



# *the* Nature Conservancy

★  
by AMY SULLIVAN  
*Photos by MIKE WILKINSON*

Local conservationists seek  
to restore western Kentucky's  
critical natural environment





## their ambitious mission:

to conserve the land and waters on which all life depends. This is the cornerstone of The Nature Conservancy, one of the most wide-reaching environmental organizations in the world since 1951.

Shelly Morris, West Kentucky Project Director of The Nature Conservancy Kentucky Chapter is a Marshall County native and has been interested in nature and conservation as long as she can remember. She focuses on large and lofty goals, which lead her to touch down in many different places. You may not realize that one of them is right here in our own backyard.

Many years ago, western Kentucky's wetlands formed a flood plain along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. When flooding occurred, water was stored in the land, along with sediments and pollutants, until it flowed slowly and naturally back into the river as clean water. When the area was settled, people cleared trees from the land, built ditches and levees, and straightened streams, which caused water to run quickly off the land and take pollutants with it. The result: compromised water quality in local streams and larger rivers in the Mississippi River Basin, and the formation of a larger "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico.

"In Kentucky, we have lost over 80% of our wetlands," says Morris. Most states in the Midwest or South are in that neighborhood as well. The Nature Conservancy works with farmers to convert their land back into wetlands. It's particularly timely and relevant today, with the historic flooding in this country, and in this area, over the past several years.

Since 2011, The Nature Conservancy has worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to help promote and implement a federal wetland conservation and restoration program, enrolling over 7,000 acres in far western










Kentucky. This program allows landowners to take frequently flooded croplands out of production, re-plant trees, and try to change the way the water flows across the land. All of these activities help convert the land back to a more natural state. When nutrients and other sediments are taken out of the water, pollution is reduced first in local water, then eventually flowing cleaner all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico.

In addition, The Nature Conservancy is working with NRCS to oversee a five-year wetland restoration monitoring project taking place through 2020 that will provide valuable information for conservationists around the world for their own projects. Groups of professors along with graduate and doctoral students from Murray State University, the University of Missouri, and Tennessee Tech University, are currently monitoring a subset of enrolled

easements in Western Kentucky and Western Tennessee to track success of the project and the impact on water quality and wildlife in these areas. All of these institutions are monitoring different things, but the cumulative results will help conservationists understand, refine, and improve wetland restoration work.

Another evidence of The Nature Conservancy's dedication to conservation efforts in western Kentucky is the spectacular Mantle Rock Nature Preserve in northern Livingston County. This breathtaking natural landmark gives visitors the feeling

that they've left Kentucky as they view a 30-foot high, 188-foot long arch, the largest freestanding arch east of the Mississippi River—a landscape that is more typical of the Shawnee Hills of southern Illinois. The north side of the Mantle Rock loop trail joins with part of the historical Trail of Tears the Cherokees were forced to travel during 1838-1839. Whether you're a history buff, a nature lover, or a hiker looking for exercise, Mantle Rock has something for everyone.

One of the best ways to support the efforts of The Nature Conservancy is to keep up with what they are doing and explore what they are trying to protect. Take a weekend trip and get back to nature, visiting the preserves that are open to the public. 

Visit [www.nature.org](http://www.nature.org) for more information about the Nature Conservancy and the Kentucky State Chapter. Follow them both on Facebook: [@thenatureconservancy](https://www.facebook.com/thenatureconservancy) [@TheNatureConservancyofKentucky](https://www.facebook.com/TheNatureConservancyofKentucky)



## Paducah Native Jason Albritton Leads the Nature Conservancy's Policy On Climate and Energy

"My career in conservation was inspired by a childhood of fishing, hunting, and enjoying the natural beauty of western Kentucky. I am so fortunate to be able to pursue this passion at a highly respected and effective organization like The Nature



Conservancy. The Conservancy's pragmatic, solutions-oriented approach is a key to our success, allowing us to work with a wide array of partners, ranging from farmers to major

corporations to elected leaders across the political spectrum. I am regularly inspired by the Conservancy's ability to bring people together to conserve treasured lands and waters and address environmental challenges. From restoring wetlands in western Kentucky to combating global problems like climate change, our conservation efforts are built on combining the resources and expertise of a global organization with an on-the-ground presence in the places we are working to conserve."

Jason is Director of U.S. Climate and Energy Policy at the Nature Conservancy. In this role he oversees a team that advocates for the Conservancy's federal climate and energy priorities and is a

leader in implementing the organization's strategy for building broad bipartisan support for climate action in the United States.

Jason earned a B.A. in Biology from Murray State University in 2003, and a Masters in Ecological Economics from the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom.