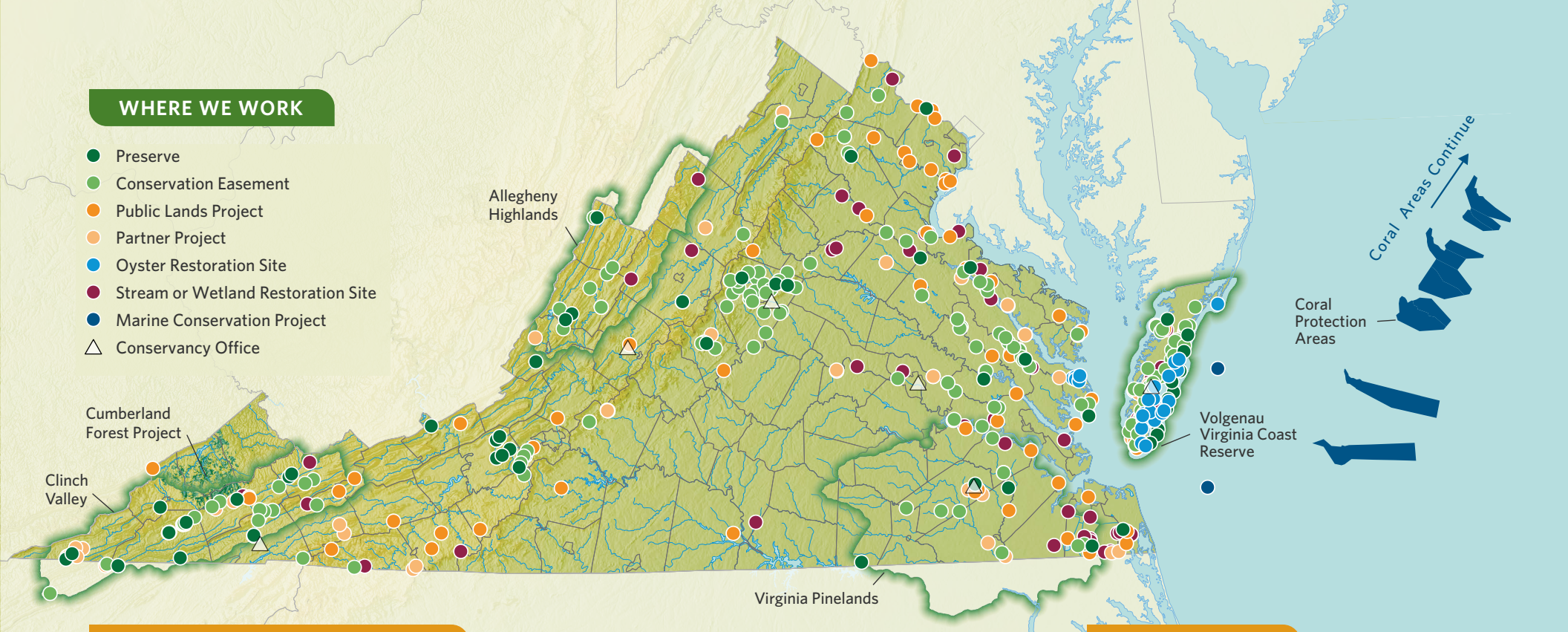
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WHERE WE WORK

- Preserve
- Conservation Easement
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- Stream or Wetland Restoration Site
- Marine Conservation Project
- △ Conservancy Office



OUR GLOBAL GOALS FOR 2030

We're racing to hit these targets to help the world reverse climate change and biodiversity loss. Together, we find the paths to make change possible.



3B

Avoid or sequester 3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually—the same as taking 650 million cars off the road every year.



30M

Conserve 1 million kilometers of rivers—enough to stretch 25 times around the globe—plus 30 million hectares of lakes and wetlands.



4B

Conserve 4 billion hectares of marine habitat—more than 10% of the world's oceans—through protected areas, sustainable fishing and more.



650M

Conserve 650 million hectares—a land area twice the size of India—of biodiverse habitats such as forests, grasslands and desert.



100M

Help 100 million people at severe risk of climate-related emergencies by safeguarding habitats that protect communities.



45M

Support the leadership of 45 million people from Indigenous and local communities in stewarding their environment and securing rights.

BY THE NUMBERS

500K

Acres that The Nature Conservancy has protected across the commonwealth of Virginia



253K

Acres across three states being managed under TNC's Cumberland Forest Project



121K

Acres of public land across Virginia that TNC has worked with partners to protect





GEOGRAPHY OF HOPE

Supporting Community and Economic Revitalization in the Appalachians

In a part of Appalachia where dependence on resource extraction, especially coal mining, is waning, local leaders and organizations are striving to diversify their communities and economies. Nature is proving to be a bankable asset—and one they are helping to protect.

