

NEW YORK UPDATE | SPRING/SUMMER | 2023

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# Together We Find a Way.

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The Nature Conservancy meets all of the Standards for Charity Accountability established by the BBB Wise Giving Alliance. The BBB Wise Giving Alliance is a national charity watchdog affiliated with the Better Business Bureau.

# Promoting the Well-being of Local Communities



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Dear Supporter,

Thanks to you, The Nature Conservancy in New York is addressing climate change, safeguarding land and water and promoting the well-being of local communities. Our thoughtful and balanced approach meets the needs of people and businesses, provides abundant recreational opportunities and ensures diverse and thriving populations of wildlife.

Through science, innovation, partnerships and real-world solutions, we are tackling climate change, protecting lands and waters and creating more equitable conservation solutions. Despite the challenges, we have much to celebrate:

- We led a campaign to pass the \$4.2-billion Clean Water, Clean Air and Green Jobs Bond Act, an unprecedented piece of legislation that will protect clean drinking water, expand renewable energy, modernize infrastructure and restore wildlife habitat. Ultimately, 68% of New Yorkers voted yes on this act, the largest environmental bond act in our state's history. Our policy team will turn its attention now to helping the state implement this historic initiative.
- We partnered with Long Island communities to improve their water quality by accessing local rebate programs and creating scalable clean-water septic system models that we're exporting to the Finger Lakes. Meanwhile, in New York City, we hosted our first City of Forest Day to raise awareness of and celebrate the vast tree canopy that is the "lungs" of our city.
- We increased people's access to nature. We are welcoming a wider diversity of people to our preserves by rethinking trail design, signage, language options and amenities, as well as assessing transportation options that make it easier for people to visit. We have built accessible trails at three of our flagship preserves—Mashomack on Long Island, Boquet River in the Adirondacks, and Thompson Pond in Dutchess County—and plan to build more.
- Through a groundbreaking global effort, we are using "blue bonds" to fund ocean conservation while providing economic benefits to coastal nations. Our innovative debt financing expertise is helping unlock \$50 million to help Barbados protect up to 30% of its marine ecosystems.

While we are proud of our progress in the past year, the climate emergency continues to intensify, and we must push for more. We have the science and strategies to address the huge challenges that remain—but we need continued support from members like you to fuel our hands-on projects for all of nature, including humanity.

We so appreciate your support as we work to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends, in New York and beyond.

Thank you.

Bill Ulfelder  
Executive Director  
The Nature Conservancy in New York

# Scaling Water Quality Upgrades on Long Island and Beyond

The shores of Montauk, the serene surface of Lake Placid, the rushing waters of Niagara Falls: New York State is known for the abundance and natural beauty of its waterways. However, our iconic waters are under threat like never before. Climate change and pollution are making waters warmer and increasingly unsuitable for both marine and human life. The Nature Conservancy is protecting our oceans and freshwater across New York and beyond.

In Suffolk County, Long Island, nitrogen pollution from more than 360,000 septic systems and cesspools causes harmful algal blooms (HABs), including red tides and blue-green algae outbreaks. HABs are linked to beach closures, shellfish die-offs and the deterioration of estuaries and coastal marshes, which serve as nurseries and habitat for 65% of our recreational and commercial fish species.

We're deeply committed to the protection and restoration of Long Island's ground and surface waters. In 2019, we launched a program to scale the installation of nitrogen-reducing septic systems by helping municipalities access public funding to help modernize wastewater infrastructure. Since then, thousands of upgraded septic systems have been installed and over \$100 million has been approved in new funds to meet the demand for septic improvement programs in Nassau and Suffolk Counties.

We've also upgraded the septic systems at our own properties, including the Conservancy's Mashomack Preserve on Shelter Island and Uplands Farm Nature Sanctuary in Cold Spring Harbor. We're thrilled to be a leader on the ground—and now, in the ground—for cleaner water along our shores.

Leveraging our hands-on experience in septic upgrades, we are working beyond Long Island in the Finger Lakes, where HABs devastate these important water bodies and threaten recreation and livelihoods. With the Auburn YMCA and Cayuga County Health Department, we recently installed a clean water septic system to remove pollution before it reaches Owasco Lake.

Agricultural runoff also impairs water quality in the Finger Lakes. When excess water flows off fields, it carries nutrients into local waterways, where they contribute to toxic algal blooms. We're working with farmers in this region to implement farming practices that prevent water pollution while reducing soil loss and runoff. Planting cover crops that protect the fields from erosion in the off-season and using no-till or reduced till farming are just two of the soil health management practices that are growing in popularity, thanks to our partnerships, across the region. With your support, we hope to seize this watershed moment to protect our lakes, rivers, oceans and streams for generations to come.



The Nature Conservancy's Environmental Educator Cindy Belt holding a blue claw crab. © Sarah Lewis

# Advocating for Nature: An Interview with Jessica Ottney Mahar



© Dawn Schlaks

Jessica Ottney Mahar is the New York director of policy and strategy for The Nature Conservancy. She shapes environmental policy, which is a critical pillar of our work to improve the health, happiness and well-being of all through conservation, while sustaining the natural resources that make New York so special. As our resources, habitats and wildlife face escalating threats—such as climate change, development and invasive pests and pathogens—our policy wins increase the pace and scale of protection, restoration and conservation throughout New York.

Ottney Mahar played a key role in a coalition that advocated to pass the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act in 2019 and the historic \$4.2-billion Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act last fall. We sat down with her to talk about policy across New York State.

## What has been the most exciting policy win this year?

We are thrilled that New York voters overwhelmingly passed the Bond Act in November. The Conservancy was proud to work with partners to lead the “Vote Yes for Clean Water and Jobs” campaign, which generated strong voter approval for the first environmental bond act in a generation. We remain committed to partnering with other stakeholders and the State to ensure that Bond Act funds are allocated to projects that tackle some of the greatest challenges facing our communities.

## What’s next for the Bond Act?

We need new agency staff to ensure that Bond Act funds are efficiently and effectively disbursed. We will advocate for those hires, and also will work on implementation of the Act with the State and diverse stakeholders, including local government officials, environmental justice organizations, conservation groups, academic institutions, Indigenous Peoples and others. We’ll work to build an understanding of what the Bond Act is authorized to fund, provide feedback on program needs that the Bond Act can fill and share information on how municipalities and organizations can apply for Bond Act funds.

## What other efforts has your team worked on this year?

Along with our partners, we successfully advocated for the passage of the “30 by 30” bill that sets a statewide goal to protect 30 percent of New York’s land and water by 2030. The goal was established by scientists who are alarmed by rapid loss of wildlife habitat, to protect biodiversity and avoid the worst effects of global warming.

Governor Hochul signed it just days after world leaders adopted a historic agreement to conserve nature at the United Nations Conference of Parties to the Convention of Biodiversity (COP15).

By bolstering collaborative efforts, New York’s new 30 by 30 goal will help conserve habitat for vulnerable plants and animals, improve forest health, safeguard local family farms, expand access to parks and nature preserves and protect our water. The Conservancy is excited to partner with state leaders, Indigenous Peoples, farmers, foresters, fishers, hunters and others to create a robust conservation plan for the benefit of all New Yorkers.



Wind power in Western Finger Lakes. © Mathew Levine

## What's it like doing policy work “behind the scenes”?

A great deal of our work happens “behind the scenes”! Our team of experts influence New York’s climate change and renewable siting policies through the working and advisory boards on which we sit. We are leading the way in deploying our scientific expertise, fostering long-standing partnerships that span party lines, and using the credibility we have earned as the foundation for engaging with policymakers.

Recently, we served on the Agriculture and Forestry Advisory Panel that recommended strategies for reducing emissions and storing carbon in New York’s farms and forests. Thanks to our influence and the hard work of Climate Action Councilmembers, advisory groups, and thousands of stakeholders, our state is on a path to power our homes, cars and businesses with clean energy. This will clean the air we breathe, improve public health and safety, and create thousands of good, local jobs.

## How does it feel to shape environmental policy in New York?

I have the best job in the world! I work with incredibly smart people inside the New York State Capitol and at The Nature Conservancy. I’m also a mom with a young child. On a personal level, climate change is scary because if we don’t solve these issues, I’m not sure what will happen to my daughter. She makes me want to be better at what I do, and on the hard days, she’s the reason I keep going. Being able to go all in at your job and work that hard is really fulfilling when you get to live a mission-driven life. I’m forever grateful to be part of an organization like the Conservancy.



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## Key Highlights of Our Policy Program:

- We successfully lead coalitions and campaigns to increase funding for conservation in New York State. Recent victories include the Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act, New York’s groundbreaking climate act; congestion pricing for New York City; \$5 billion for clean water projects; and more than \$2 billion for environmental programs, including a historic annual appropriation of \$400 million for the Environmental Protection Fund.
- We secured federal appropriations focused on climate change and conservation, including the federal infrastructure bill and the Inflation Reduction Act.
- We lead local policy work, such as campaigns for Community Preservation Funds and water infrastructure programs to improve water quality, protect wildlife habitat and increase coastal safety.
- We provide leadership internally to shape the Conservancy’s approach to public policy and funding matters. Some of our priorities include incorporating equity into our policy work, focusing on transportation and climate change, advancing work in the Appalachians focal area and serving on the U.S. Government Relations Cabinet to steer annual federal policy work.

