



KENTUCKY
FIELD NOTES

FALL/WINTER 2020

Reckoning with Race



During the early days of the coronavirus, I developed a standard, albeit sincere, response to the “how are you doing?” questions we all field at the start of numerous Zoom calls. I said I felt fortunate. My family and I were healthy, we had a comfortable home and good neighborhood to shelter in, and my wife and I still had our jobs. As millions fell sick or lost their jobs, our family’s blessings grew all the larger by comparison. My feelings of attendant responsibility grew as well. While working for The Nature Conservancy has always provided me the gift of work grounded in a mission, my own “am I doing enough?” questions increasingly shadowed my sense of good fortune.

The police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many other people of color and the associated outpouring of grief and anger witnessed in widespread national protests brought my own questions of fortune and privilege into even sharper focus. While long aware of the racial inequities that are thoroughly engrained in the American experience, thinking more deeply about my health, my community, and my job brought new clarity to the fact that much of my fortune is far less attainable to millions of my fellow citizens because of the color of their skin. And as much as I have personally opposed racial inequities, my actions to directly improve equity have clearly fallen short.

My personal reckoning on these issues mirrors larger efforts by The Nature Conservancy through our organization-wide investment in diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many of these investments pre-date this summer’s protests by many years, but there is an increased willingness by leadership, including most notably our new CEO, Jennifer Morris, to speak up and act. As colleagues of color made their voices heard, Jennifer answered the call on June 1 with a statement on why silence is not an option for environmentalists. “Yes, we must speak out,” Jennifer wrote. “When injustice reigns—whether it is unequal access to nature, unfair and inequitable laws, or police brutality—we must all do our part to push for change.” To read the full statement, please go to nature.org/racism.

Two areas of focus for us in Kentucky are building a more diverse staff and Board and ensuring green space, natural areas, and public lands are more accessible and welcoming to all Kentuckians. (The passage of the Great American Outdoors Act will help; see page 3.) We have a lot of work to do on both fronts but are committed to the long, sustained effort needed. Let’s get to work.

Thanks, as always, for your ongoing and generous support of The Nature Conservancy and a world where all people and nature thrive.

Most sincerely,

David Phemister, State Director

COVER Vivian Nguyen (TNC Americorps member) enjoys the scenery while hiking in Aravaipa Canyon Preserve, Arizona. © Justin Bailie; THIS PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT A cardinal perches on a tree at Dupree Nature Preserve. © Oliver Starks; Kentucky State Director David Phemister © Mike Wilkinson

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The Great American OUTDOORS ACT

BECOMES LAW

A once-in-a-generation investment in conservation has now been signed into law. The Great American Outdoors Act provides for full and permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and five years of funding to address deferred maintenance at national parks and other public lands. The Nature Conservancy was one of the principal advocates for the legislation, and its passage was the culmination of decades of work.

“The Conservancy has been involved in efforts to permanently fund LWCF for many years,” says Heather Majors, director of external affairs for the Kentucky chapter. “We’ve been a proud member of the LWCF Coalition, which includes other environmental groups, sportsman’s groups, and outdoor recreation groups, all working toward this common goal.”

The LWCF is funded by offshore oil and gas revenues—not tax dollars—and supports public lands and recreation. The Conservancy and its partners have utilized LWCF funding for many land protection projects since the 1960s. While state and federal partners may have to wait years to purchase land, the Conservancy can step in and buy the land and hold onto it until a funding source is identified. The LWCF provides a critical funding source for securing important natural areas, historic and cultural sites, and recreational opportunities and managing them as public lands accessible to all.

“This is the best news for land protection in Kentucky in a long, long time,” says Dian Osbourne, director of protection for the Kentucky chapter. “I’m very excited that there will be a significant increase in funding that our partners can access to work with us on land protection.”