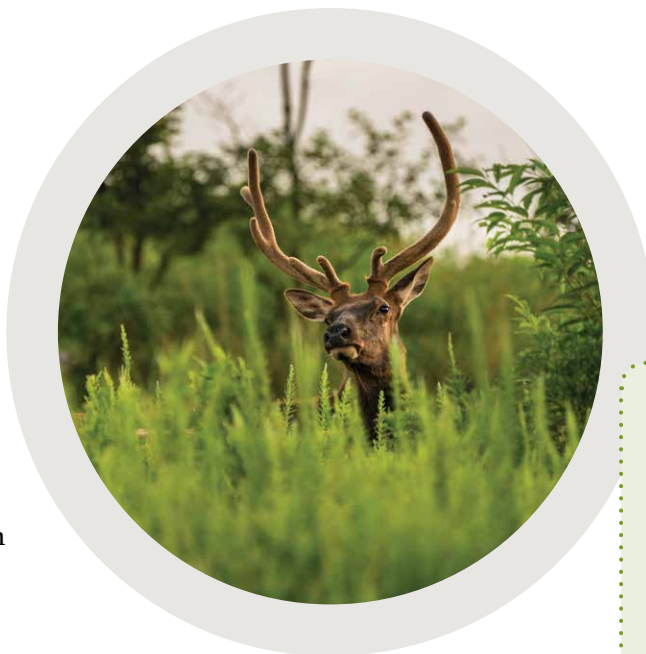
The Cumberland Forest Community Fund is a competitive grant program designed to advance economic and community development goals throughout the footprint of The Nature Conservancy's Cumberland Forest Project in Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia. This year in Virginia, UVA Wise, TNC and the Cumberland Forest Limited Partnership awarded \$140,000 in grants, providing a critical infusion of funds for 10 nature-based projects.

“The quality of awarded projects is a testament to the creative, thoughtful commitment that our communities have in solving unique challenges in Southwest Virginia,” says Nick Proctor, community outreach coordinator with TNC's Clinch Valley Program. “Each project demonstrates the fund's triple bottom line: nature, community and economy.”

“Investing in our communities is a critical part of revitalizing the overall region,” adds Shannon Blevins, UVA Wise vice chancellor for administration, government relations and strategic initiatives. “We are thrilled to work alongside The Nature Conservancy and the Cumberland Forest Limited Partnership in enabling the success of these exciting projects.”

“ Elk and wildlife tours in the area have increased and, in turn, have helped increase tourism and cabin and hotel stays, as well as local shopping. The [Community Fund] made this project possible and successful and will continue to provide lasting results for years to come.”

— John Taylor, Director, SWVA Sportsmen



THIS PAGE Elk © Steven David Johnson; SIDEBAR Elk watching © Nick Proctor/TNC; OPPOSITE PAGE Cumberland Forest sunrise © Daniel White/TNC

More Room to Range

A 576-acre addition to TNC's property in Buchanan County will support elk restoration and wildlife-watching ventures that bring vital ecotourism dollars into local communities. A second acquisition in Russell County will help protect water quality and add 121 acres to the state's Pinnacle Natural Area Preserve on the Clinch River. Along with TNC supporters, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Virginia Land Conservation Foundation, Capital One and Genan Foundation made these projects possible.





2023 Grant Recipients

BREAKS INTERSTATE PARK—\$30,000

Since 2015, the park has developed more than 300 high-quality routes for rock climbers of various skill levels. This second Community Fund grant will support new trails and expanded access for climbing.

FRIENDS OF SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA—\$19,000

The Tyler Flanary Pump Track and Skate Park will provide opportunities to connect local and visiting mountain bikers to the area's world-class resources, as well as bring new events to the town of Big Stone Gap.

APPALACHIAN VOICES—\$15,000

By leading the Solar Workgroup of Southwest Virginia, the organization is helping build a locally rooted solar industry in service to regional collaborations around economic diversification.

SWVA SPORTSMEN—\$15,000

The group is expanding wildlife viewing opportunities to attract more visitors and tourism dollars to Buchanan County. This second Community Fund grant will fund ongoing habitat restoration and more food plots for elk.

TOWN OF LEBANON—\$15,000

Building on Lebanon's recent Downtown Revitalization project, the town seeks to upgrade one of its most frequently visited park playgrounds and construct a community pavilion.

TOWN OF WISE—\$15,000

To promote healthy, active lifestyles through outdoor recreation, the town will use this grant to renovate restroom facilities at its popular Bear Creek Reservoir.

TOWN OF PENNINGTON GAP—\$12,000

Constructed along the Powell River with support from a prior Community Fund grant, the town's outdoor classroom will be upgraded with new educational signage, accessibility features, compost bins, native plant and pollinator gardens, and weather and wildlife stations.

