

Virginia

2025 Annual Report



Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends, Partners and Supporters,

Nature is a complex, beautiful web, with every ecosystem and all its inhabitants interwoven. Conservation work mirrors this interdependence. Caring for one another and the planet requires coordination, trust and shared purpose.

That's why collaboration is at the core of how The Nature Conservancy operates. Collaboration fosters understanding and mutual respect and it is most effective when each participant is able to contribute unique strengths.

Our Cumberland Forest Community Fund is a shining example of this approach. For years now, the innovative 253,000-acre Cumberland Forest Project in Southwest Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky has enabled TNC and our partners to support local

projects that are making communities stronger. To date, \$480,000 has been awarded to community ventures in Southwest Virginia that embrace conservation and economic diversification. The results are apparent across the region, from new trails and enhanced outdoor recreation sites to sustainable solutions for managing stormwater.

Partnerships like these are key as we increase the pace and scale of conservation to meet the challenges of the moment. As I reflect on this past year and look ahead to the next, my optimism is bolstered by opportunities such as our coalition with TNC colleagues in Maryland, North Carolina and South Carolina to reduce carbon emissions through nature-based solutions.

Thanks to a significant grant from the EPA's Climate Pollution Reduction Grant Program, we are working with colleagues and partners across state lines to improve forest management, restore peatlands and enhance tidal wetlands. These ecosystems hold the greatest promise for carbon sequestration, and they are also important for recreation and community resilience.

When people come together, we can accomplish so much. Whether you live in one of our state's vibrant cities or in a small coastal or mountain town, enjoy hunting or hiking, or find renewal in sand between your toes or the sound of wind in the pines, nature is the great unifier. Thank you for all that you do to demonstrate your love of our lands, waters, communities and one another.

With gratitude,

Bettina K. Ring
State Director, The Nature Conservancy in Virginia

The Nature Conservancy in Virginia

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Cover: Hiking to source red spruce tips to brew into beer for our annual OktoberForest Fest celebrating the lands and waters of Virginia © Nick Proctor/TNC; This page: © Isabel Hayman

TNC in Virginia

Where we work

- Preserve
- Conservation Easement
- Public Lands Project
- Partner Project
- Oyster Restoration Site
- Stream or Wetland Restoration Site
- Marine Conservation Project
- △ Conservancy Office

Allegheny Highlands

Eastern Divide
Critical Focal Landscape

Cumberland
Forest Project

Clinch
Valley

Virginia Pinelands

Mid-Atlantic
Seascape

Coral Areas Continue

Coral
Protection
Areas

Virginia Coast
Reserve

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



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: VIRGINIA

500K

acres that The Nature Conservancy has protected across Virginia



135K

acres of public and partner lands we have helped protect



253K

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



2025 Conservation Wins

A photograph of two people kayaking down a river. The kayaker in the foreground is wearing a green jacket and a black hat, with a yellow paddle. The kayaker in the background is wearing an orange jacket and a blue hat. The river is surrounded by a dense forest with trees showing autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and green. The water is calm and reflects the surrounding trees.

Dragon Flats Preserve

The Nature Conservancy transferred the 495-acre Dragon Flats Preserve to the Friends of Dragon Run, a volunteer-led nonprofit dedicated to protecting the Dragon Run watershed. Forming the border between King & Queen and Middlesex Counties, the blackwater stream and swamp system is known for bald cypress and black tupelo trees. The preserve features river frontage and provides access for canoeing and kayaking.

“A lot of people don’t even know about the Dragon, but anybody who’s studied it or experienced it can fully understand that it’s a place that needs and deserves to be protected as best we can.”

— *James Garner, former Virginia State Forester and former TNC Virginia trustee*

Virginia Pinelands

A 1,663-acre acquisition in Southampton County raises the total acreage of protected lands in the Piney Grove Conservation Area to 12,507 and contributes to a nine-state longleaf ecosystem restoration effort, one of the largest forest restoration initiatives in the country. The property includes extensive wetland forest along Assamoosic Swamp—a major tributary to the Nottoway River—existing longleaf pine and opportunities to establish longleaf pine seedlings across several hundred acres.

Restoring Cultural Ties

In early 2025, TNC transferred the 865-acre Alexander Berger Memorial Sanctuary to the Patawomeck Indian Tribe of Virginia. The property is a significant piece of their ancestral homeland, sitting on the Rappahannock River and harboring 3.5 miles of streams and 210 acres of freshwater wetlands. The Trust for Public Land helped secure funding for the project through grants from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Virginia Outdoors Foundation. This historic project restores cultural ties to the land and supports Indigenous land stewardship, demonstrating the power of collaboration to heal land and honor heritage for generations to come.

"This property will be instrumental in maintaining our traditional cultural practices and instilling a deep connection to the lands and waters of our home within future generations of our citizens," says Chief Charles Bullock.



Clinch River State Park

TNC was proud to make its latest transfer of 184 acres to the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation in our sustained support for the growing Clinch River State Park. Anchored in the towns of Cleveland and St. Paul, the park is composed of multiple properties that constitute a "blueway" for public recreation stretching across nearly 75 miles of the Clinch River. With TNC's transfer, the Clinch River State Park now totals 1,343 acres.

Clinch Mountain Coves Preserve

TNC's vision of a flagship public preserve nestled among the forested coves of Clinch Mountain moved a step closer to reality with the protection of a 34-acre tract in Washington County. This latest acquisition brings us closer to the goal of securing more than 2,000 contiguous acres. Once established, the new preserve will provide a space for community engagement, outdoor recreation and forest restoration efforts across more than 50,000 acres on Clinch Mountain—a key corridor in the Appalachians.

