



FALL/WINTER 2023

Inviting Youth into the Conservation Conversation



BY TANNER YESS, *Executive Director, Groundwork Ohio River Valley*

Every organization has its origin story. And our origin story at Groundwork Ohio River Valley (ORV) began with social enterprise. We wanted to restore and protect nature in communities that had the least access to the outdoors. In doing so, we knew that we could help keep wealth in our own neighborhoods while bringing the benefits of nature to youth.

Our goals are ambitious: pursue a future in which every neighborhood environment is green, healthy and resilient; undo legacies of poverty and racial discrimination; and break the widening disparity between communities that are enjoying a renaissance and

those that are experiencing disinvestment and neglect. Our work is grounded in inclusivity and embracing the diversity needed for conservation to be effective in the future. Unfortunately, we didn't see a place for us in Cincinnati's sustainability scene, so we had to start an organization that looked different. And The Nature Conservancy (TNC) was our first partner in this endeavor.

TNC took a risk and hired our young-adult workforce, the Green Team, for an invasive removal project at Jacoby Branch in Yellow Springs. Four years later, we've built one of the largest youth green workforce programs in the nation, employing over 165 youth and young adults each year. TNC's support gave us the foothold we needed to blend jobs and conservation in the city.

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Director's Message



As a budding conservationist decades ago, I can remember folks telling me, "Your generation can save the world." It felt flattering, and daunting, and kind of like they were passing the buck. Maybe we can save the world, I thought, but only if your generation starts turning the ship in the right direction.

I know that the work of our generation is key to achieving global sustainability. And while the articles in this issue show that we are making progress on many fronts, climate change and loss of biodiversity suggest that my generation will not "save the world." But I don't think any one genera-

tion will do that. Rather, I think of conservation as a never-ending relay race. Each generation of conservationists takes the baton from the last. And if any leg of this race is not run well, it will make it harder for every subsequent generation to catch up.

The young people featured in the story about Groundwork Ohio River Valley give me confidence that the next generation of conservationists will be more than up to the job. Their excitement is inspiring. And our work with today's youth and young adults doesn't stop there. We recently welcomed student trustees from the John Glenn College of Public Affairs to our board. I have been impressed with their knowledge, passion and willingness to roll up their sleeves and get to work. The conservation baton will be in good hands as these young people step into leadership roles.

But we can't rely on youth alone to make a difference. We must each run our leg of the race. I invite you today to take the baton by supporting our United by Nature Campaign. While your gift makes it possible for us to do the incredibly important conservation work needed now, it also helps us to train and provide opportunities for the next generation of conservationists, supporting them as they work to ensure that nature will thrive for generations to come.

Thank you for being part of our team!

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YOUTH CONTINUED FROM COVER

Today, we offer certifications, travel and on-the-job training. But, most importantly, we're fostering a love of nature. That's where our partnership with TNC comes in. Visiting places like the Edge of Appalachia Preserve with professional scientists allows our youth to see how their work is connected to the bigger picture of conservation.

And we don't just meet up with TNC staff in the pristine wilderness. They meet us in the city where rough edges blur the lines between habitat and inhabited. TNC staff like Community and Conservation Specialist Angie Burke visit us to uncover mysteries right in front of our eyes: identifying native plants, unveiling the impacts of climate change and explaining the science playing out in front of us every day.

"Here at TNC, we're committed to helping strengthen people's ability to meaningfully participate in conservation decision-making," says Burke. "Our collaboration with Groundwork ORV is helping us meet this goal by elevating the voices of youth in ways that will encourage them to become trusted leaders who advocate for social and environmental justice in their local communities."

Last year, in partnership with TNC, Groundwork ORV created the city's first Youth Environmental Council. Youth from different backgrounds came together to address issues they find most concerning through community activism. Their inaugural session ended with a presentation to the city's Climate, Environment and Infrastructure Committee, a city council committee focused on climate change that is the first of its kind in the nation. They advocated for more youth perspectives to be included in planning for environmental justice and carbon cutting initiatives and to help review the Green Cincinnati Plan, the city's climate action playbook. These experiences are giving our youth voice and power in how we address pressing environmental issues like climate change.