CLINCH RIVER VALLEY INITIATIVE (CRVI)—\$11,500

CRVI will use this grant to promote outdoor recreation opportunities along the Clinch River and help communities expand capacity related to nature tourism.

TOWN OF CLEVELAND—\$5,000

Through Cleveland's Nurturing Nature beautification program, the community will plant native trees and shrubs to enhance the landscape and public recreation access at Riverbend Campground.

TOWN OF ST. PAUL—\$2,500

The Wetlands Estonsa Learning Center facilitates free environmental educational programs for students of all ages. A prior Community Fund grant supported the first phase of a bridge and wetland overlook; this new award will complete the construction.

A Catalyst for Appalachians Conservation

As one of TNC's four global priorities, the Appalachian Mountains are central to our mission—now Virginia's Warm Springs Mountain Preserve and adjoining Hobby Horse Farm are centering Appalachians conservation in the heart of our Allegheny Highlands. Over the past year, staff and supporters working across all seven states of the range have completed trainings and workshops at the farm. To meet rising demands for training space, TNC is raising resources to transform a rustic barn into a hub for sharing research and expertise.



ONLINE | Learn more at nature.org/cfcommunityfund

Hobby Horse Farm © Daniel White/TNC; Collage of community projects © Nick Proctor/TNC, © Byron Jorjorian, © Travis Dove, © Kyle LaFerriere, © Kelley Galownia/TNC

Celebrating 25 Years of Restoration

In early 1999, The Nature Conservancy announced the launch of an ambitious restoration effort centered on our newly acquired Piney Grove Preserve. Over its first 25 years, TNC's Virginia Pinelands Program has fostered powerful partnerships, restored fire as a natural force in the forest system, and helped Virginia's then-tiny population of endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers to recover and thrive. Your support keeps Piney Grove at the heart of a massive regional initiative urgently focused on restoring our diverse, climate-resilient longleaf pine forests.

A Trip Through Time

By *Susan McHarris*



Virginia has one of the most extreme stories of loss when it comes to Southern pine forests. When English settlers arrived in 1607, more than 1 million acres of longleaf-dominant forest stretched south from the James River. Adapted to fire and resistant to drought, wind and pests, the longleaf pine had served for millennia as valuable habitat. But at the turn of the 21st century, only 200 mature trees from that original forest remained.

I turned these facts over and over in my mind on the drive to TNC's Piney Grove Preserve. Located about an hour southeast of Richmond, Piney Grove protects 4,000 acres of the historic longleaf pine belt. While the preserve is dominated by loblolly and shortleaf pine, TNC and its partners are returning longleaf to the forest, slowly but surely.

As I started down the preserve's Darden Trail, I thought, uncritically, that this forest didn't look much like the pinelands I'd seen in pictures. Then we passed the fire line.

Rising from Ashes: Our Once and Future Forest

The fire line we crossed couldn't have been more obvious. On one side lay a dense, mixed-species forest. On the other, a spacious grove of pines. At their

bases, scorched bark revealed where fires had attempted to climb. Though clearly marked by fire, these trees were not damaged.

For thousands of years, Indigenous people ignited fires that encouraged the growth of the pinelands, allowing them to flourish and sustain people and place. But Virginia, being the first landing place for English colonists, lost its Indigenous stewards of the pinelands relatively early. After Indigenous knowledge was lost, a fear of fire began to take over American culture.

"The worst thing you can do to longleaf is plant it and not burn it," says Bobby Clontz, TNC's stewardship manager for Southeastern Virginia. TNC and myriad partners have brought controlled burns back to the region. Even Smokey Bear has changed his tune. Now, Piney Grove receives good fire every two to four years, facilitating the planting of longleaf and the overall success of the ecosystem.

Soon I will leave Virginia, and unentangle myself, at least for the time being, from its landscapes and stories. But all of this will stay. The pine will keep rising from the ashes. And, hopefully, the tide will turn. After all, humans were always a part of the longleaf ecosystem. With the right actions, we can intertwine our destinies once more.

Susan McHarris was TNC's summer 2023 STEP intern working on our Virginia Lands and Lives project. She is a senior at Swarthmore College majoring in philosophy and environmental studies. Read more about STEP on Page 14.