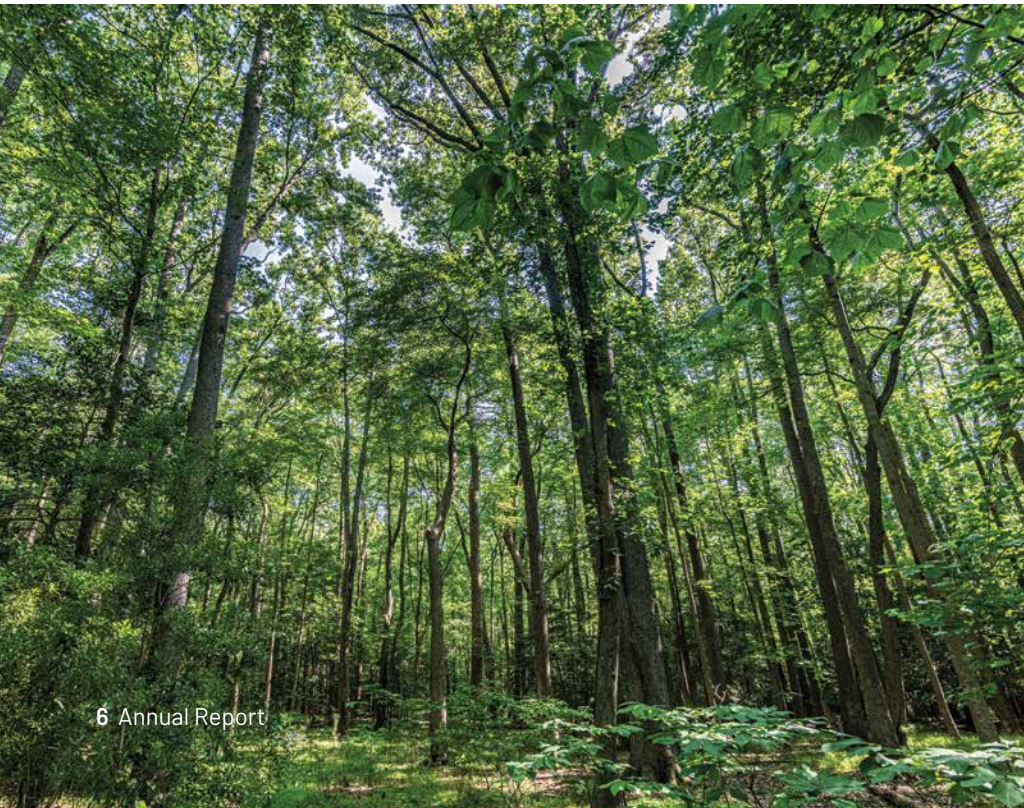
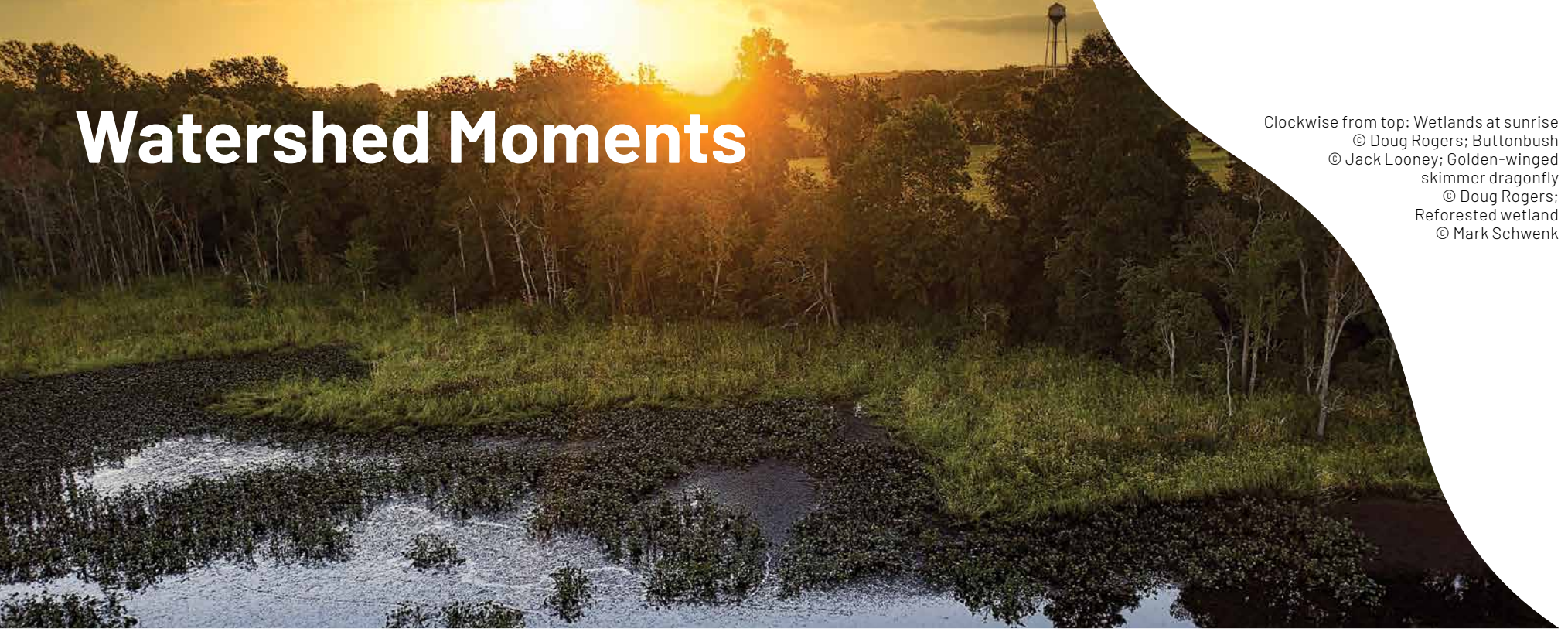
Burton's Bay and Cedar Island

Thanks to a generous donation, TNC now co-owns 910 acres of farmland, forested wetlands and tidal marshes along Burton's Bay in Accomack County. The property is one of our Virginia Coast Reserve's top priorities for land protection, benefiting wildlife and water quality on the Seaside and connecting protected lands in-shore from Cedar Island.