But the most important impact of these projects is how youth participants gain confidence and apply this ethic of conservation to their futures. Partnering with TNC has shown our youth that they already have the power to create change, they just need a supportive foundation and a place at the table. The rest is up to them.



LEARN MORE about how TNC is partnering with Groundwork Ohio River Valley to cultivate the next generation of conservationists at nature.org/groundworkORV.

Growing Green Leaders

BY DAMIEN LEE, *Groundwork Ohio River Valley Green Team Member*



I first fell in love with nature when I was younger. My mom would always take me hiking and birdwatching. But when COVID-19 hit at the end of my 2019-2020 school year, we were quarantined. As a kid with ADHD, it was difficult not relying on physical activity as my "medicine." So, my mom and I got to work to find a solution. That's when we discovered Groundwork Ohio River Valley.

I recently wrapped up my third summer working for Groundwork ORV, and the experience has helped me uncover a passion for conservation. During my second summer with the organization, I was blessed to be chosen to go to the Edge of Appalachia Preserve for a camping trip hosted by TNC. From what I remember, that was my first time actually camping. I learned that many Black youths and those in low- to middle-income families don't really get the opportunity to experience the outdoors and nature in this way. Our partnership with TNC not only allowed youth from inner-city neighborhoods like me to get into nature in their own communities but also opened our world to wilder places that we may never have gotten the opportunity to experience. The trip expanded my love for conservation work and gave me a clearer vision of the future.

Looking forward, I hope to be accepted into Appalachian State University and major in environmental science with a minor in community planning. After that, I hope to continue toward a career in conservation with programs like Groundwork ORV/USA, the Environmental Protection Agency, Peace Corps, the National Park Service or maybe even TNC.

Conservation Highlights

Historic Find at Morgan Swamp

Last spring, Greg Lipps, amphibian and reptile conservation coordinator in The Ohio State University's Ohio Biodiversity Conservation Partnership, along with a crew of OSU researchers, successfully trapped two spotted turtles (*Clemmys guttata*) at Morgan Swamp Preserve. Not only were these the first records for the species from the preserve proper, but they were also the first records from the township since an observation reported in 2021.

"For the first time ever, we had the resources to make this happen, thanks to a competitive State Wildlife Grant that is funding a statewide survey of the spotted turtle," says Lipps. "It also wouldn't have happened without TNC's support. The wetlands targeted for surveying were first identified by Derrick Cooper, Grand River restoration coordinator, who has extensive knowledge of the preserve."

Spotted turtles inhabit shallow herbaceous wetlands, which have become increasingly rare in Ohio. So too, have the habitat corridors that the highly mobile reptiles need as they move from one wetland to another to forage or find a mate. Unfortunately, these habitats, which support many rare and endangered species, are prone to succession. Without disturbance that prevents the growth of woody species, wetlands transition to scrub-shrub and eventually to forest.

TNC is working to set back the clock on succession through routine disturbance like mowing and invasive species control. And beavers lend a helping hand in the wildest areas of Morgan Swamp Preserve by felling trees and keeping the wetlands intact.

The spotted turtle is threatened within the state of Ohio and is being evaluated by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) for federal protection under the Endangered Species Act. A decision is expected this year.



Bringing a Butterfly Back from the Brink

Like the federally endangered Karner blue butterfly, the frosted elfin (*Callophrys irus*) has experienced population declines due to habitat loss. The butterfly thrives in pine barrens characterized by fire-dependent conifers, thickets of scrub oak and grassy openings that support its host plants, blue lupine and wild indigo.

As disturbance like fire has been largely removed from the landscape and woody invasives have moved in, habitat has become increasingly rare throughout the butterfly's historic range. In Ohio, Kitty Todd Nature Preserve near Toledo is the only remaining site where the state-endangered species occurs. Numbers are dwindling, according to annual butterfly population surveys at the TNC preserve, but that could change if the butterfly is granted federal protection.