ONLINE | Read Susan's full story at nature.org/longleafva

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THIS PAGE, LARGE Young longleaf pines during controlled burn © Andrew Kornylak; INSETS, LEFT TO RIGHT Controlled burn at Piney Grove © Kyle LaFerriere; Researcher collecting red-cockaded woodpecker chicks for banding © Carolyn Hall/TNC; Red-cockaded woodpecker © Karen Willes; OPPOSITE PAGE Susan McHarris © Daniel White/TNC

2023

HIGHLIGHTS

↓ THE LIPFORD PATH

TNC recognized former State Director Michael Lipford's leadership in the protection of Piney Grove Preserve by naming a trail there in his honor. © Elizabeth Lipford



→ LATINO CONSERVATION WEEK

In July, TNC's Eastern Shore team hosted events for students and families to explore nature at sites such as our Brownsville Preserve pollinator meadow. © Margaret Van Clief/TNC



↓ HOLD YOUR SEAHORSES

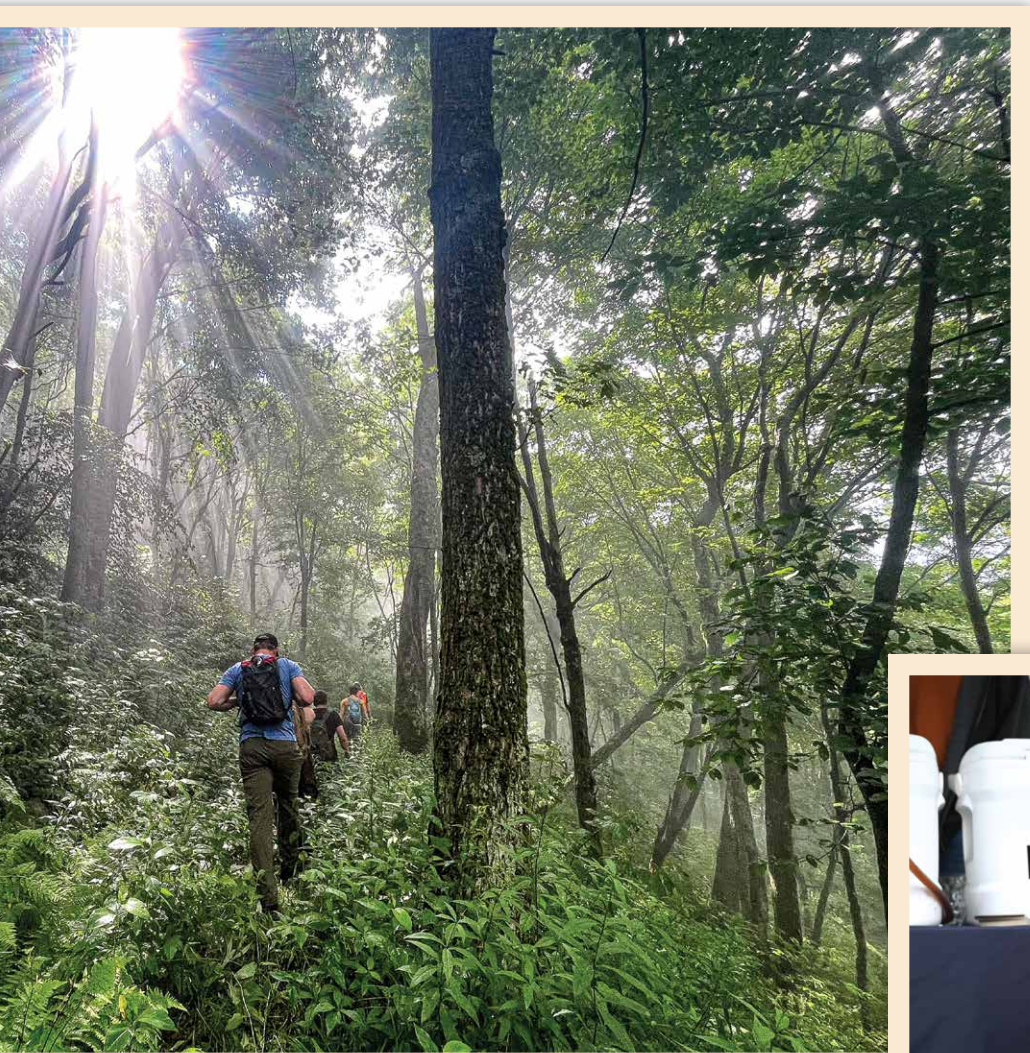
On the Eastern Shore, the world's largest seagrass restoration project absorbs carbon and provides habitat for myriad marine animals, including seahorses. © Britt Collins/TNC



See the latest Virginia photos! Follow us at [instagram.com/nature_va](https://www.instagram.com/nature_va)

← SOMETHING'S BREWING

OktoberForest collaborator Brian Mandeville of Fine Creek Brewing used sassafras leaves foraged from Warm Springs Mountain Preserve for this year's Allegheny Highlands Farmhouse Ale. © Daniel White/TNC

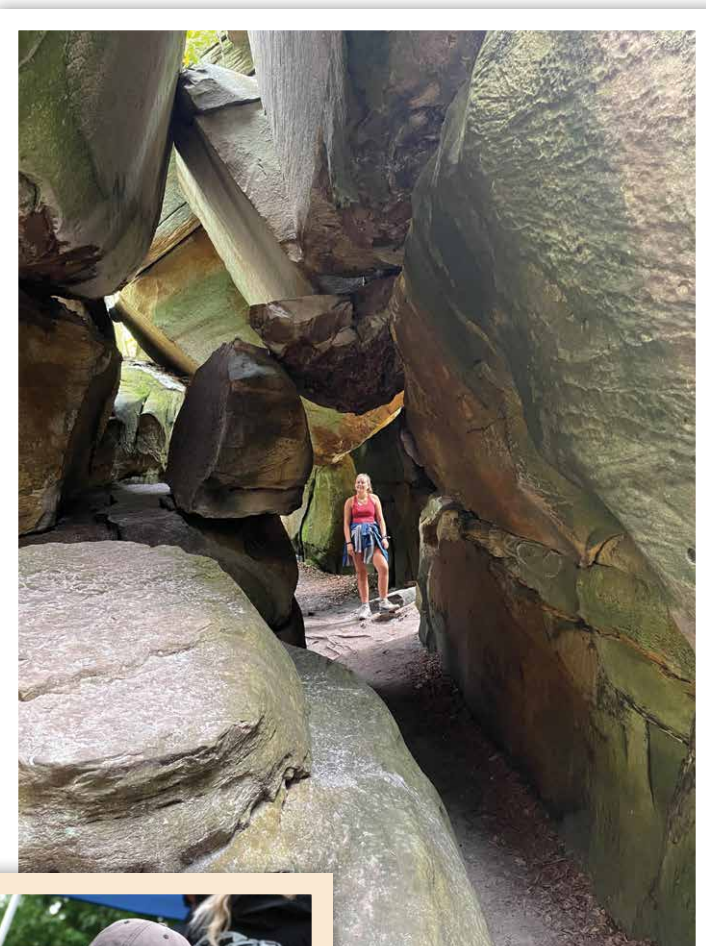


↑ FOREST FORAGING

Staff from TNC and Crooked Run Fermentation faced a steep climb, literally, to forage red spruce tips for our OktoberForest collaboration: Clinch Valley Saison. © Nick Proctor/TNC

→ PUBLIC LANDS DAY

Virginia celebrated Public Lands Day on September 23, but any day is a good day to visit places like The Channels. © Vanessa Morel/TNC



← OKTOBERFOREST FEST

Hosted by Black Narrows Brewing and TNC, our annual celebration of forests, clean water and craft beer drew nearly 500 attendees to Chincoteague. © Daniel White/TNC

Charting a Course for Healthy Oceans and Sustainable Fisheries



ONLINE | Learn more at [nature.org/midatlanticseascape](https://www.nature.org/midatlanticseascape)

Kate Wilke's scariest moment on the ocean took place off the coast of Mexico. Before starting graduate school, Wilke undertook a study abroad project interviewing fishermen—which is how she found herself bobbing far from shore on a 19-foot wooden panga boat facing a sudden, violent storm.

“The darkest clouds blew in and just sheets of rain; we could not see our hands in front of us,” she recalls. “I think that boat driver just kept his eye on where the land disappeared and steered us toward that spot.”

Wilke didn't let that close call steer her away from a career in marine conservation, but it left an indelible impression: “On the water, weather controls everything, and you're at the mercy of Mother Nature.”

That lesson remains relevant to the urgent challenges Wilke faces today as director of The Nature Conservancy's Mid-Atlantic Seascape program. Her team works to protect healthy habitat and sustainable fisheries in ocean waters stretching from North Carolina to New York. It's a bustling environment, with many people vying for fish and other marine resources. And conservation is only getting harder because of climate change.

Despite myriad challenges, the seascape team has pulled off some huge wins: establishing ecosystem-based management for previously unregulated menhaden (small prey fish with an enormous role in the ocean food chain), creating an Ocean Data Portal to guide decision makers, and protecting 41,000 square miles of deep-sea canyons and corals—an area about the size of Virginia.

Wilke maintains a long-term focus on transforming ocean policy, often fostering unlikely alliances with fishing interests and regulatory agencies. And, since coming aboard a year ago, marine scientist Brendan Runde has deepened TNC's engagement in field-based research and conservation.

The team's current priorities include generating reliable data on recreational fishing harvests (which traditionally have largely gone unrecorded) and producing sound science to guide wind-power development. “We like renewable energy; we want it to happen soon and in a big way,” Runde says. “But we don't want it to happen at any cost.”

Only seven offshore wind turbines are generating power in U.S. Atlantic waters, but, within a decade, we expect thousands. TNC engages with industry on where to build turbines for the least disturbance. With support from NOAA, the seascape team is driving new research into how construction noise will affect marine life, as well as assessing the potential habitat value of turbine bases.

