OUR VIRGINIA
2020 Impact Report
It’s often said that a crisis doesn’t build character; it reveals it. This past year has presented nearly overwhelming challenges. In conservation, as in every other aspect of our lives, we’ve encountered frustrations and setbacks. Yet I am greatly heartened by the positivity and persistence with which our whole Virginia team has adapted to new ways of working.

Moreover, I am deeply gratified by the unwavering passion and commitment to conservation of supporters like you. Even in these anxious and uncertain times, you have risen to the occasion, helped keep our priorities on track and propelled us toward some big conservation victories that would be remarkable in any year.

I hope you will be as inspired as I am by the success stories in this issue, as well as by the years and, often, decades of sustained effort and leadership required to achieve these results. One thing this year has made clear is the enormous value of investing in resilient natural systems, as so many people have found solace and comfort in nature.

“Protection is nature’s vaccine, and one that we need to deploy around the world for the benefit of all species, including our own,” Jeffrey Parrish, a TNC global managing director, wrote this summer. I sincerely thank you for joining us in our endeavor to create a healthier future for nature and people. Working together, with purpose and determination, we can make all the difference in the world.

Locke Ogens, Virginia State Director
WHERE WE WORK

Thirty Years of Leadership

The Nature Conservancy salutes Bill Kittrell for 30 years of leadership—and counting! Kittrell began his TNC career guiding our fledgling Clinch Valley program. As deputy state director overseeing all conservation programs, he tackles complex challenges with a unique combination of conservation expertise, business acumen and respect for others—all essential to successfully negotiate TNC’s recent 250,000-acre acquisition launching the Cumberland Forest Project.

A Southern Reunion

Seeking to increase efficiency, The Nature Conservancy consolidated its regional structures this year. As a result of the reorganization, Virginia moved to TNC’s Southern U.S. division, led by former long-time state director Michael Lipford. The reunion has already facilitated more cross-state collaboration on priorities such as restoring longleaf-pine systems.
CONSERVATION IN THE TIME OF COVID

FINDING RESILIENCE, PURPOSE AND HOPE IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL CHALLENGES
As we all face a global crisis unlike any in recent memory, our primary concern remains the health of our loved ones, colleagues and communities. But recent experience has also underscored our urgent need to keep working toward a sustainable future. To that end, The Nature Conservancy’s Virginia team has grappled with anxieties and, ultimately, demonstrated our resolve. We’ve adapted to new ways of working, while finding new inspiration and hope from our communities and our shared sense of purpose in protecting the natural systems on which life depends.

HIGHLIGHTS IN THE HIGHLANDS

On a clear, sunny June morning, Blair Smyth and a small group of TNC colleagues form a circle outside the compact Blue Grass, Virginia, post office. It’s the first foray back in the field for the group after three months of interacting through computer screens, and the excitement at the rendezvous is palpable, despite face coverings and the minimum six feet of distance between each person. “We’ve got a cave to find,” Smyth says, dispersing the group to its ultimate destination.

Smyth, who heads TNC’s Allegheny Highlands team, leads the way out of the valley and onto a rough track hugging the edge of a forested slope. Below, Straight Fork is anything but straight as its braided course meanders for two miles through valley meadows and countless beaver ponds. Smyth finally eases to a stop and, following directions from locals, points the way up a steep, muddy mountainside. The goal is to follow a side stream to where it reportedly gushes forth from the mouth of a cave. After forging upwards roughly the length of two football fields, the group finds the cave, taking turns scrambling up from the stream to explore a dark rift in the rocky mountain.

Completing the cave quest is a cherry on top of a productive day exploring and documenting a recent conservation easement encompassing over 1,800 acres. “The most impressive thing about this project is just the sheer diversity of the habitat we’re conserving up here,” says Smyth. “I mean, you’ve got everything from this cave system to trout streams to beaver meadows to spruce-fir forest to a grove of massive old sugar maples.”