Opposite page: People enjoy fall paddle season on Dragon Run. © Daniel White/TNC; Above: A portion of TNC's transfer to the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation that further expands Clinch River State Park. © Scott Bowen; Right: Wetlands within the property transferred to the Patawomeck Indian Tribe of Virginia. © Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation

Watershed Moments

Clockwise from top: Wetlands at sunrise
© Doug Rogers; Buttonbush
© Jack Looney; Golden-winged
skimmer dragonfly
© Doug Rogers;
Reforested wetland
© Mark Schwenk



Of the **22,000+ acres** that SWMP has protected, 10,000 acres are now public land, including properties managed by the cities of Charlottesville, Harrisonburg and Fredericksburg.



The living edges where land and water meet are special. These transition areas provide breeding and feeding grounds for birds and fish, as well as flood protection for fields and communities by absorbing water from extreme precipitation.

Wetlands are replete with these living edges, and Virginia has recognized the value of these ecosystems for decades. In 1995, The Nature Conservancy launched the **Virginia Aquatic Resources Trust Fund** to offset unavoidable environmental impacts from infrastructure and development. The program consolidates mitigation money from permitted impacts to invest in larger projects that provide greater conservation benefit. It is co-administered with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Virginia Department of Environmental Quality.

Three decades later, the program—Virginia’s only statewide restoration and conservation program—has helped improve **more than 22,000 acres of land** and inspired similar programs in other states. This anniversary year also provided an opportunity to update the program’s name to one that better reflects its purpose: the **Virginia Stream and Wetland Mitigation Program (SWMP)**.

This past spring, TNC purchased the **nearly 700-acre Sunken Meadow property in Surry County**, protecting significant ecological resources and wildlife near the James River. The newly protected area has the potential to become an even healthier home for fish, waterfowl, songbirds, turtles, otters and many other native species. “This trove of forests, stream habitat, and wetlands is already a beautiful place, and we can help enhance its biodiversity and reduce flooding risks for the nearby community,” says Karen Johnson, director of SWMP.

READ MORE: nature.org/SWMP

Intentional Growth

A partnership with the Forest Stewards Guild is creating momentum for an exciting new phase of our work to protect and improve the forests of Southwest Virginia, especially within the Clinch Mountain corridor and surrounding landscapes. The Guild is a respected national nonprofit that practices and promotes stewardship to forge a healthy future for people and forests—and to foster a durable workforce to carry out that mission.

In 2024, the Guild secured a grant from the U.S. Forest Service to pilot a hands-on training program in the Appalachians. While some regional opportunities exist for skills training, particularly prescribed fire, their short-term or seasonal nature frequently results in people moving around for work.

“TNC was eager to join the initiative because we see the need for a longer-term, apprenticeship-style program for emerging professionals to build sustainable local talent,” says Tal Jacobs, manager of TNC’s Clinch Valley Conservation Forestry program. TNC supports a four-member crew, providing financial assistance from our Appalachians program and training from our forestry professionals on TNC-managed lands.

This approach builds on growing energy and investment in collaborative forest management from our landscape partners, including the Ruffed Grouse Society & American Woodcock Society, the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources, and many others in and around Clinch Mountain.

“It can be hard to find vendors to conduct forest stand improvements, treat invasives, plant trees and take on other habitat restoration work at the scale we are looking for,” says Jacobs. “With this talent development pipeline, we aim to set people up to work for partners or start their own businesses.”

The program is gaining attention from other parts of the Appalachians and beyond. Jacobs adds, “Connecting people to good jobs caring for the landscapes they love is conservation at its best.”



Walker Trent’s passion for the outdoors started early while hiking and fishing in Southwest Virginia. After studying environmental science and spending much of his career teaching nature-based education, Trent is now deepening his skills in forest conservation through the Southwest Virginia Forest Stewards Apprenticeship program. Photo courtesy of Walker Trent



A FOREST OF OPPORTUNITY

Protecting the Land, Investing in People

The Nature Conservancy established the Cumberland Forest Project six years ago. TNC brought private equity investors together to form the Cumberland Forest Limited Partnership to acquire and manage 253,000 acres where Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky converge. The protected properties harbor beloved and threatened wildlife and encompass expansive mountain forests, but they also include 40,000 acres disturbed by coal mining.

As the coal industry and related economic opportunities dwindled in Southwest Virginia, the region began seeking new streams of income—including ventures that improve outdoor recreation and tourism and strengthen community resilience. To complement our land protection work in the Cumberland Forest, we established the Cumberland Forest Community Fund.

Every year, this fund supports nature-based economic and community development projects across Southwest Virginia. Local governments, nonprofits and community organizations are eligible to submit proposals for our competitive process. In 2025, we awarded seven groups a total of \$140,000 for projects such as trail system improvements, new outdoor education spaces, a community garden and flood mitigation work.

“This year’s awardees are driving crucial work in environmental stewardship, public access and placemaking,” says Brad Kreps, director of TNC’s Clinch Valley Program. “Their projects align with our mission to deepen connections between people and nature, creating lasting benefits like healthier ecosystems and vibrant community spaces.”

To date, we have awarded \$480,000 to 35 community-based projects in Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell and Wise counties, as well as the City of Norton. The fund is supported by TNC, the Cumberland Forest Limited Partnership, the Anne & Gene Worrell Foundation and the University of Virginia’s College at Wise, which also serves as program administrator.

READ MORE: nature.org/communityfund

Left: Appalachian Sustainable Development secured \$15,000 to install irrigation at the Growing Together Community Garden, which will improve accessibility for visitors and gardeners, and increase capacity, production and functionality. Courtesy Appalachian Sustainable Development; Right: 2025 Cumberland Forest Community Fund awardees © Robert Luna



New Places to Nurture a Love for Nature

In June 2025, The Nature Conservancy staff, partners and friends gathered to honor Nellie and Truman Semans and their legacy through the **Nellie and Truman Semans Center for Conservation Learning**. Nestled within the rolling 600-acre Hobby Horse Farm in Bath County donated to TNC by the Semans in 2022, a historic stable barn is transforming into a flagship site for conservation learning. When complete, this new hub will anchor our work in the Allegheny Highlands and support conservation partnerships across the entire Appalachian region as a place to host visiting scientists, students, agency partners and conservation leaders. It will also serve as a training center for prescribed fire teams—sharing best practices to restore vital habitat for wildlife and protect recreational lands. By hosting and convening experts, the center will foster innovation, accelerate conservation solutions and inspire emerging stewards.

This spring, TNC joined in the celebration to dedicate the **Raccoon Creek Pinelands Pavilion**, a striking open-air space built entirely from reclaimed longleaf pine. The pavilion stands on the property of Bill Owen, a musician, longtime TNC Virginia trustee, and passionate advocate for restoring the once-vast longleaf pine ecosystem. For years, Owen has been planting and nurturing longleaf on 1,300 acres of his farm near Yale, Virginia, which is under conservation easement with TNC.

More than a beautiful gathering space, the pavilion stands as a symbol of restoration and resilience. Its reclaimed timbers showcase the enduring value of longleaf pine, while its location within Virginia's largest stands of longleaf pines invites visitors, conservation partners and community members to experience the benefits of healthy forests firsthand.



See more photos from our work year-round!
Follow us at [instagram.com/nature_va](https://www.instagram.com/nature_va)

Left: A rendering of the under-construction Nellie and Truman Semans Center for Conservation Learning, by Bushman Dreyfus Architects; Right: The new Raccoon Creek Pinelands Pavilion © Kyle LaFerriere; 1st inset: Truman Semans in front of an architectural drawing for the center © Chromatic Expressions; 2nd inset: TNC trustee Bill Owen, center left, and Bettina Ring, center right, with longleaf restoration partners. © Kyle LaFerriere

Snapshots across the Commonwealth



Top: We celebrated our annual OktoberForest Fest in the fall, foraging ingredients from our preserves to brew craft beer and sharing the message of conservation with the community. © Daniel White/TNC; Tagging fish near Virginia's offshore wind project. © Brendan Runde/TNC



Bottom: At the Fernbrook Preserve bioblitz, volunteers helped us document and identify species, a valuable form of citizen science that increases our knowledge about local ecosystems and helps inform land management decisions. © Mark Schwenk; A banded red-cockaded woodpecker flies into its cavity at Piney Grove Preserve. © Megan May





Top: Interns enjoy a paddle at Harrell's Mill Pond. © Taylor Fanelli/TNC

Middle row: TNC helped revegetate a former mineland site in the Cumberland Forest within the Russell County Stonecoal Creek watershed through decompacting soil and planting hardwoods and understory trees. Approximately 150 9th graders from Russell County Schools helped complete the last two acres of the 20.5-acre site. © Link Elmore/TNC; Chincoteague High School students enjoyed TNC's new pontoon, *Navigating Barriers*, during an educational outing. © Jen Miller/TNC

Bottom: Kiptopeke Elementary students learned about seagrass and created presentations at the end of summer school to share with their families. © Sam Oleynik; Right: Musician Dave Matthews

Plant a Billion Trees

It all began in 2003 with 1,000 native trees. That's when The Dave Matthews Band joined forces with The Nature Conservancy and other partners to get roots in the ground at Forks of the Rivanna River, a wetland and stream restoration project near the band's hometown of Charlottesville.

Since that first project, the band has continued its commitment to reforestation through TNC's global Plant a Billion Trees initiative. They've helped plant 5 million trees so far—including hundreds of thousands of longleaf pines across our Virginia Pinelands and the Southeast—and recently committed to an additional 1 million trees in 2025.

The band's investment has enabled the program to expand from the United States to Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, China, Guatemala, Kenya and Tanzania. As a result, millions of people around the world are benefiting from cleaner drinking water, greener lands, increased carbon capture, improved flood mitigation, expanded wildlife habitat and richer livestock grazing.

READ MORE: nature.org/abilliontrees





The Gift of Time and Talent

"I think we're learning more from our interns than they're learning from us," says Bettina Ring, Virginia State Director for The Nature Conservancy.

That's the collaborative spirit behind TNC's Short-Term Experience Program (STEP), which was recognized by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia as a top employer for interns in 2025. The program's goal is two-fold:

1. Build pathways for people interested in exploring the field of conservation.
2. Create an environment where people of all backgrounds, experiences and identities feel welcome to participate.

That level of inclusivity and openness to learning from the interns "is going to make us a stronger organization, better people and better at the work we're doing in the community," says STEP manager Taylor Fanelli.

Since the program began in 2023, participants have worked on a variety of projects. In the summer of 2025, eight interns focused on everything from coastal conservation to invasive species mapping to storytelling. Each experience is part of TNC's collaboration with colleges and universities across the commonwealth to provide hands-on opportunities for emerging conservationists.

"This experience made me more independent," says Jennifer Garcia-Herrera, the 2025 conservation intern for the Virginia Pinelands. "I stepped outside my comfort zone and learned more about what I do and don't like. I see myself staying in land management and restoration. I like the hard work!"

Meet STEP Intern Bella Ravella

Bella Ravella comes from a military family and moved around growing up. She's lived in Arizona, Florida, Texas and, most recently, Tennessee. She is a Belmont University graduate, where she received a degree in Faith and Social Justice with a minor in Photographic Studies. As a STEP intern in marketing and communications, Bella set out to learn more about our Piney Grove Preserve.



Between the Pines and the Pages: Learning about the Land and Legacy of Longleaf Pine

By Bella Ravella

This story is an ode to Nancy Drew, a reflection on my very own summer mystery. I didn't anticipate that my work in marketing and communications would include sifting through 17th century ledgers, corresponding with an anthropologist or sleuthing around the swamp. But I quickly learned that conservation storytelling is, in some ways, a uniquely investigative endeavor.

Chapter 1: The Meeting

In my second week on the job, Brian van Eerden, Virginia Pinelands program director, sat down across from me at the conference table, a curious look on his face. "So, did Ann [my supervisor] mention college lands to you? Well, there's a story idea I've toyed with for a while now. This map shows..." I listened carefully as Brian's voice grew with excitement. Here's what he told me:

Piney Grove is a 3,200-acre TNC preserve an hour south of Richmond, in Sussex County.

Some part of those 3,200 acres, probably, as evidenced in old records, overlaps with historic lands surveyed by The College of William & Mary, circa 1693.

We're not sure how much (or where exactly) the acreage overlaps.

Brian brought Dan Hannon over, Piney Grove's newest land steward, and introduced him to me as another point person for the project. The duo's enthusiasm was striking, as were the questions they posed. Why did the college want these tracts? How was value ascribed to them? Who else had a footprint on them? I immediately set out on a hunt for more information, like Nancy Drew creeping down a hallway toward some unknown end.

To read the next chapter in Bella's mystery, visit nature.org/betweenthepines.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Interns at Ivy Creek © Taylor Fanelli/TNC; Bald cypress at Harrell's Mill Pond © Bella Ravella; Courtesy of Bella Ravella; Trudging through Piney Grove Preserve after a rain © Bella Ravella

Generosity Starts at Home

You are probably aware that The Nature Conservancy accepts donations of land worthy of protection for conservation. But did you know that you can also support conservation by donating a variety of "trade lands"? From single-family homes and apartments to vacation properties and commercial buildings and farms and ranches, many people donate their property for TNC to sell. In 2024–2025 alone, TNC turned 27 generous real estate gifts into \$29 million for critical conservation priorities.



Marcia K. with her husband Seth. Courtesy of Marcia K.

For Marcia K. of Fredericksburg, this option was the perfect choice to make a difference. Marcia's connections to nature include a meaningful career with the National Park Service, and she served as a founding member of Friends of the Rappahannock, a local nonprofit that works to be the voice and active force for a healthy and scenic Rappahannock River.

Marcia first donated a rental home to TNC through a charitable remainder trust, and the home she now shares with her husband is willed to TNC. The legacy planning partnership with TNC has been invaluable. My message to others is "Look at your financial planning needs and where you are NOW... and look at all of the reasons to invest in nature NOW," says Marcia. "Planning with purpose"—especially when it supports the environment and future generations—has been one of the most meaningful things I've done.

Learn how you, too, can leave a legacy for nature. Contact Katherine Magnuson, associate director of development for TNC Virginia, at katherine.magnuson@tnc.org.



Meet more people who make conservation possible.
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Science for the Sea

From Long Island to Cape Hatteras, nearly 50 million people rely on the Mid-Atlantic Seascapes, from the shorelines where they live and recreate, to the deep waters that support industries such as shipping, sport and commercial fishing, and offshore wind energy. This highly productive, diverse ecosystem also teems with ocean life. TNC's marine scientists research the effects of human uses of this ecosystem and inform decisions that balance the needs of people and nature.

Understanding dolphinfish

Together with North Carolina State University, TNC analyzed changes in the diets and sizes of dolphinfish—also called mahi mahi—a prized fish along the entire Atlantic Coast. To fill gaps in what we know about dolphinfish populations, we undertook a series of studies to analyze:

- The sizes of tournament-caught dolphinfish;
- The sizes of trophy dolphinfish caught;
- Stomach contents of 1,300+ dolphinfish distilled from 23 years of data



Collectively, the results suggest a decline in the health of dolphinfish populations. This data is critical for fisheries managers seeking guidance on how to conserve dolphinfish stock.