What's at stake? “It boils down to our quality of life,” Wilke says. Whether or not you enjoy fishing or eating seafood or relaxing on beaches, you depend on resources that come from, or travel across, our oceans.

And millions of people earn their livelihoods from the sea. “What I still love best is working with fishermen and people who spend their lives on the water,” says Wilke. “It's challenging but rewarding to learn from them, combine our different perspectives and expertise, and find solutions to big challenges.”

Offshore Wind: A Bottom-Up Approach

Understanding potential impacts from offshore wind development requires a bottom-up approach—as in from the bottom of the ocean to the birds up in the sky. As part of our research into migrating shorebirds, for example, this year TNC's Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve and our partners at the Center for Conservation Biology tagged 22 willets with GPS devices tracking routes and altitudes. According to bird program leader Alex Wilke, “The study is helping us assess likely risks that offshore wind turbines may pose to this key species and establishing new benchmarks for everyone working on willet ecology and conservation.”



THIS PAGE Willet tagging © Bryan Watts; OPPOSITE PAGE, LARGE Commercial crabber and oysterman in Mathews © Jason Houston; INSETS, LEFT TO RIGHT Kate Wilke © Morning Star Fishing; Maine Avenue Fish Market in D.C. © Jason Houston; Brendan Runde © Cameron Luck

Investing in Future Conservation Leaders

The Nature Conservancy realizes the urgent need to foster our next generation of conservation leaders, as well as to build a stronger, more diverse workforce. Virginia's Short Term Experience Program (STEP) launched this year with eight paid summer internships geared to college students and recent graduates.

“We wanted to create a program that specifically focused on working with people of color, people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and people of different educational backgrounds who are coming from the humanities or the social sciences,” says program manager Taylor Fanelli.

The interns gained 10 weeks of valuable experience not only in traditional roles such as land stewardship and geographic information systems, but also in emerging fields such as inclusive storytelling and outreach to underrepresented communities. Along the way, says State Director Bettina Ring, “we learned as much from these impressive young people as they learned from us.”

A Shore Bet

Our Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve hosted three interns—all Eastern Shore natives and, thus, products of the local public school systems that partner with TNC's environmental education team. “The best part of our summer program was



the fact that we were able to hire three local women who, without STEP, may not have realized TNC offered opportunities like this where they grew up,” says Jenny Miller, preserve and education manager.

“We were really excited for this opportunity to bring in young people from different areas of the Shore, different communities on the Shore,” adds Margaret Van Clief, outreach and education coordinator. “Not only could we help them connect with some of the benefits of working with an organization like The Nature Conservancy, but it's also been really exciting for them to help us make new community connections.”



ONLINE | Watch a video featuring our STEP interns at nature.org/learningva

THIS PAGE 2023 STEP interns Hayley Marshall, Anna Ardila-McCarter and Alicia Godwin at the Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve's Brownsville Preserve. © Kyle LaFerriere; OPPOSITE PAGE Photos courtesy of the interns

“ We wanted to create a program that specifically focused on working with people of color, people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and people of different educational backgrounds.”

— Taylor Fanelli,
STEP Manager

Our 2023 STEP Interns



ANNA ARDILA-MCCARTER, Spanish Language Outreach, **Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve**. Anna helped plan public outreach events and translate materials for the Eastern Shore's large Spanish-speaking population. An Eastern Shore native, Anna is majoring in media studies and Spanish at the University of Virginia.



ELI BEECH-BROWN, GIS Technician, **Charlottesville Office**. Eli generated data, produced maps and supported projects ranging from land protection to conservation planning. A Minnesota native, he is studying geography and environmental science with a minor in data science at the University of Richmond.



GRACE DHO, Land Monitoring & Stewardship, **Allegheny Highlands Program**. Grace assisted with breeding bird surveys, plant monitoring and general stewardship at our Warm Springs Mountain Preserve. Hailing from Richmond, she graduated in 2023 from the College of William & Mary with a double major in biology and integrative conservation.



ALICIA GODWIN, **Brownsville History, Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve**. Alicia continued our research into Brownsville Preserve's historic African American community and descendants. An Eastern Shore native, she is studying criminal justice and anthropology and minoring in biology at Longwood University.



XINYUE LI, Natural Climate Solutions, **Arlington Office**. Xinyue worked with our senior conservation scientist, met with statewide partners and conducted research on barriers to solar development across Virginia. From Jiangsu, China, she studies energy and environmental policy at the University of Chicago.



HAYLEY MARSHALL, Coastal Conservation Technician, **Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve**. Hayley assisted with marine habitat restoration and stewardship of beach nesting birds. From the Eastern Shore, she is a 2023 graduate of the University of Virginia with a double major in environmental sciences and global studies and a minor in French.



SUSAN MCHARRIS, Lands and Lives Project, **Charlottesville Office**. Susan researched and wrote about the experiences of Indigenous people and other underrepresented communities in places where TNC works. Hailing from Portland, Oregon, Susan is a philosophy and environmental studies student at Swarthmore College.



WILL STOREY, Preserve Stewardship, **Charlottesville Office**. At preserves across the state, Will assisted with prescribed burns, trail management, and vehicle and tool maintenance. A Mechanicsville resident, Will is majoring in environmental science at Virginia Tech.

Jeff Wright's Passion for Connecting People to Nature



THIS PAGE, LEFT Jeff Wright © Kyle LaFerriere; RIGHT Land steward James Davis with Wright © Daniel White/TNC; OPPOSITE PAGE, LARGE Hollow Tree at Voorhees Nature Preserve © Kyle LaFerriere; INSET Kathy and Jeff Wright © Kyle LaFerriere



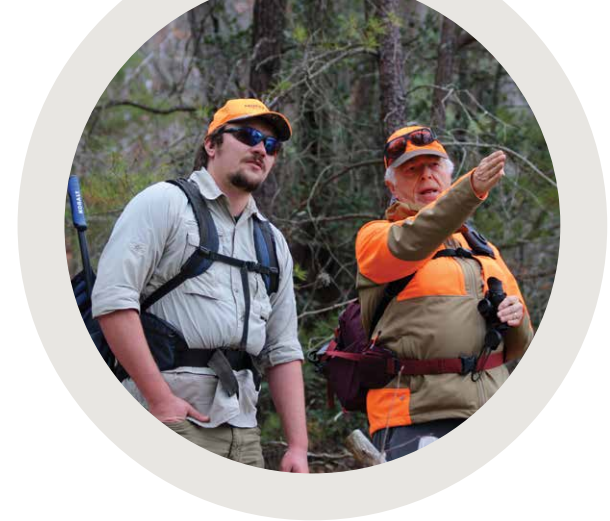
ONLINE | Get involved at [nature.org/volunteer](https://www.nature.org/volunteer)

Nature was in short supply around Jeff Wright's childhood home in downtown Philadelphia. Wright's father, too, had been a city kid, but his wartime experience had inspired a profound appreciation for forests. "My father was part of an air crew shot down over France in World War II and hidden by the French underground in a forest," Wright says. "The forest hid them, fed them and provided them solace."

Wright recalls frequent family getaways to parks, until, around the time he was in third grade, they moved into a house in Delaware County, Pennsylvania. "That was a kind of revelation for me," he says. "We actually had trees and nature for the first time rather than visiting it in parks."

Wright's love for the natural world deepened during his own military service. Fresh out of college ROTC, he anticipated a two-year active duty assignment in the Army. Instead, a nearly 30-year career took him to some 50 countries. Along with "places of wonder and beauty," Wright also witnessed rampant pollution, habitat degradation and deforestation in the former Soviet Union, Asia and the Americas.

Those experiences would strengthen his resolve that, for the benefit of humankind, "something had to be done." Not one to leave a job to others, Wright started volunteering for stewardship workdays, including



Nature Conservancy events, and citizen science projects during his last decade in government service and then his nearly two decades as an executive in industry. The rest is far from history. For almost as long as he spent in the Army, Wright has served TNC in Virginia as a leadership volunteer, financial supporter and self-described "thorn in the side"—an outspoken advocate for tackling difficult challenges.

Having grown up in an urban apartment and playing on a concrete schoolyard, Wright is passionate about providing public access to parks and preserves. He sees reaching out to communities who otherwise lack ready access to nature as "a tremendous challenge," but a necessary one for both ethical and pragmatic reasons. "Wherever we do that, I think we have great success," he says.

At TNC's Voorhees Nature Preserve on the Rappahannock River, for example, Wright has invested not only many hours of "sweat equity" into the trail system, but he and his wife, Kathy, also helped TNC fund a popular new public access point that opened in 2020. And as a long-time member and current president of Friends of Dragon Run, he has helped countless hikers and kayakers explore one of the Chesapeake Bay's most scenic and ecologically

“ Once you see some of those couple-hundred-year-old trees, see your first eagle fly by and see something as wonderful as a box turtle lumbering across a TNC trail, I think you’re hooked.”

— Jeff Wright, TNC Supporter and Volunteer

important tributaries while preserving, protecting and encouraging the wise use of this amazing watershed.

“Once you see some of those couple-hundred-year-old trees, see your first eagle fly by and see something as wonderful as a box turtle lumbering across a TNC trail, I think you’re hooked,” Wright says. “It makes an impression for life on a child, but, more importantly, it makes a big impact on the adults: They vote, they donate, they make policy changes.”