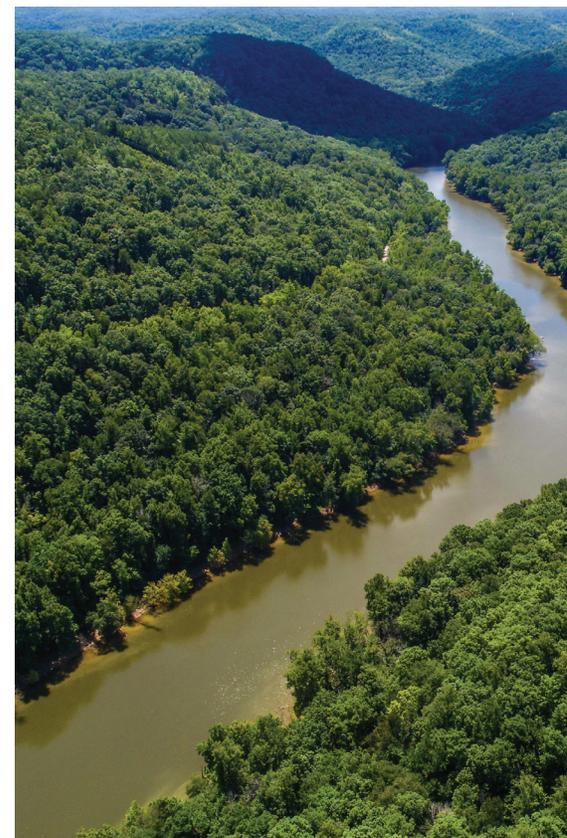
Previously, funding amounts appropriated to LWCF were only a fraction of the \$900 million it is authorized to receive. Majors says Fiscal Year 2020 saw the highest appropriation in 15 years for the fund, at \$495 million. Now the \$900 million yearly appropriation is enshrined in law.

“It took years of Conservancy staff developing relationships in Congress, coupled with our trustees’ willingness to leverage their relationships with key members at the right time,” Majors says. “In the Kentucky chapter, our primary role was to build support for the legislation from our own congressional delegation. It was an important role to play because Senator McConnell, the Majority Leader, is from Kentucky. We were thrilled that he supported the bill as a co-sponsor and guided it through the Senate, where it passed 73-25.”

In addition to fully and permanently funding the LWCF, the Great American Outdoors Act provides for \$9.5 billion over the next five years to address deferred maintenance needs at national parks and other public lands. Both provisions of the bill will help stimulate the economy. Research on the impact of the

LWCF shows that every \$1 spent generates \$4 in economic value from natural resource goods and services. Addressing maintenance on public lands could generate nearly 110,000 infrastructure-related jobs nationally.

“The importance of passing the Great American Outdoors Act and the effect on the future of land protection in Kentucky can’t be stressed enough,” Osbourne says. “This is an exciting time for Kentucky’s great natural resources and the wildlife, human communities, and economies that depend on their conservation and sustainable management.”



The Nature We Depend on DEPENDS ON US

From the bottomland hardwood forests of western Kentucky to the Appalachian Mountains in the east, our state is home to some of the most beautiful landscapes and important wildlife habitats in the country. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and the quality of life we enjoy are all intrinsically connected to the health of our natural world. And now, the nature we depend on depends on us. Indeed, the choices and investments we make as a society today will determine our own future and the future we leave to our loved ones. Change isn't coming. It is here. And conservation can't wait.

"I give to The Nature Conservancy because it delivers real, tangible conservation results for Kentucky and our world."

—Gordon Dabney,
Board Treasurer and Campaign Co-Chair

These conservation imperatives and a correspondingly ambitious conservation vision are at the heart of **Our Kentucky** campaign, by far the largest in our chapter's history. Thanks to supporters like you, we are already well on our way to achieving our fundraising goals. But there is still important work to be done. Read on to learn about the critical conservation work we have accomplished, and the additional gains we'll make in the coming years.



Our Forests and Grasslands

- Secured the acquisition of the 253,000-acre Cumberland Forest property, including over 54,000 acres in Kentucky, the largest land conservation project in chapter history.
- Developed the Working Woodlands and Working Forests for Wildlife programs as key climate strategies and tools to secure a resilient and connected corridor through the Appalachians.
- With partners, employed prescribed fire on tens of thousands of acres, improving forest health and wildlife habitat and reducing wildfire risk.

Our Rivers and Streams

- Working with partners at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), enrolled approximately

9,000 acres of western Kentucky wetlands in restoration programs, continuing the largest floodplain and wetland restoration project in state history.