"The USFWS is working to better understand the status and needs of the frosted elfin to determine whether the species should be granted federal protection under the Endangered Species Act," says Pete Blank, northwest Ohio restoration manager. "Federal protection may provide us greater support in managing Kitty Todd Nature Preserve and the broader Oak Openings Region. We're particularly excited to get fire back on the landscape, which will help us better steward this globally rare ecosystem to support the many rare and endangered species that thrive here."



United By Nature

DEFINING A NEW PATH FOR CONSERVATION



In 2019, The Nature Conservancy in Ohio launched a six-year fundraising campaign for conservation. The campaign directly supports our work to protect Ohio's lands and waters, transition to sustainable use of resources, and inspire more people to take action for nature. Out of our \$100 million fundraising goal, we raised more than \$107 million in the first four years of the campaign, including unprecedented support of TNC's work beyond Ohio's borders.

Your gifts through membership in The Nature Conservancy are part of this incredible sum and have helped us to achieve major milestones. But we are not done. The challenges we face are enormous—from a changing climate to the loss of biodiversity—and so our campaign continues as we move forward our conservation strategies and work to raise the remaining \$3.8 million needed to fully achieve our Ohio conservation goals.

A world filled with cleaner air and waters, connected and healthy habitats and more sustainable communities is possible, and that future is determined by the decisions we make today. Together, our efforts will yield positive impacts for every Ohioan—all 11.7 million of us and counting—and the billions more who benefit from the shared systems that connect Ohio and the Midwest to the rest of our planet.

 **JOIN US** by supporting Ohio's United by Nature Campaign at nature.org/ohiounitedbynature.

Campaign Highlights

WHAT WE'VE ACHIEVED WITH YOUR HELP

Securing Cleaner Waters for All

- Advanced the restoration of nearly 18,000 acres of wetlands.
- Secured more than \$14 million in H2Ohio funding to complete coastal and inland restoration projects.
- Restored 5.4 miles of streams over the past year through six projects led by the Ohio Mitigation Program, with 31 other projects in various stages of implementation or evaluation.

Conserving Ohio's Climate-Resilient Lands

- Protected more than 1,700 acres of biodiverse landscapes since July 2019.
- Collaborated with partners to improve management on nearly 12,000 acres of natural areas, including treatments for hemlock woolly adelgid and elongate hemlock scale—two non-native, invasive pests that threaten northeast Ohio's eastern hemlock forests.

Driving Science-Based Action on Climate

- Removed nearly 770,000 metric tons of CO₂ from the atmosphere by improving soil health and forest management practices, the equivalent of preventing emissions generated by more than 165,000 cars driven for one year.
- Helped secure passage of the Inflation Reduction Act in August 2022, which is expected to bring \$12.8 billion to Ohio for renewable energy development, climate-resilient infrastructure improvements and sustainable agriculture and forestry.

Faces of Conservation

Q&A WITH TNC'S NEW DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, MARY TUROCY

Can you tell us a bit about your background and what attracted you to The Nature Conservancy (TNC)?

I started my career at the Legislative Service Commission, which is where I began working with the Ohio General Assembly, conducting research and drafting policy. Most recently, I worked for the Ohio Civil Rights Commission as Director of Public Affairs. I have always aimed to help create public policy that improves people's lives. TNC is engaged in some of the most critical policy matters of our time, and I am eager to be a part of the great work Ohio is doing.

How do you envision building upon TNC's successful conservation legacy and expanding the organization's impact through effective government relations and policy work?

I believe TNC's government relations and policy work is best as a complement to the great work of our seasoned and brilliant conservation staff. One of my favorite parts about working here is the ability to consult and collaborate with in-house experts when learning about the impact of a proposed bill, policy or project. I envision my role as helping to amplify these experts and translate their knowledge and experience into public policy that will have the best conservation outcome for people and wildlife.

Looking into the next year, are there any specific policy initiatives or legislative measures that you find particularly exciting or inspiring?

I'm most looking forward to developing new ways to sustain the long-term impact of the very successful H2Ohio program, which has already profoundly helped to reduce nutrient runoff into Lake Erie. I am also excited to work on federal policies like the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, which has bipartisan support and could have far-reaching outcomes for Ohio's endangered and threatened fish and wildlife and the habitats they need to thrive.

How can Ohioans support our efforts in promoting conservation policies in Ohio?

It's always a good idea to reach out to local, state and federal representatives to let them know you care about conservation and protecting Ohio's air, land and water. If you're not sure where to begin, visit TNC's Action Center at nature.org/actioncenter to learn about proposed legislation and pledge your support to a variety of causes.



LEGISLATION AIMS TO RECOVER AMERICA'S WILDLIFE

More than one-third of America's fish and wildlife species are at risk of extinction. But new proposed legislation is hoping to change that. The Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA) is a groundbreaking legislative initiative aimed at conserving and restoring the nation's wildlife by proactively protecting habitats, fighting invasive species, reintroducing native species and tackling emerging diseases. If passed into law, the act would be the largest investment in U.S. wildlife conservation in decades. Learn more about RAWA at nature.org/rawa.



Water Wins

ENHANCING SANDUSKY BAY

In partnership with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy broke ground last spring on the first of many planned projects to enhance the ecological function of Sandusky Bay. Staff are working to restore 44 acres of wetland habitat at Pickerel Creek Wildlife Area, which will help to reestablish the connection between Pickerel Creek and its floodplain. The project aims to enhance habitat and reduce runoff by slowing water flow and allowing nutrients and sediment to settle before entering Lake Erie, decreasing the likelihood and severity of harmful algal blooms.

Formed at the mouth of the Sandusky River, Sandusky Bay encompasses roughly 40,000 acres of open water. Prior to European colonization, Indigenous peoples fished the bay's healthy, productive waters, and native vegetation thrived in the open bay and along its shores. Game fish like northern pike could make their way from the lake into the shallower vegetated wetlands along the coast to spawn. Migratory birds and shorebirds thrived here in great numbers.

Today, although the area is still a hotspot for birders, the abundance and diversity of bird species have declined. Conversion of land to agricultural uses has transformed the entire watershed and degraded coastal habitat. Sandusky Bay is now marked by armored shorelines that have severed the hydrologic connection between the lake and adjacent wetlands. These impacts have resulted in increased harmful algal blooms and decreased available habitat for fish and other

wildlife. Remaining wetlands are either isolated behind dikes or found in small patches in protected areas that lack diversity.

Spearheaded by the Ohio DNR Office of Coastal Management and supported by a wide range of stakeholders, work at Pickerel Creek Wildlife Area is one of the first of more than a dozen planned projects that will work together to improve Sandusky Bay. "Our work at Sandusky Bay is a testament to TNC's ability to advance landscape-scale, novel projects," says TNC Restoration Ecologist Ashlee Decker. "Enhancing the bay's ecological function is critical in reducing nutrients that are entering Lake Erie, especially as climate change brings more frequent and severe rainfall events."

TNC will break ground on two additional Sandusky Bay projects next year, both of which aim to restore shoreline.



TO LEARN MORE about TNC's work to enhance Sandusky Bay, visit nature.org/sanduskybay.

Governor Mike DeWine created the H2Ohio program in 2019 as a comprehensive data-driven approach to improving water quality in Ohio by enhancing water infrastructure and combating harmful algal blooms. TNC played an important role in designing the concept for H2Ohio and mobilizing support from a broad constituency for the program. Today, TNC is helping to identify and implement practical and effective on-the-ground H2Ohio projects, like those at Sandusky Bay. Learn more about H2Ohio at h2.ohio.gov.

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OUR OHIO NATURE

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Big Darby Creek © Rick Connor

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE



We know that nature unites us—physically, spiritually and mentally. And the opportunity to take action, now and for the future, is here. Learn about our United By Nature campaign and the many conservation successes we've accomplished with your help.

Hemlock forest at Morgan Swamp Preserve © Rebecca Nieminen