Wright is one such changemaker, and, for a former military man, he offers an interesting twist on the definition of a hero. Rather than someone willing to run toward danger, Wright says, “I’m looking for people who’ll run toward nature.” By any measure, Jeff Wright is one conservation hero whom we’re fortunate to serve alongside.





A NATURAL QUEST

100 Before 60

By Tim Koppenhaver

THIS PAGE Potomac River at Fraser Preserve © Tom Hamilton; OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT Selfie at Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge © Tim Koppenhaver; RIGHT Aravaipa Preserve, Arizona © Aaron Mrotek/TNC

“ You can learn a lot about habitats online, but immersive in-person experiences bring much deeper appreciation.”



After completing a sabbatical in 2016 during which I took time away from work to visit 18 preserves protected by The Nature Conservancy, the question came up, “What’s next?” The answer was simple: *Keep the momentum going.* I wanted to continue collecting amazing habitats protected by TNC. So, I set a new goal to visit 100 properties in Virginia and beyond before I turn 60 in 2024.

To qualify, a property had to meet one of two standards. The first was easy: any location listed under “Places We Protect” at nature.org. Most of these are TNC preserves with public signage like Fraser in Fairfax, Virginia, or Blowing Rocks in Florida. The second was any property where TNC’s work is behind the scenes and takes research to find, such as Bethel Beach in Onemo, Virginia, or the Mesoamerican Reef off the coast of Cancun, Mexico.

Using these two standards, it was easy for me to find a property within two hours of just about every place I’ve visited since 2016. As I traveled for business or pleasure, most trips included excursions to add new properties, and the count grew quickly.

Though I traveled far in this quest to collect 100 properties, 31 came from my home state of Virginia. Here in Virginia, I found a beautiful mosaic of diverse habitats, including caves, swamps, prairies (yes, Virginia has prairies), marshes, waterfalls and mountaintops. Once, on one of the latter, I was turned back by a black bear.

You can learn a lot about habitats online, but immersive in-person experiences bring much deeper appreciation. And so, visiting diverse and beautiful habitats where TNC works became my obsession.

Along the way, the assistance I received from TNC employees both locally and abroad has been remarkable. Without fail, they promptly attended to all my inquiries. Whether it was administrative guidance by email or land stewards accompanying me during visits, the staff at TNC has added great richness to my quest.

Of particular note is Jen Dalke, Virginia’s volunteer program manager. We first met when I was training to be a trail monitor for Wildcat Mountain Preserve. Since then, her guidance and help have been invaluable in connecting me with the right people when considering TNC property visits. She’s been my secret weapon.

After reaching #100, a September 2023 visit to TNC headquarters in Arlington, I know the question that’s coming: What’s next? Part of that answer will be this. I’ll never stop visiting new TNC properties when traveling. The momentum rolls on. Though my current 100-tile mosaic is diverse and beautiful, adding more will offer an even deeper understanding of this planet’s amazing TNC-protected habitats.







ONLINE | Start your own adventure at nature.org/VAgetaways



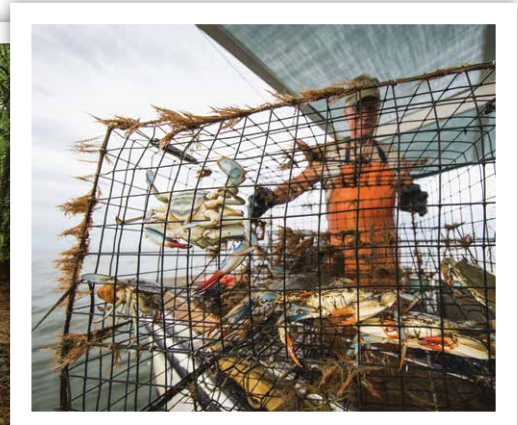
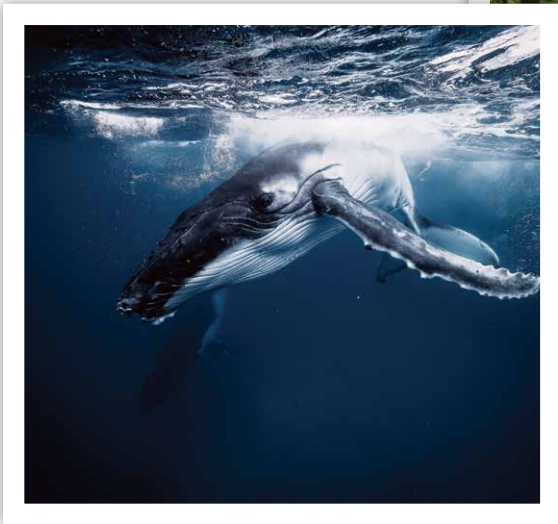


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LEFT TO RIGHT Humpback whale
 © Matt Horspool/TNC Photo
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