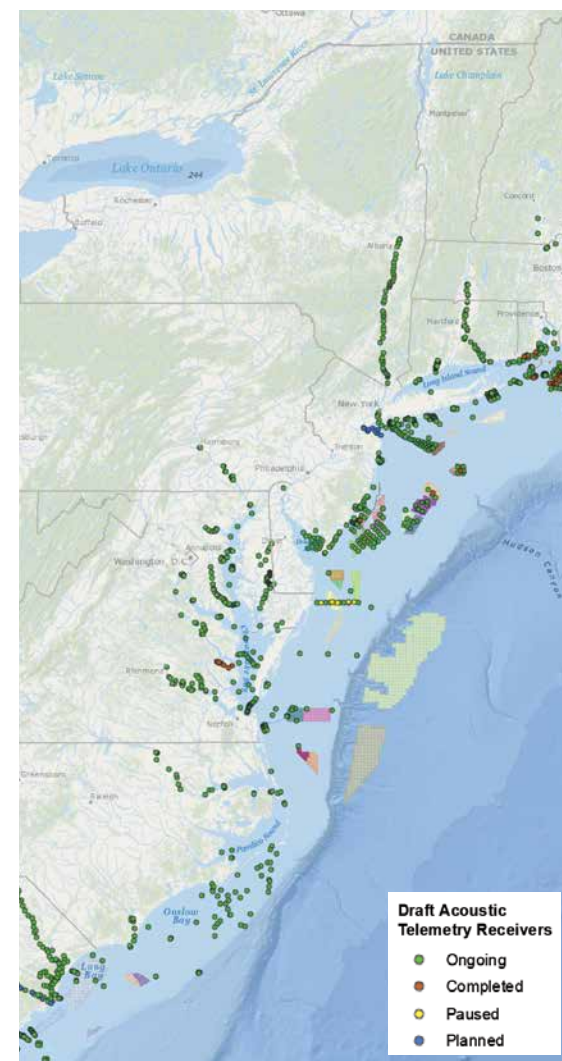
Studying sturgeon

Since 2023, TNC has also partnered with researchers who are tagging endangered Atlantic sturgeon. TNC shares electronic tag data with teams at Rutgers University, Monmouth University, Stony Brook University, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Chesapeake Bay Office. Our goal is a better coastwide understanding of sturgeon migrations and habitat use, including documentation of where sturgeon overlap with human uses of the ocean like coastal and offshore development. In late 2024, researchers applied TNC tags to the first young Atlantic sturgeon in the James River.

Engineering meets ecosystems

TNC researchers have also teamed up with international scientists in an effort to improve global knowledge of how human-made structures in the ocean can benefit natural habitats. The team cataloged increases in human-made structures such as wind turbines and artificial reefs and concurrent declines in natural habitats like coral reefs. Using these findings, they offered recommendations for how human-made structures can facilitate efforts to preserve and restore natural habitats.

Generating knowledge through research is one of the ways TNC advances conservation in the ocean, but our work doesn't end when the science is published. The real value TNC brings is our focus on solutions—we take the science and use it to make change—and in the world of marine conservation, effective, durable policies are what protect marine life and habitats for the long-term.



This map was generated using data on the Northeast Ocean Data Portal on 4/22/2025.
www.northeastoceandata.org

0 30 60 120
Miles

READ MORE: nature.org/midatlanticseascape

Left: TNC's Kate Wilke holds a mahi mahi during a research outing. © Brendan Runde/TNC; Above: Telemetry receivers along the Atlantic Coast provide location of tagged marine life.



TNC Virginia staff and trustees visit Senator Aaron Rouse (center), who represents Virginia Beach. Courtesy of Sen. Rouse's office

Policy for Productive Places

Virginia has bold goals for tackling climate change, including reaching net-zero emissions by 2045. One key to achieving that outcome is rapidly building solar energy capacity. Clean energy is essential to a healthy future, but that transition can't come at the expense of treasured forests and productive farmland.

In 2022, the Virginia General Assembly passed HB206 to reduce that risk. "Virginia was one of the first states in the nation to require mitigation for solar installations," says Nikki Rovner, TNC Virginia's

associate state director, who oversees policy initiatives.

In the three years that followed, TNC provided scientific expertise and advised on best practices to inform the regulations that were developed pursuant to the legislation. "Intact forests store carbon, so we promoted an approach that would protect Virginia's most at-risk and most ecologically significant forests," says Judy Dunscomb, senior conservation scientist at TNC. "This approach also matters for communities, ensuring that productive

and treasured lands are not converted to energy production. We have plenty of land that is better suited for renewable energy installations, like already-impacted lands such as brownfields, former mines and farmland with low productivity."

Rovner adds that, looking ahead, helping localities benefit from solar energy is a priority. "We are working with stakeholders to understand the issues that face communities, and ultimately, to develop solutions that respond to concerns and enable the approval of as many projects as possible."

READ MORE: nature.org/VApolicy

Planning for High Tide

The quiet community of Oyster sits on the seaside of the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The name speaks to the long history that the waterfront has played in the economic and cultural fabric of the region—and the state at large. Coastal storms and tidal flooding are also part of the area's heritage, but today, climate change and habitat loss are accelerating their impacts. In Oyster, places that flood occasionally today are projected to experience chronic or even daily flooding by mid-century with sea-level rise.

In response to these flooding concerns, TNC partnered with Northampton County to facilitate a community-driven Coastal Adaptation and Resilience Plan for Oyster. With the help of community members, TNC and Northampton County formed a Resilience Steering Committee composed of interested stakeholder groups, including residents, property owners, aquaculture industry, local government, county planners and research representatives to ensure a community-driven planning effort.

"The result is a plan that supports the town's vision for the future as a thriving community of people and

nature that is safe, cohesive, and maintains a working waterfront for commercial and recreational fishing, as well as scientific research, in the face of rising sea levels," says Susan Bates, TNC coastal science program manager.

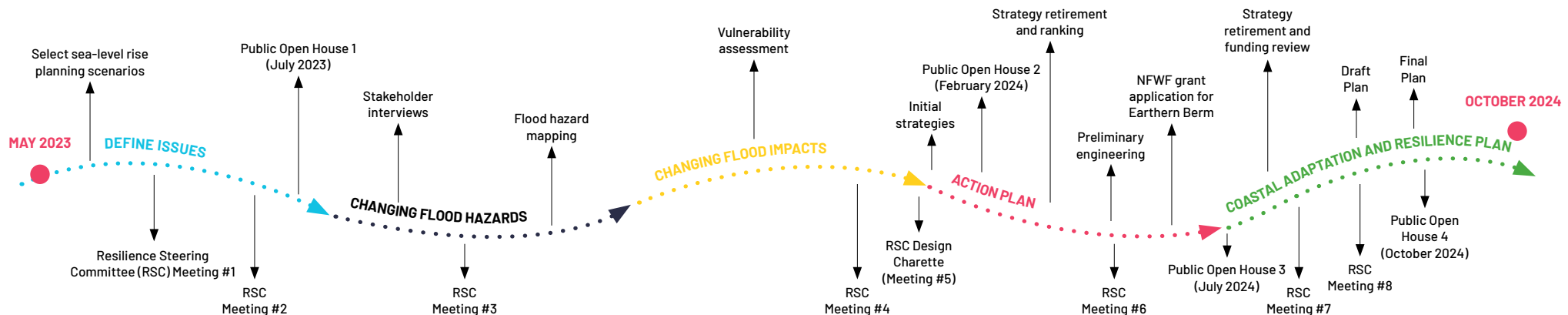
The plan culminated in five community-prioritized strategies that focus on increasing resilience to flooding, including 10% engineered designs to ready the projects for funding applications. TNC and partners have secured funding for one of these strategies: reducing flood risk to the southern side of the town harbor. The strategy includes an earthen berm, wetland plantings and living breakwaters as well as raising the current bulkhead along the working waterfront while using nature-based methods. These projects will bring the strategy design to 90% and make it ready for permitting.

Following Hurricane Isabel in 2003, many homes were elevated with federal grant funding, but not every vulnerable property was addressed, and some did not meet the FEMA cost-benefit requirements at the time, leading to a second community-prioritized



project. TNC and partners are now providing the necessary cost-benefit calculations included in the Plan that are needed to apply for these funds.

"This plan is the first of its kind on the Eastern Shore, and using this as a blueprint, two other coastal communities have now received funding to write similar plans," says Bates. "As coastal flood conditions change with sea-level rise and other compounding environmental factors, we look forward to supporting Oyster on project implementation and working together with other communities on resilience planning to preserve their historical ties to the waterfront and maintain important coastal habitat in the face of these changes."



Nature's Filters: Green Solutions Below the Surface

Beneath the waves, two unassuming marine species play an outsized role in protecting people and wildlife: oysters and seagrass. Oysters are filter feeders that clean the water, and their reefs provide nurseries and feeding grounds for other marine life that ultimately support local fisheries and economies. Similarly, seagrass beds improve water quality and provide wildlife habitat, while also helping to mitigate the impacts of climate change: Five acres of eelgrass can soak up enough carbon dioxide to offset driving a car 15,000 miles a year.

"Despite the ecological significance of oysters and seagrass, how they're being impacted by climate change and nature loss is relatively unknown," says Bo Lusk, coastal scientist. "This speaks to a broader need for marine habitat research that takes these circumstances into account to inform restoration."

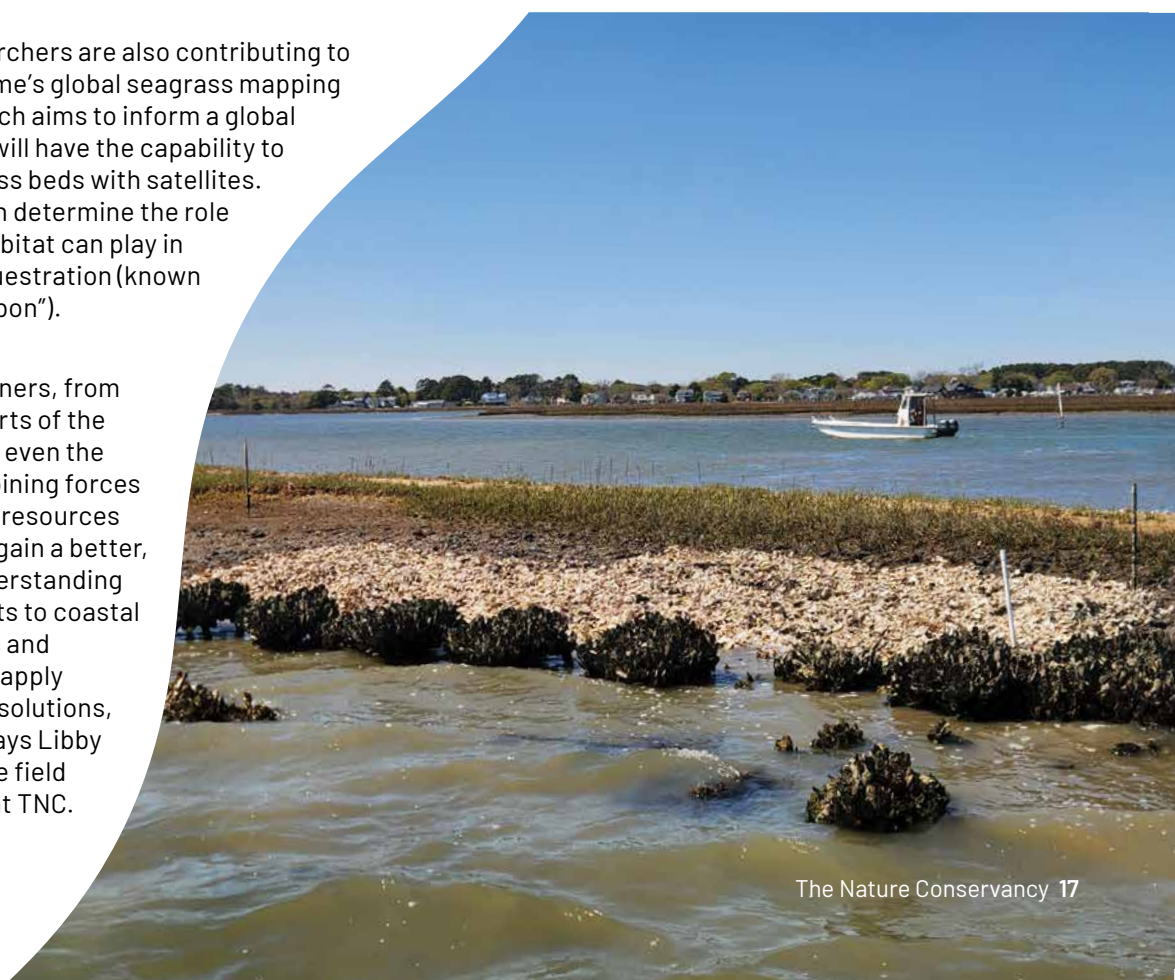
TNC's Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve (VVCR), which oversees 14 undeveloped barrier and marsh islands—the longest expanse of coastal wilderness remaining on the East Coast—is playing a key role in organizing collaborative research that will help protect oysters, eelgrass and other coastal species. From Prince Edward Island, Canada, to Corpus Christi, Texas, VVCR researchers are partnering with the Smithsonian's Marine Global Earth Observatory (MarineGEO) Network, North Carolina State University, Duke University and the North Carolina Coastal Federation to investigate the drivers of change in coastal habitats.