Moreover, the property’s strategic location stands to make an even bigger conservation impact, preserving vital habitat corridors that connect Virginia’s George Washington and Jefferson National Forests with West Virginia’s Monongahela National Forest.

This project was made possible through the vision and generosity of landowner Fitz Gary, who donated a permanent conservation easement on the entire property last December. This year, Gary donated 1,824 acres outright to TNC for preservation.

Generous Donor Protects Highlands

Landowner Fitz Gary donated a conservation easement late last year on 1,839 rugged, remote acres in Highland County between Blue Grass and the West Virginia state line. Having recently returned to Virginia after living for years in northern California, Gary compares his first impression of the land he’s owned since 1972 and adjacent Blue Grass Valley as “almost as overwhelming as driving into Yosemite.” This year, Gary worked with Blair Smyth and the Allegheny Highlands team to ensure permanent stewardship of the rich habitat, which includes diverse mountain forests, streams, caves and picturesque beaver meadows. He is retaining 15 acres to use during his lifetime, while donating the rest outright to TNC.

EXPLORE: Turn the page for more conservation highlights and learn more about our partnership with landowner Fitz Gary at nature.org/virginia.
CONSERVATION IN THE TIME OF COVID
MORE HIGHLIGHTS

VICTORY AT SEA

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission has adopted a new management approach for the Atlantic menhaden—the most important fish in the sea. Rather than setting catch limits based simply on menhaden numbers, the commission will use “ecological reference points” that take into account the needs of myriad ocean species that depend on menhaden. According to Kate Wilke, TNC fisheries scientist and long-time advocate for the change, “This decision may be held up as a new model, a new way to ensure that our ecosystem is vibrant and brimming with life.” Learn more at nature.org/menhaden.

A humpback whale feeds on menhaden. A revolutionary new approach to fisheries management will help protect critical Atlantic Ocean food webs. © Sutton Lynch

PINEY GROVE PRESERVE EXPANDS

TNC’s recent acquisitions of Harrell’s Mill Pond and nearby lands expand our Piney Grove Preserve to almost 4,000 acres and the overall protected area to well over 10,000 acres. We will restore pine savanna habitat across the property to boost populations of native wildlife, including bobwhite quail and the imperiled red-cockaded woodpecker. Grants from the Cabell Foundation and WestRock and donations from a long list of TNC supporters made these acquisitions possible. Learn more at nature.org/vapinelands.

Acquiring Harrell’s Mill Pond adds a new freshwater dimension and opportunities to expand habitat restoration in the Virginia Pinelands. © Robert B. Clontz/TNC
CLINCH VALLEY FARM GRANT AWARDED

Having successfully deployed a $4.2 million grant from the Natural Resources Conservation Service to help local farmers reduce pollution in the Clinch and Powell rivers, TNC’s Clinch Valley program was recently awarded an additional $2 million to extend the program. Project leader Ronald Lambert’s long-standing working relationships with the agricultural community, combined with Angela Watland’s scientific modeling, enable us to target farms that have the greatest potential to improve water quality.

HISTORIC LEGISLATION PASSES

In August, the Great American Outdoors Act was signed into law. This historic legislation provides $1.9 billion annually over the next five years to address deferred maintenance backlogs on public lands and permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund at $900 million per year. For many years, TNC has persistently advocated for this national commitment to conservation, and we thank our many partners and supporters who made this remarkable achievement possible.
In January of 1955, the United States Navy announced a plan for Parramore Island, the largest of Virginia’s barrier islands. The Navy would condemn Parramore, legally and figuratively, and turn the island into a bombing range. The island’s rare old-growth maritime forest would lie squarely in the crosshairs of two proposed target areas, virtually assuring its destruction. Migratory birds and other wildlife dependent on this habitat would face immeasurable peril.