- Secured \$4.36 million for a five-year monitoring study that will quantify wetland restoration benefits and may help secure future investments.
- Helped secure \$14.9 million in federal funding for the Dogtooth Bend project in Illinois, a top floodplain restoration priority of the larger Mississippi River Basin project.

Our Cities

- Began planting hundreds of trees and shrubs in the Green Heart project area, with plans for thousands more in the near future.

- Granted \$250,000 to community-based organizations to assist with community engagement and tree planting for the Green Heart project.
- With partners, conducted feasibility assessments and initiated conceptual planning for a park in the Mill Creek watershed. This project would be one of the largest urban stream restoration projects in the country, with up to 1,000 acres of floodplain, 15 miles of stream, and critically needed public green space in south Louisville.

Our People, Our Future

- Opened Pine Creek Barrens Nature Preserve to the public, just a 40-minute drive from Louisville.
- Secured massive investments in our future, with over \$11 million in new bequest commitments.

- Hired the chapter's first-ever director of external affairs, enabling greater engagement and bigger impacts on state and federal conservation policies and funding.

Looking Forward

Thanks to the contributions of supporters like you, the Kentucky chapter has accomplished ground-breaking conservation goals in the past few years. But there is more work to do. With your help, we can complete our vision for **Our Kentucky** campaign:

- Continue to advance best in class management on the Cumberland Forest Project to demonstrate that conservation and economic opportunity can go hand in hand.
- Remove Green River Lock and Dam #5, restoring 200 miles of free-flowing conditions to the river.

- Complete the wetland restoration monitoring project, gaining valuable insights on wetland restoration designs and associated benefits for Kentucky and beyond.

- Plant thousands of large trees on public and private property for the greening portion of the Green Heart project.

- Expand our policy work on climate, clean energy, conservation funding, and other key issues.

Join Us

We can't accomplish this critical conservation work without you. Please consider making a contribution to **Our Kentucky** campaign, using the enclosed envelope or going online to nature.org/KYdonate.

“Nature gives us respite from our challenging world. When we invest in nature, we are investing in our own health, happiness, and wellbeing.”

—Dottie Cordray, Board Chair and Campaign Co-Chair

OUR CAMPAIGN PROGRESS



Totals are current as of Sept. 18, 2020

Soil Health PARTNERSHIP COMES TO KENTUCKY

Soil supports life on Earth. The healthier the soil is, the more benefits it provides—from increased food yields to better water infiltration and retention to higher levels of carbon storage.

“To me, soil health is about having soil that is a natural, functioning system full of water, air, nutrients, carbon, animals, and microscopic life,” says Zach Luttrell, director of agriculture for the Kentucky and Tennessee chapters. “Building and working with this natural system means fewer artificial inputs and therefore fewer economic and environment costs. We have replaced biology with chemistry and we need to return to more of the former.”

Healthy soils rely on good management practices. These include no-till farming and cover cropping, among others. No-till farming leaves the soil undisturbed and less susceptible to erosion. Cover cropping keeps living roots growing all year to prevent erosion and nutrient run-off and naturally replenish soil nutrients. Without these practices, soil may be lost. In fact, almost half of the world’s natural topsoil has been lost in just a couple of hundred years.

“Our soils are degraded, which means they are less fertile than before or are simply gone—washed away,” says Luttrell. “Topsoil that took thousands of years to form can be eroded away through poor management practices in just a few years.”

To address the need for good management practices, The Nature Conservancy is partnering with the National Corn Growers Association through their Soil Health Partnership. The partnership will leverage funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through a conservation innovation grant.

“This grant will support four Soil Health Partnership research plots,” says John Stewart, field manager for the Soil Health Partnership. “These are on-farm research trials that will introduce cover cropping. We’ll collect soil health data over time to see how the adoption of the cover crop process is changing their soil and management practices.”

The Conservancy is supporting the launch of this program in Kentucky by providing matching funds for the grant and by making stakeholders more aware of the partnership. “Beyond the research aspect, it will be more and more important to give farmers specific guidance about conservation practices,” Luttrell says. “The farmer to farmer networking and field days like what the Soil Health Partnership is doing are critical to driving adoption of new conservation practices at scale.”