# From Green to Blue: Transforming Barbados' Debt into Marine Conservation

Island life is defined by the ocean. When local waters flourish, communities prosper. But when resources such as coral reefs and fisheries are threatened, so are the people who depend upon them.

Island nations such as Barbados are at the frontline of climate change, subject to significant flooding, storms, erosion and rising sea levels. Overfishing, pollution and unsustainable development decimate coastal resources and jeopardize local wildlife, including endangered sea turtles and 13 species of flying fish. Conservation of marine resources is critical, but the initial costs can be high, and sometimes conservation competes with other national needs for funding.

The Nature Conservancy and the government of Barbados recently collaborated on an innovative financial solution to unlock critical funds for

marine conservation that are a win-win for both the people and wildlife of that country. The Blue Bonds for Ocean Conservation project refinances Barbados' sovereign debt at a low interest rate. This frees up \$50 million to support expansion of the country's marine protected areas from virtually none to approximately 30%. That equals an impressive 56,000 km<sup>2</sup>—an area nearly the size of West Virginia—and helps improve management of all its marine waters.

As soon as these funds are available, they will go toward cutting-edge conservation programs supported by the Conservancy's research and planning. Our scientists are working with local communities and the Barbados government to determine the most effective strategies for giving coral reefs, coastal mangroves and other marine ecosystems the chance to heal and replenish themselves in these newly protected areas.

Now that the pressures of sovereign debt have eased, Barbados can focus on its climate goals. "We have taken action to combat climate change's damaging effects," says Barbadian Prime Minister Mia Mottley.

In addition to protecting local communities, wildlife and habitats, Barbados can preserve the iconic white sands and vibrant reefs that entice visitors. Blue Bonds open the door for long-term efforts to ensure sustainability and local resilience—which will preserve the natural beauty upon which much of the island's economy depends.

Tourism makes up more than 40% of Barbados' Gross Domestic Product and employs 40% of its citizens. Conservation of marine resources will ensure that these resources will last in the long term and will support the growth of Barbados' "blue economy"—the sustainable use of ocean resources to spur economic growth, improve livelihoods, and provide jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem.

Barbados is the third nation to work with the Conservancy on Blue Bond debt conversions, following the Seychelles and Belize. This successful approach will soon help more coastal nations protect their waters and is central to our goal to conserve 10% of the world's oceans by 2030.



A hawksbill sea turtle on a coral reef in Barbados. © Shane Gross

# By the Numbers

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From the forests of Western New York to the shores of Long Island, we are protecting our natural world for generations to come. Here's a snapshot of recent accomplishments that we achieved—thanks to your support!

## 270,000

visits to our New York preserves in 2022—the second-highest visitation rate for our preserves in the United States, due to our statewide efforts to make them more welcoming and accessible to diverse groups

## \$4.2 billion

earmarked for New York's lands and waters, thanks to our advocacy to pass the Clean Water, Clean Air and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act

## 6,000

predatory bugs released in Lake Ontario to protect native ash trees by feeding on invasive beetles

## \$370 billion

allocated in 2022's Inflation Reduction Act for climate investments and clean energy

## 43%

of endangered or threatened species rely on wetlands—and newly passed NYS budget reforms will safeguard small wetlands

## 1.7 million

acres of private land in New York State identified by our team as ripe for reforestation

## 5,000

acres conserved in the Adirondacks, Tug Hill Plateau, Catskills and the Green Mountains, through our Climate Resilience Grant Program

## 17

homeowners in Staten Island moved to safer ground, thanks to a voluntary buyout program for floodprone land

## 76%

of Adirondack waterways monitored over the past 21 years found to be free of aquatic invasive species

## 13

miles of multi-use trails under construction in Western New York's West Hill Preserve as part of our statewide efforts to improve people's access to nature

## 10,000

eelgrass seeds planted to help restore Long Island's declining seagrasses, which are crucial to marine life

## 500

hours contributed by volunteers in 2022 to survey Adirondack lands and waters for invasive pests

## 1,000

people attended the first City of Forest Day, where 30 organizations held 50 events to celebrate urban trees through our Forest for All NYC coalition

## 50%

Conservancy-wide commitment to carbon reduction within our own organization by 2030



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## Leave a legacy for generations to come.

What better legacy is there to leave than your commitment to protecting the Earth for generations to come? Whether you are taking those first steps toward planning your estate or are in the process of updating your estate plan, The Nature Conservancy is here to help. Don't let another day pass by.

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