

SUMMER 2022

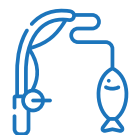
# Tennessee field notes

## PROTECTING NATURE'S PLAYGROUND

The world will never be the same after it slowly recovers from the effects of a global pandemic. That includes our relationship with the outdoors. More people than ever are seeking nature as a salve for our health and well-being.

Society's growing appreciation for the outdoors is fueling more interest in our local, state and national parks, private nature preserves, and a growing outdoor recreation industry that is redefining time spent in nature and even reinvigorating local economies across the state.

Our state's natural resources provide endless opportunities for Tennesseans—and visitors from around the world—to get outdoors and connect with nature. The numbers tell the story. According to the



Outdoor Industry Association, in 2020, Tennessee's outdoor recreation economy generated **88,568 direct jobs**, **\$3.6 billion in wages and salaries** and **two percent of the state's GDP**.

Today, there are significant pressures placed upon Tennessee's lands, waters and wildlife by multiple, often competing, uses. These uses, if not managed wisely, can negatively impact nature and the outdoor recreation sector.

Moving forward, we might consider adopting the "Seventh Generation Principle" conceived by the ancient Iroquois, which suggests that the decisions we make today result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future. When it comes to guaranteeing nature's benefits, we must do the same.



*The Nature Conservancy's mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.*

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## GUEST COLUMN



## Board Notes

While both of our terms on The Nature Conservancy's Board of Trustees in Tennessee are coming to an end, we remain enduring supporters of TNC's efforts to ensure that people benefit from nature for many years to come. These include several accomplishments mentioned in the pages of this newsletter:

- Acquiring a conservation easement, and an additional 850 acres, to permanently protect the 43,000-acre Ed Carter Unit of the North Cumberland Wildlife Management Area (page 4).
- Acquiring and permanently protecting an 858-acre parcel that serves dual roles as a flood mitigation project and brand-new outdoor recreation destination in West Tennessee (page 5).
- Working with the state to acquire and permanently protect 8,600 acres—one of the largest privately owned blocks of forest in the Southern Blue Ridge—to share with outdoor enthusiasts while bringing jobs and income to a struggling rural Tennessee community (page 6).

As human beings who share a planet, one thing is clear. We can no longer subscribe to choosing between nature and the economy. They are a package deal. In fact, our economy thrives when we prioritize the health of our natural environment.

Examples of this abound around the world and here in Tennessee. Managing a working forest to support wildlife and sequester more carbon can provide income for the landowner and the local community. Welcoming back native forest and wetland habitats to our floodplains also helps them store and filter water that moves slowly through the landscape to support, rather than destroy, wildlife habitat and property.

And, focusing on the health of Tennessee's lands, waters and wildlife fuels an outdoor recreation industry ready to serve people seeking the outdoors for their mental and physical health. For example, our treasured Great Smoky Mountains National Park shows what is possible when we put our minds to permanently protecting nature in Tennessee. In fact, the National Park Service recently issued a report stating that in 2020, 12 million visitors spent more than \$1 billion to support communities located around the national park.

As we depart as trustees, we feel proud of our accomplishments and affiliation with TNC, for these and many other reasons. Nature offers powerful tools to improve human lives and livelihoods. We are all in it together, and our support is needed more than ever. So thank you for yours.

*Carolyn Long Mary H. Johnson*



The Nature Conservancy's staff and current board of trustees thanks Carolyn Long and Mary Johnson for their valuable input and support, and welcomes Whitfield Hamilton back for a new term since previously serving from 2011 to 2020.



# Tennessee Visionary

A landmark project comes full circle for our state's Comptroller Emeritus, Justin P. Wilson

Designated first as a state scenic trail, and later as Tennessee's 53rd state park, the Justin P. Wilson Cumberland Trail State Park was named in honor of a longtime state leader and public servant committed to establishing what has become an 11-county natural corridor that supports wildlife and outdoor pursuits. With about 10 percent of the trail left to complete, Justin Wilson, who recently retired, is focused on seeing this project to completion.

**TNC:** How did the idea of developing a statewide trail come to you?

**Justin Wilson:** It was inspired by the Arizona National Scenic Trail, which I learned about during a vacation many years ago. That trail stretches for 800 miles across the state, linking deserts, mountains, canyons, forests and historic landmarks.

**TNC:** How do you get an ambitious project like that going?

**Justin Wilson:** It remained in the back of my mind for quite a while, until I was appointed to be Tennessee's Commissioner of Conservation and Environment in 1986. Then, with the Governor's support, I coordinated with the division overseeing Tennessee's trails. That got the ball rolling.