Among these efforts is a three-year collaboration with North Carolina State University to study interactions between shellfish and seagrass. "We are learning what to expect from different oyster, clam and seagrass restoration scenarios across state lines and regional geographies," says Lusk. "With this knowledge, partners can invest in more effective restoration techniques and projects to achieve the desired results tailored to different locales."

VVCR researchers are also contributing to Earth Genome's global seagrass mapping project, which aims to inform a global model that will have the capability to map seagrass beds with satellites. This tool can determine the role seagrass habitat can play in carbon sequestration (known as "blue carbon").

"Varied partners, from different parts of the country and even the world, are joining forces and sharing resources and data to gain a better, holistic understanding of the threats to coastal ecosystems and how we can apply meaningful solutions, together," says Libby Bieri, marine field technician at TNC.

Opposite page: A community member looks at the action plan for making the Town of Oyster more resilient to sea-level rise. © Susan Bates/TNC; This page, top to bottom: Monitoring restored oyster reefs at Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge during a winter freeze © Bo Lusk/TNC; Wachapreague shell plant © Bo Lusk/TNC



Fiery Progress

For millions of years, fire has shaped the diversity of life on Earth. Using sophisticated fire practices, Indigenous peoples cared for forests, prairies and other ecosystems. Without such intentional stewardship, including the use of controlled burns, these vital landscapes degrade over time or vanish entirely.

That's why The Nature Conservancy and partners across 18 states are working to bring fire back to the land. TNC's Appalachians program is focused on building capacity, fostering collaboration and allocating resources to expand controlled burns in each state within the region, each with its own diverse fire management capabilities and needs.

"Our goal of improving management on nearly 4 million acres across the Appalachians by 2030 depends heavily on scaling up this work with partners, including Tribes, state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, contractors and others," says Blair Smyth, director of the Allegheny Highlands Program. "Doing so not only benefits the land and wildlife and reduces the buildup of fuels that can lead to large, damaging wildfires, but it also directly supports local communities. Restoring fire to the landscape helps revitalize a culture of stewardship among Appalachian residents while creating new conservation-based employment opportunities that strengthen local economies."

To help meet these goals, in 2025 TNC Virginia assisted state agencies and the U.S. Forest Service on 11 spring burns, covering just over 3,600 acres. One particularly notable burn was a 1,300-acre Forest Service burn that TNC supported on Fore

Mountain. This site, lacking fire since 2008, is especially critical in the Appalachians as a model for the more open canopy we are seeking to achieve in fire-adapted mountain forests.

In addition, two dozen participants representing four agencies gathered for tailored Wilderness First Aid Training through the Heart of the Appalachians Fire Learning Network. This training was just one of five interagency fire readiness programs hosted this year. These regular trainings build skills, relationships, and trust that allow practitioners from diverse backgrounds to show up on burn days as an integrated workforce.

In our longleaf pine savannas in southeastern Virginia, fire is also needed for a healthy and biodiverse landscape. For centuries, longleaf forests were overharvested, and a more recent era of fire suppression degraded remaining stands. The once-abundant red-cockaded woodpecker concurrently experienced a steep decline. By 1999, when TNC began managing Piney Grove Preserve, the property held the last three breeding pairs of red-cockaded woodpeckers in all of Virginia.

The timing of TNC's intervention was critical. Our early years of management focused on stabilizing habitat and stemming population decline, gradually introducing controlled burns to thin the canopy of the unnaturally young and dense forest. Longleaf needs fire to thrive, and a more open canopy enables hundreds of types

of flora to proliferate on the forest floor, becoming a haven for all sizes of wildlife.

Between these and other measures such as tree plantings, we're seeing remarkable results. The red-cockaded woodpecker, which almost went extinct in Virginia, is making a comeback. TNC documents breeding results at Piney Grove annually, recording 35 fledglings in 2024 and 48 in 2025.





Clockwise from top: Blair Smyth, Zoe McGee and Laurel Schablein of the Allegheny Highlands team © Kyle LaFerriere; Tagging red-cockaded woodpecker chicks this spring at Piney Grove Preserve © Ann Nallo/TNC; Illustration: Jessica Battista; Controlled burn in the Allegheny Highlands © Kyle LaFerriere






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Volunteers Giving Time and Talent

From improving elk habitat in the Clinch Valley to planting trees in the Virginia Pinelands to collecting eelgrass in our bays, TNC's accomplishments in Virginia would not be possible without the hundreds of volunteers who work alongside us each year. Over the past decade, more than 6,000 volunteers have donated over 50,000 hours of their time to our conservation in Virginia. Thank you to our volunteers, and to all who support us in so many ways!

Left: Nick Proctor, Clinch Valley community outreach manager, gathers with volunteers ahead of native river cane restoration. © Mark Schwenk