

The Nature
Conservancy



BASIN RANGE & RIMROCK

SPRING 2021 NEWSLETTER ■ UTAH CHAPTER

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Conservation Corner



More than 250,000 American avocets rely on the habitats of the Great Salt Lake each year. © Mick Thompson

Celebrating a Key Anniversary for the Great Salt Lake and Shorebirds

Thirty years ago, in the spring of 1991, the Great Salt Lake was designated a Site of Hemispheric Importance by the Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network. According to John Neill, an avian biologist with Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, “This is the highest rank of importance and one of only seven site designations in the contiguous United States.” For migratory shorebirds, the Great Salt Lake’s value is hard to overstate. It is an outsized, vital link in an increasingly fragile network of habitats—a life-giving, desert oasis. Today, Lake proponents are both worried and inspired. Between increasing water diversions and climate change, the Lake’s ecosystem faces unprecedented threats. Yet, the community rallying for the Lake’s protection has

never been more diverse or more powerful. “I have a great deal of hope today,” says Ann Neville, TNC’s Northern Mountains Regional Director. “A host of partners have made huge strides in protecting the Lake’s wetlands and uplands and in educating the public, and now I think we are seeing new momentum to protect Lake water levels.”

New Grants Fund Research on Sustainable Agriculture

At the Canyonlands Research Center (CRC), based at TNC’s Dugout Ranch, ranchers and scientists are excited about new funding to study the health of rangelands and the range habits of cattle breeds like Rarámuri Criollo (Criollo). Studies suggest that the Criollo cattle, a breed which originated in an isolated region of northern Mexico, could put less stress on arid ecosystems than traditional European breeds. A new grant through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture will allow the CRC team to use technology, like GPS-collaring and precision sensors, to provide real-time analysis of cattle movements and their impacts on soils and vegetation. Working with our grant partners — New Mexico State University, the Jornada Experimental Range and Utah State University — the CRC team hopes these breed comparison studies, which examine the Criollo relative to Red Angus, will help livestock producers understand whether the Criollo show real promise for economic and environmental sustainability.

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Lasting Results

Utah Private Lands Protection

Number of Projects. 198
Acres Protected. 942,071

Utah Public Lands Protection

Number of Projects. 40
Acres Protected. 130,063

Total Acres Protected 1,072,134
Total Utah Membership 8,021

Cover: Great Salt Lake. © Charles Uibel

What Should We Do With Our Blink in Time?

Spending Our Lives Doing What Matters



© Charles Uibel

Dave Livermore
Utah State Director

“We must deal with the extraordinary opportunity of our few decades on Earth with restraint, blessed by the fragile miracle of our health and acutely aware that we must act with care if our natural world is to flourish.”

— Stephen Trimble

TO GET SOME EXERCISE DURING the pandemic, I have rigged up our daughter’s old bike on a stand to create a stationary bicycle in our backyard. Instead of swimming in

the mornings as I used to, I peddle. It gives me time to think. The other morning a full moon was growing paler in the new light, robins were singing, and a woodpecker was noisily carving out a place for his cache. While this spring scene was full of new life, I thought to myself that the pandemic has taught us how fragile and temporal our lives are. Decades from now I will be gone, but the sounds of nature all around me that morning will live on.

Which reminds me of an inspiring essay, “What should we do with our blink in time?,” by my good friend, writer and conservationist Stephen Trimble. Scientists estimate the universe is 13.5 billion years old, but we humans have been on Earth only 300,000 of these years. And each of our lives, as Steve writes, is but “a blink.” What to do? As William James wrote, “The great use of life is to spend it on something that will outlast it.” All of our members, volunteers, staff and those of you reading this message know something about this. Fundamentally, we are spending our “blinks in time” conserving the lands and waters upon which all life depends. This is no small task. It is a cause no more worthy, perhaps, than advancing social justice, universal health care, aid for the poor or a myriad of other noble pursuits. But this is what we at TNC do to make our lives matter.

With these thoughts in mind, I want to salute four valued colleagues and friends I have worked with for a long time who are retiring from TNC this year. Joel Tuhy (37 years) has been our Science Director. He has brought us beautiful wildflower talks and expert science advice, as well as helped establish 40 Research Natural Areas (130,000 acres). Heidi Mosburg (20 years) has been our Philanthropy Director. I will remember her smile, her warm way with people and her special fundraising talent always. Mary Delle Gunn (16 years), who also worked in philanthropy, has been our dog and donor whisperer, connecting with her beloved Newfoundlands and major supporters alike. Pauline Blanchard (14 years) has been our extremely hard-working Executive Assistant and Board Liaison par excellence. She has met all of our needs, and then some, with a generous spirit and helping hand. I want to thank Joel, Heidi, Mary Delle and Pauline for giving so much of their “blinks in time” to The Nature Conservancy, to conservation and to making the world a better place. From the waters of Indian Creek at the Dugout Ranch to the wetlands of the Great Salt Lake, there will come no end to the good that they have done.