**TNC:** What informed the vision for the Cumberland Trail?

**Justin Wilson:** Our state is unbelievable in its beauty and its biodiversity. It made sense to feature all of that with a trail stretching from the Cumberland Gap at the Virginia-Kentucky border to Signal Mountain overlooking the Tennessee Gorge and the Georgia-Alabama line. That was the vision.

After serving as Commissioner and as Deputy Governor, I returned to my law practice and subsequently was elected to serve as Comptroller of the Treasury for six terms. During that time, I continued to follow the project, but didn't actively participate in it.

**TNC:** Well, the state took the project and ran. And now you've made it your mission to lay the groundwork for completing the Cumberland Trail. What led you to engage The Nature Conservancy in this effort?

**Justin Wilson:** As a former trustee with the Tennessee program, I was already familiar with your work, and TNC knew of my involvement with the Cumberland Trail project. That's why TNC contacted me when an opportunity arose to buy an essential tract. I didn't respond right away, but it was on my mind a few months later when one of my brothers and I were discussing charitable contributions. TNC's request made a lot of sense to us.

**TNC:** We are glad to be working together to ensure that the resulting Justin P. Wilson Land Protection Fund succeeds in helping us acquire strategic conservation lands surrounding the Cumberland Trail to create important pathways for wildlife and outdoor opportunities for Tennesseans.

**Justin Wilson:** Thank you. My experience with TNC is that they do what they say and they play by the rules. And I have worked with a lot of charitable organizations.

**"We are grateful for the support and vision of Justin Wilson, whose generosity will make a significant impact in Tennessee and in the Appalachian Mountains—one of the most resilient and diverse landscapes on earth. The Cumberland Trail is a vision whose time has come. What a wonderful why to help conserve our lands and waters and create new opportunities for people to connect with nature."**

– Terry Cook, TNC's state director in Tennessee







# Cumberland Plateau

## New acquisitions benefit forests, wildlife and people

In the past six months, The Nature Conservancy and partners succeeded in permanently protecting and expanding conservation lands on the Cumberland Plateau. First, in late 2021, TNC and the State of Tennessee, through its Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA), established a permanent conservation easement across the 43,000-acre Ed Carter Unit of the North Cumberland Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The easement, located in an area known locally as Tackett Creek, protects 179 miles of streams and habitat for the Tennessee/Kentucky elk herd and many other species.

This area also attracts thousands of visitors each year to enjoy its multi-use trails and other outdoor recreation pursuits.

“Dedicated, world-class conservation, in partnership with TWRA and local conservation groups like the Campbell Outdoor Recreation Association, draws

visitors who love the outdoors and value sustainable tourism experiences,” says E.L. Morton, Campbell County mayor. “The attraction value of the trails and natural mountain beauty boosts our local sales tax and hotel/motel tax bases while creating jobs and capital investment. On top of that, our local residents enjoy these wonderful adventures anytime they like.”

Even more recently, TNC and longtime partner, The Conservation Fund, acquired and transferred an additional 850 acres to the State of Tennessee to further expand the Ed Carter Unit. The new parcel’s location at the headwaters of the Cumberland River system is key to protecting this valuable freshwater resource that harbors the federally endangered Blackside Dace and other important aquatic species. The property also lies within the swarming zone for a winter colony of federally endangered Indiana bats, expands protected rangelands for the Tennessee/Kentucky elk herd, and provides a critical link among existing protected areas that include the Justin P. Wilson Cumberland Trail State Park, Cumberland Gap National Historic Park and the Kentucky Ridge State Forest.

“This effort builds on a victorious partnership between The Conservation Fund, TNC and TWRA, which has secured key properties for protection and public access across the state,” said

Ralph Knoll, The Conservation Fund’s Tennessee state director.

The Ed Carter Unit is located within the Appalachian Mountains, identified by TNC as one of four regions named as global priorities for conservation due to the variety of species, level of climate change resiliency, potential for carbon storage, and natural resources that provide clean air and water, food and economic stability for 22 million people. Moving forward, TNC will continue to assist with managing the Ed Carter Unit as part of its Cumberland Forest Project, an impact investment project that manages a 250,000+ acre network of high conservation value lands and waters located along the Tennessee-Kentucky border and a portion of Southwest Virginia.



Yamaha Clean-Up Day © Flex, Rocks & Rollovers and Ronald Lambert

Thanks to support from Yamaha Outdoor Access Initiative, we participated in an event—organized by Flex, Rocks & Rollovers and sponsored by Campbell County Litter Control—that collected approximately 4,000 pounds of garbage at Tackett Creek last fall. Several jeep clubs and other volunteers traveled from throughout the United States to participate.

According to the Tennessee Wildlife Management Area (WMA) Visitor Survey 2019, conducted by TWRA, North Cumberland ranked as the 3rd most used WMA in the state.

The top five purposes for visiting WMAs in Tennessee included:

**Hunting • Fishing • Hiking • ATV/OHV • Wildlife Viewing**

# Middle Fork Bottoms

Tennessee's newest recreation area opens to the public

The gravel had barely settled before cars showed up in the parking lot—up to 15 vehicles on weekdays and 50 or more on the weekends. Before scissors cut through the symbolic ribbon, people were walking dogs, strolling along the boardwalk and riding bikes on the five miles of trails.

It was everything envisioned by the team of conservation professionals who worked to acquire and develop the 858-acre parcel that would become the Middle Fork Bottoms Recreation Area.

“This is clearly something people have wanted for quite some time,” says David Blackwood, the West Tennessee River Basin Authority’s executive director charged with overseeing its management.

Like many, Blackwood is excited about what this new public space will do for wildlife, people and the local economy.

“We initially envisioned creating a park that celebrates West Tennessee’s nature, but to be honest, I underestimated how much of a boost a new recreation area of this size would provide to the regional economy by attracting new businesses and their employees to the Jackson area,” says Alex Wyss, The Nature Conservancy’s director of conservation, who has worked on the project since its



inception in 2016. “The busy parking lots represent an expression of interest that exceeds our predictions.”

In addition to attracting outdoor enthusiasts from Jackson and beyond, Middle Fork Bottoms fulfills its original purpose as a restored complex of bottomland hardwood forests, marshes and other wetland habitats key to retaining, and slowly filtering, floodwaters that previously inundated farmland located on the property and further downstream. Visitors will be able to access wetland portions of the recreation area via a boardwalk, where they will be treated to wildlife ranging from spring peepers to waterfowl and a variety of birds.

Looking forward, the team has set their sights on a Phase II thanks to a grant from Tennessee’s Department of Environment and Conservation dedicated to developing a trailhead and building public restrooms. They are also situating wildlife cameras and plan to establish a “friends” group to help with monitoring, managing and educating the public about the property.

“Without TNC there would be no Middle Fork Bottoms,” adds Blackwood. “They assembled the purchase of key parcels, critical funding and supporters to make it happen. It has been rewarding to work with TNC and other partners to return the Middle Fork Forked Deer floodplain to its natural state while providing the community with high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities.”

## PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION

Thank you to Toyota North America for supporting the construction of an overlook, near a wetland marsh refuge area, that focuses on providing accessibility for recreation and environmental awareness. Their generosity builds on this effort, conceived by TNC and the West Tennessee River Basin Authority, made possible with additional assistance from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, the TennGreen Land Conservancy, the Jackson Chamber of Commerce and Madison County.



# Marking A Milestone

## Doe Mountain Recreation Area celebrates 10 years of nature and recreation management

What a difference a decade makes. In 2012, The Nature Conservancy partnered with the State of Tennessee to acquire the 8,600-acre Doe Mountain Recreation Area. Mired in a federal bankruptcy case following a failed residential development atop the mountain, the property comprised one of the largest privately owned blocks of forest in the Southern Blue Ridge. The partners, including Johnson County government, wanted to keep those forests intact.

Fast forward 10 years to today, and things are turning around under management by the Doe Mountain Recreation Authority's (DMRA) 15-member board, on which TNC sits. The numbers tell the story. At the end of 2021, the Institute for Service Research published *The Economic and Fiscal Impacts of Doe Mountain Recreation Area* based on data that highlights steadily increasing revenue generated by recreation user passes sold to people visiting the mountain to explore the trails on foot, trail bike and off-highway vehicles.

"It has been rewarding to watch it unfold," says Gabby Lynch, TNC's director of protection in Tennessee and founding member of the DMRA board. "Ten years ago, we lacked staff and resources, and today Doe Mountain attracts significant revenue to the area. We've been able to hire several permanent, full-time local employees, and several more part-time and seasonal workers."

According to Lynch, Doe Mountain's transformation into a destination for adventure tourism has made it a key driver for Johnson County's rural economy, which is designated as "At



Risk" by the Appalachian Regional Commission. The impact report provides some highlights supporting the claim that Doe Mountain stimulates economic activity locally, and throughout Tennessee. Some key findings from the study, which focused on Fiscal Year 2020-2021, include:

- The total economic activity stimulated by Doe Mountain in Tennessee was approximately \$4.5 million, most occurring within the local area.
- The total "economic impact from travelers" attributed to Doe Mountain—a measure of "fresh money" infused into a local economy that would not have otherwise been generated—was an estimated \$2.4 million.
- The economic activity stimulated by visitation to Doe Mountain

supported approximately 45 full-time jobs and was responsible for roughly \$2 million in wage and salary income in Tennessee.