New Faces: Zach Luttrell

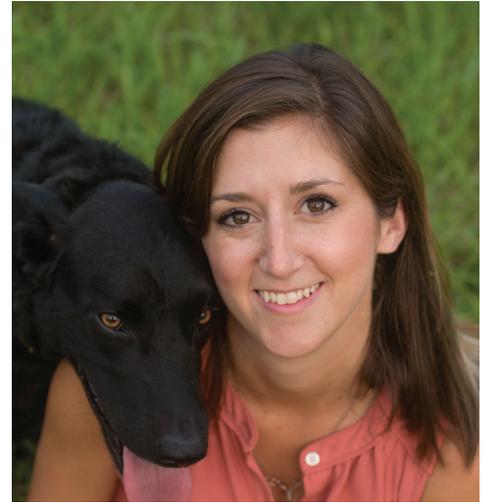
The Kentucky and Tennessee chapters have a new director of agriculture. Zach Luttrell will work in both states to develop a formal agricultural strategy and promote conservation practices within the agricultural community.

Luttrell grew up on a farm in Mississippi where his family grew soybeans, corn, and wheat. He says few things show the fruits of labor in such a direct way as farming.

“There’s something in the soil that becomes a part of you,” Luttrell says. “We are all alive because of a few inches of topsoil and the farmers that make things grow there. No industry is more important, and it will become even more crucial to society as time passes.”

As the director of agriculture for Kentucky and Tennessee, Luttrell will help build the Conservancy’s reputation and impact in the agricultural sector. He will help demonstrate that sustainable agriculture isn’t just about helping the environment; it’s also about helping farmers.

“My love of nature is equal to my love of farming,” Luttrell says. “Developing and implementing a new agricultural strategy that aims to achieve ambitious conservation goals while also supporting farm profitability is a rare opportunity, and I’m glad I was the one selected to lead the effort.”



Working around a PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges for everyone, including The Nature Conservancy. Hiring new employees, transitioning positions, and navigating economic uncertainty have required innovation and resilience.

New director of development Heather Wisniewski went through the hiring process entirely on Zoom. Meeting so many new people remotely and learning about the Kentucky chapter while working from home presented a unique situation.

“I actually met more people in the process,” says Wisniewski. “While I would much rather be in person, we have to be flexible and adaptable to maintain connections and advance our work.”

Wisniewski, who joins the Kentucky chapter after working with the Conservancy’s Global Cities team, says working at the chapter level allows her to be more in touch and engaged with the work. “I love what Kentucky is doing

locally, as well as the regional efforts we are leading like our work with floodplains and the Central Appalachians,” she says. “The Green Heart project will have a role locally but also globally. There is something special happening here in Kentucky, and as a fundraiser you’re always looking for programs that are compelling.”

The pandemic has also necessitated that the Conservancy save resources. The chapter’s office manager position, formerly full-time, became a part-time position. A new position, the protection associate, is fully grant-funded by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Holly Whiteman, formerly the office manager, applied for and received the new protection associate position. She will perform due diligence work for conservation easements and other land protection projects, investigating properties to ensure they fulfill the protection program’s requirements. “I enjoy the work and had been doing some

of it previously,” Whiteman says. “I am thrilled to have the chance to do it full time and help advance the Conservancy’s ambitious conservation agenda.”

Kellie Adkins, formerly working roughly 10 hours a week on a discrete project for the Conservancy, applied for and received the office manager position. She says transitioning over to the new role seemed like a perfect fit. “I enjoy working with all the different staff,” Adkins says. “Being at the center of office needs, it’s nice to get to know people and learn about what they’re doing.”

Adkins says her immediate priorities are finding more efficient and effective ways to support the organization and its staff. “I know that a good administrative or office manager position can be transformative for an organization when done well,” she says. “That is what I intend to do for the Conservancy. I believe in the work so much, so this is a tremendous opportunity for me.”

Conserving resources and working around the pandemic have presented challenges. With innovative and flexible personnel, and a continued focus on our top priorities, the Kentucky chapter can meet these challenges and emerge a stronger program.

Kentucky Field Notes

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The Sky is the Limit
to protect the lands and waters you love

The night sky over Concordia, Pakistan. © Ida Vincent

The Nature Conservancy 

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