Parramore’s owners reached out to The Nature Conservancy in hopes of protecting the island as a wildlife refuge. The idea would take nearly 20 years to come to full fruition, yet it set in motion a dynamic that continues today: local people joining in partnership with TNC to defend the lands and waters on which their lives depend.

Alarming Development

Back then, TNC was a fledgling organization, so the quest to protect the islands began, necessarily, as grassroots letter-writing and outreach campaigns.

The small conservation community, local Chamber of Commerce and watermen found themselves in an exceedingly rare alignment for the time over threats to wild habitat and to commercial and recreational fishing grounds. Facing this united opposition, the Navy dropped its plans.

But in late 1969, a massive new development threat suddenly loomed. New York-based Smith Island Development Corporation announced that it had purchased Smith, Myrtle and Ship Shoal islands and planned to build a $150 million resort and second-home community for at least 40,000 people.

Power of Partnership

A 1970 New York Times article highlighted the development scheme, reviving now-urgent negotiations involving TNC and landowners. Patrick Noonan, who later would become TNC’s president, was visiting the islands to discuss conservation options with trustee Ed Bentley and representatives from The Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust when a proverbial lightbulb clicked on. The group realized that, working together, they could protect not only a tract here and there, but an entire barrier island ecosystem.

By year’s end, TNC acquired Godwin and Hog islands and then purchased Smith, Myrtle and Ship Shoal islands from Smith Island Development.
Years of persistence and relationship building bore more fruit in 1973, when TNC added Parramore as a crown jewel in our island chain. By 1975, the Cary Trust had invested nearly $8 million in our Eastern Shore program.

As a result of these combined efforts, the Virginia Coast Reserve encompassed nearly all of 14 islands—then, as now, the longest stretch of wilderness along the nation’s entire Atlantic coastline.

**Living Laboratory for the World**

By the time TNC named its original Virginia Coast Reserve, the evolved organization had committed to a long-term investment in the Eastern Shore. Today, maintaining decades-strong partnerships with communities, myriad agencies and private foundations, our newly renamed Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve manages one of the most influential living laboratories in the world.

Having piloted community-based conservation, contributed landmark migratory bird research, pioneered oyster reef reconstruction and accomplished the largest seagrass restoration in the world, the reserve continues to produce groundbreaking science and innovative conservation. Our conservation scientists and partners are unlocking more new knowledge by the day about protecting coastal communities around the world from the harshest impacts of climate change. While the environmental challenges we face are serious, our Eastern Shore success story offers abundant hope for the next 50 years.

**Decades of Making a Difference**

The Nature Conservancy has renamed our conservation program on the Eastern Shore of Virginia in honor of The Volgenau Foundation’s three decades of support. Dr. Ernst Volgenau and family have made possible some of TNC’s largest success stories—from the Atlantic to the Appalachians in Virginia, along with the Pacific coast. But the family maintains a special connection and commitment to the Eastern Shore, where their partnership with TNC began. To mark the program’s 50th anniversary, the foundation’s most recent contribution is a leadership gift of $5 million, which they hope will inspire others to support the next half-century of innovative science and conservation in one of Virginia’s most iconic landscapes.
CELEBRATING VIRGINIA’S LARGEST LONGLEAF PINE RESTORATION

Burner Bob the bobwhite quail joined landowner Bill Owen, TNC and myriad partners to celebrate the permanent protection of Owen’s Raccoon Creek Pinelands. © Daniel White/TNC
**HOT PURSUIT**

A bull trails two cows during last fall’s elk mating season in southwestern Virginia, where TNC’s Cumberland Forest Project provides over 150,000 acres for these majestic animals to roam. © Roger Kirby

**GRAND REOPENING**

Volunteer Jeff Wright (far right) helped stewardship staff develop a new entrance and trail to increase access at Voorhees Preserve. © Daniel White/TNC

**TEACHING THE TEACHERS**

Hands-on workshops for teachers resumed in August at the Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve, which offers free environmental education programs to every teacher and student in Northampton and Accomack county schools. © Marcus Killmon/TNC

