

CURRENT RIVER WATERSHED, MISSOURI

project profile

acres protected 91,134

habitat hardwood forests, pine forests, glades, fens, canebrakes, cliffs and spring-fed rivers

wildlife Ozark hellbender (salamander), Current River saddled darter (fish), western fanshell (mussel), Ozark crayfish and migratory birds like the worm-eating warbler and summer tanager

exceptional biodiversity
35 globally significant species; some, like the Current River saddled darter, are found nowhere else on Earth

Conservancy preserves
Chilton Creek, Thorny Mountain and Shut-in Mountain Fens

Conservancy partners
Missouri Department of Conservation

Ozark National Scenic Riverways

U.S. Forest Service

Local land trusts

The Nature Conservancy's work in the Current River watershed is made possible in large part by generous support from private individuals. If you would like to support ongoing conservation efforts in the watershed, please visit Ways of Giving at nature.org/missouri.



Protecting water quality and aquatic life in Missouri's Current River is a top priority. © Byron Jorjorian

Missouri's beautiful Current River gets its start near Montauk in the Ozark Mountains. From there, it flows nearly 184 miles past hardwood forests, rock ledges, springs and towering limestone bluffs before emptying into the Black River in Arkansas.

A favorite of fly-fishing enthusiasts, kayakers and other nature lovers, the Current River attracts more than 1.5 million visitors each year.

Fed by some of the largest springs in North America, including Big Spring and Blue Spring, the river is home to 35 globally significant plants and

animals. Many of these species, including fish like the Current River saddled darter, are found nowhere else on Earth; others have their most viable populations in the river's watershed.

River's Fate Tied to Land Use

Nestled in the heart of the Missouri Ozarks, the Current River's fate is inextricably tied to the surrounding landscape. The watershed is dominated by oak-hickory forests, making it an important part of the state's forest products industry. Agriculture and development are other, sometimes competing, land uses.



Sustainable forest management helps reduce soil erosion and keep the water in the Current River clean.
© Byron Jorjorian

Human land use in the watershed threatens the river's health. Unsustainable forestry and agricultural practices are increasing the amount of nutrients and sediment in the river, altering fish and mussel habitat and robbing the water of its life-giving oxygen.

Urban and rural development also contributes to sedimentation of the river. With more than 3,407 miles of unpaved streets and county and private roads in the area, the influx of sediment from road construction and maintenance increasingly threatens water quality.

Native habitats like canebrakes, which once grew in abundance in the bottomlands along the Current River, were used by Missouri's earliest settlers as food for livestock and have largely disappeared.

This native bamboo, or "cane," helped stabilize stream banks,

improve water quality and keep the gravel spawning beds used by numerous fish from being suffocated by eroded soil.

Promoting Sustainable Forestry to Protect Water Quality

The Current River watershed has been a top conservation priority for the Conservancy since 1992, and the organization has set an ambitious goal of conserving an additional 100,000 acres there primarily through the use of conservation easements.

Because what happens on the land is critical to the health of the Current River, one of the Conservancy's key strategies in the watershed is working directly with private landowners to promote sustainable forest management.

With a generous challenge gift from Howard and Joyce Wood and matching gifts from other committed supporters, the Conservancy established the Howard and Joyce Wood Ozarks Conservation Buyer Fund.

The fund allows the Conservancy to buy key parcels of land in the Current River watershed and place permanent conservation easements on the land that protect water quality, working forestland and other natural features. The lands are then publicly marketed to people interested in conserving this world class river and the economic health of the region.

Working with Partners to Keep Soil on the Land

Keeping soil on the land and out of the water is another top priority. The Conservancy and the Ozark National Scenic

Riverways are restoring some of the bottomland hardwood forests and canebrakes that are vital to reducing soil erosion and maintaining clean water in the river.

A pilot effort to transplant clumps of cane from a donor site on public land to a 15-acre parcel along the Current River appears to be a success and is likely to be replicated along additional stretches of the river.

The Conservancy is in the early stages of helping county road crews find ways to build and maintain roads and stream crossings that minimize erosion and save money.

Staff will also collaborate with local farmers to develop affordable ways to water livestock that protect in-stream habitat and minimize streambank erosion and loss of valuable farmland.

How You Can See Our Work

The Conservancy has three preserves in the Current River watershed—Chilton Creek, Thorny Mountain and Shut-in Mountain Fens. The preserves are open for hiking, bird-watching and other low impact recreation. To learn more, visit our Web site and click on "Places We Protect."

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