- Economic activity created by Doe Mountain was associated with approximately \$2.8 million in value-added effects, a measure of the recreation area's contribution to the gross domestic product of Tennessee.

"It has been amazing to observe the transformation of Doe Mountain into a wonderful outdoor destination," says Mike Taylor, Johnson County mayor. "What the 'locals' have experienced for many years is now being shared with folks from around the world. The promotion of nature tourism and outdoor adventure has brought about new business opportunities, creating a positive economic impact to this small mountain community."

# Faces of Conservation

Welcome to the following new staff members to the Tennessee team

Our new donor relations manager, **Emily Fenichel**, relocated to Tennessee from Lynchburg, Virginia where she worked as the development and donor stewardship manager at an interactive children's museum called Amazement Square. Now based in Knoxville, Emily is working around the state with loyal donors and Legacy Club members to advance TNC's mission in Tennessee. Emily holds an undergraduate degree in marketing from Coastal Carolina University and a graduate degree in sustainable business from the University of Otago in New Zealand.

**Lindsay Hanna** first crossed paths with The Nature Conservancy in 2010 when she worked as a mentor for TNC's LEAF program focused on engaging urban youth in conservation. Since then, Lindsay acquired expertise in land use, public policy, economic development, community engagement and sustainability before re-joining TNC in March as the new director of government relations and climate policy in Tennessee. Lindsay holds an undergraduate degree in environmental studies from the University of Vermont and a masters degree in public administration from the University of Washington.



## CONSERVATION UPDATE



### TNC partners to protect the Duck River from impacts of regional growth

Represented by the Southern Environmental Law Center, The Nature Conservancy and the Tennessee Wildlife Federation reached a settlement with state officials and a local water utility upholding Tennessee's ability to responsibly manage water withdrawals from the Duck River, especially during times of low flow or drought, to protect wildlife and the river's health. The settlement is an important victory for conservationists, anglers, paddlers, local communities, and others who enjoy and rely on this unique waterway.

"The Duck is North America's most biodiverse river," says Rob Bullard, TNC's Tennessee and Cumberland rivers project director. "Its incredible wildlife, scenic views and thriving sport fisheries represent the backbone of Middle Tennessee's outdoor recreation economy, which engages an estimated 150,000 anglers, kayakers, canoers and boaters annually while providing drinking water to approximately 250,000 people."

While the settlement, finalized in March, represents a positive step in responsible management of the river, it occurs as other utilities make plans to increase the amount of water they withdraw to accommodate the region's growth. In response, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation is collecting data to help state officials, conservation groups and other stakeholders better understand the flow needs of aquatic wildlife.

Bullard adds, "The decisions we make about water infrastructure in the next few years will be felt for generations. We all want healthy rivers and thriving communities, and we all agree that water withdrawals should be informed by the best possible science. There is an urgent need for stakeholders in this watershed to collaboratively approach water supply questions, and this agreement is a big step in that direction."





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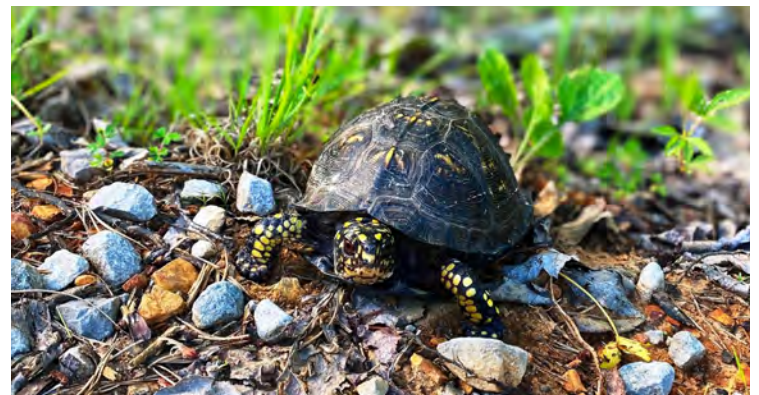
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## VIRTUAL EVENTS



Born out of necessity, our virtual webinar series continues thanks to an enthusiastic response. Since April 2020, we have collaborated with partners and colleagues on 22 webinars about wildflowers, caves, dams, photography and other topics of interest to hundreds of our members.

**Visit [nature.org/tnwebinars](https://nature.org/tnwebinars) to find recordings and register for upcoming events.**



## A Lasting Legacy

Leaving a gift to The Nature Conservancy through your will or estate plans can make a lasting impact for Tennessee's lands and waters tomorrow while meeting your financial goals and personal values today.

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