**ALL HANDS ON DECK**

In 2020, Take Your Daughter to Work Day can come any day. Baby Eleanor helped mom Laurel Schablein survey plant life to assess benefits from prescribed fire in the Allegheny Highlands. © Laurel Schablein/TNC

**GREEN THUMBS UP**

In September, Julie Erickson hosted her 20th annual backyard plant sale, which over the years has raised more than $50,000 to support TNC conservation priorities. © Andy Lacatell/TNC
IN WATER
WE TRUST

VIRGINIA AQUATIC RESOURCES TRUST FUND
MARKS QUARTER CENTURY OF RESTORING
WETLANDS AND STREAMS
There was a time when buying swampland, like purchasing the Brooklyn Bridge, supplied a punchline for countless jokes. Over the last 25 years, though, the Virginia Aquatic Resources Trust Fund has proven the wisdom of investing in wetlands and streams and in restoring the natural services they provide to everyone, such as cleaning our water, reducing floods and providing outdoor recreation.

When the trust fund launched in 1995, it presented a straightforward option for developers whose projects impacted small, scattered wetlands (generally less than an acre). Instead of attempting on-site measures of dubious quality and benefit, developers could mitigate damages by paying fees set by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Nature Conservancy would then use those pooled resources to undertake larger-scale conservation projects in places identified as priorities.

The trust fund's early years focused on restoring the Green Sea Wetlands of southeastern Virginia, enhancing habitat as well as natural water filters in river systems that provide drinking water for residents in Hampton Roads. In 2003, the program expanded to include stream projects. One of the most complex stream restorations in Virginia involved restoring approximately two miles of Charlottesville’s Meadow Creek and protecting new city parkland.

The program has also evolved to keep current with legal and regulatory changes, as well as to engage more partners. Today, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality is a co-administrator, and the trust fund team regularly consults with experts from myriad agencies and organizations. Tribal representatives are weighing in on a current project at Cedar Creek Battlefields in the Shenandoah Valley.

“We’ve also prevented tons of sediment from polluting streams and served as a mitigation model that’s being emulated in states such as Ohio and Utah,” Johnson says. Looking to the trust fund’s next quarter century, Johnson adds, “I’d like to leverage our 25 years of experience to replicate the success of TNC’s Fire Learning Exchange, but for wetland and stream mitigation and restoration.”

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**OUR VIRGINIA AQUATIC RESOURCES TRUST FUND HAS CONSERVED MORE THAN 20,000 ACRES, NEARLY HALF OF WHICH IS PUBLIC LAND.**

— Karen Johnson, Director

ONLINE: Explore key restoration projects and reflections from members of our Trust Fund team at [nature.org/vartf](http://nature.org/vartf).
CONSERVATION AND RACE
A CONVERSATION WITH DR. MAMIE PARKER

“WHEN WE BRING PEOPLE OF COLOR AND OTHER PEOPLE TO THE TABLE, WE'RE TALKING ABOUT OUR FUTURE. WE NEED THEM.” — Dr. Mamie Parker
Dr. Mamie Parker is the first African-American woman to lead Fisheries and a regional office at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Following retirement from government service, Parker began coaching other leaders. She also serves as a Virginia trustee for The Nature Conservancy.

You've shared before that your mother influenced your love for nature.

Parker: My mother only had an eighth-grade education, but she was very smart, an avid angler and a great gardener. As the last child, I got a lot of time with her and many life lessons on the banks of the Bayou Bartholomew and Lake Enterprise in southern Arkansas. That's where I started appreciating the outdoors.

What was your experience of race relations growing up?

I integrated my third-grade class in the mid-1960s, and there was not a lot of socializing between Blacks and whites. To integrate the schools was a big deal. They had to choose certain children that they thought had resilience and that would survive in that environment.

What was that like for you?

Pioneers are very lonesome people, and so I had some lonesome, lonesome moments of being pretty much ignored. I learned the importance of not quitting. That's a big burden on pioneers, to have to carry the weight of a whole population on their shoulders.

What inspired you to go into science and conservation?

What really got to me was when [my science teacher] talked about the mercury in the fish. I asked more questions, because my family ate a lot of fish. And I started reading up on it and found out about pesticides, about DDT. I was inspired by him saying, “What can you do about this?”

Since becoming a TNC trustee, you’ve become a passionate advocate for our Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve.

That became like my baby. [TNC realized it] needed to get support from the local community, including the Black community. Today, they do that through the children: Many elementary school children in that area come to the reserve to learn about it. And we hope in years to come that these individuals will be the ones that are protecting this land.

You’ve said engaging people of color is not only right, but also a good business decision.

We need a diverse range of partners. When you look at who's leading Congress right now, many of the important committees on the House side, they're being led by people of color. They're chairing many of the natural resource committees; they're minority leaders on the Senate committees. [Those leaders] represent large blocks of people of color. We need them in the movement.

Where should the conservation movement go from here?

We have to think about nontraditional partners and the value that they add. When we bring people of color and other people to the table, we're talking about our future. We need them. Community conservation, in my mind, is the conservation of the future.

ONLINE: Read the full interview at nature.org/mamieparkerconversation.
HIGHER EDUCATION

PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS IN NATURE’S LIVING LABORATORIES
For some college students, an “open classroom” is more than a concept. Their experiences in higher education may include sinking hip deep in a mudflat, picking apart coyote scat or piloting drones over forests. In partnership with at least 20 colleges and universities, The Nature Conservancy provides our next generation of conservationists with opportunities to study in some of the world’s most extraordinary living laboratories.

Our Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve, for example, hosts scientists from Virginia and around the world and has spawned countless research projects. But you don’t have to possess a Ph.D.—or even be in hot pursuit of one—to study in this outdoor lab. “We enjoy nothing more than sharing this special place and the important work we do here with students,” says director Jill Bieri. In fact, the reserve welcomes learners on all levels, offering a hands-on environmental education program for local public-school students, as well as experiences for undergraduates.

In early March—shortly before the pandemic caused closures and travel restrictions—new science director Dr. Susan Bates hosted a group of Old Dominion University students at Brownsville Preserve, the reserve’s headquarters. Focused on what their professor, Dr. Hans-Peter Plag, calls a “wicked problem,” the students came to gather real-world observations and develop recommendations for enhancing Brownsville’s resilience to climate change.

That same week, Jim McGowan, who leads land protection efforts on the Eastern Shore, coordinated a week’s worth of service projects as an alternative spring break for a group from Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The Carlisle crew undertook tasks ranging from shoreline and trail cleanups to deploying bags of shell at a reef restoration site.

**ONLINE:** Visit our “Living Laboratories” webpage to see more photos from these students’ experiences and explore how TNC engages with students from the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech and many other institutions: [nature.org/livinglaboratoriesVA](http://nature.org/livinglaboratoriesVA).

— Jill Bieri, Director, Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve
THANK YOU!

The Nature Conservancy is grateful to Virginia donors who are investing in our long-term sustainability and advancing our conservation agenda. Our thanks to the following Conservation Heroes who made pledge and intention payments or outright gifts in the following leadership ranges during the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2019, and ending June 30, 2020.

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We are grateful to the following Virginia donors who made new commitments to advance our conservation agenda during the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2019, and ending June 30, 2020.

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Please bring any errors or omissions to our attention by contacting liz.blaine@tnc.org.

Land donor Fitz Gary protected more than 1,800 scenic acres, helping preserve vital forest corridors in the Central Appalachians. © Daniel White/TNC

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Thanks to supporters like you, this year we added Harrell’s Mill Pond to Piney Grove Preserve. © Robert B. Clontz/TNC