TNC is working with partners to improve irrigation efficiency and protect flows on the Virgin River, a tributary of the Colorado River.



Turning Point for the Colorado River Basin

A New Vision for 2026

CONSERVATIONISTS IN THE ARID WEST often say that “the story of climate change will be written in water.” For the Colorado River and its tributaries, that story is fast-paced and scary. “It’s no longer adequate to say that the Colorado River Basin is experiencing a long-term drought,” explains Taylor Hawes, who leads TNC’s Colorado River Program. “It is undergoing the process of permanent aridification due to climate change.”

Permanent aridification. To address this stark reality and to effectively engage in upcoming, basin-wide decisions, TNC’s Colorado River Program has developed a new and ambitious game plan for the Colorado River Basin. Between now and 2026, TNC sees an historic opportunity to influence critical decisions that can improve flows and water security for the river system for the next 30 to 50 years.

“Water managers in the Basin are already crafting responses to this crisis,” says Hawes.

“We want to ensure the river’s health is considered from the beginning and included in the solutions being developed.” No one denies the emergency at hand. Human demands and a changing climate are putting major population centers, some of the country’s largest food producers, and a vast and interconnected river ecosystem at risk. Of the Basin’s 30 endemic fishes, four are already extinct, 12 are federally listed as endangered and four are listed as threatened.

At this unprecedented turning point, TNC has unveiled a new strategic plan. Through 2026, TNC’s Colorado River Program—spanning seven states and two countries—will focus on three pillars of engagement:

- **Balancing Water Needs** — address the threat of over-depletion and achieve long-term environmental water security.
- **Improving Water Infrastructure & Operations for Environmental Flows** — update the Colorado River Basin’s 20th-century water infrastructure to meet 21st-century challenges. Reduce diversions, increase flows and improve river health while enhancing efficiency and reliability.
- **Tribal Water Initiative** — develop, mobilize and/or leverage Tribal Nation water in ways that address economic needs, protect the

environment and respect the rights of Indigenous Peoples of the Colorado River Basin.

The new strategic plan builds on the strong foundation TNC’s Colorado River Program has built since its launch in 2008. Combining regional relationships with science and policy expertise, TNC has the critical pieces now in place to take the program to a new level. “This updated plan provides a basin-wide vision and focuses our work where we can have the greatest impact to help address water scarcity issues,” says Sue Bellagamba, TNC’s Canyonlands Regional Director. She oversees an innovative water-sharing project on the Price River, part of the Colorado River Basin in eastern Utah. And in our state’s southeastern corner, TNC is working with partners on agricultural efficiency projects to increase flows on the Virgin River, a tributary to the Colorado that faces increasing pressures from diversions and prolonged drought.

“TNC can’t fix this on its own,” says Hawes. “But we’ve identified a specific and unique role for TNC that we believe will result in substantial impact and benefits for nature and our communities.” That role means developing innovative tools and partnerships that will help people and nature thrive in the face of a hotter, drier future.

The Mitigation Commission helped TNC piece together the Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve, which is now a vital resource for wildlife and people.



A Powerful Force for Conservation

Saluting the Utah Reclamation Mitigation and Conservation Commission

“WITHOUT THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS, OUR Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve would not exist as we know it today,” says Dave Livermore, TNC’s Utah State Director. Livermore is referring to the support of the Utah Reclamation Mitigation and Conservation Commission (the Mitigation Commission), an entity unknown to many Utahns. “And the Great Salt Lake is just one example,” Livermore adds. “They really are Utah’s best kept secret in conservation.”

The Mitigation Commission recently celebrated 25 years of fulfilling its mission to support high-value fish and wildlife mitigation, conservation and recreation projects in Utah. An executive branch agency of the federal government, the Mitigation Commission was created in 1994 to offset the impacts of the Central Utah Project, the state’s largest water development project.

“The Mitigation Commission quickly recognized the tremendous power of

partnerships in carrying out its mission, and its vision and goals for its conservation program align perfectly with those of TNC,” said Mitigation Commission Chair Brad Barber. “We entered into our first of many cooperative agreements with TNC in 1995, and in 25 years we’ve accomplished far more than we could have on our own, especially along the shores of Great Salt Lake,” added Mitigation Commission Executive Director Mark Holden.

For TNC’s priorities at the Great Salt Lake, the Mitigation Commission’s partnership has been invaluable. “They often stepped up to purchase key properties we couldn’t afford,” Livermore remembers. TNC and the Mitigation Commission worked together to amass the 4,531 acres of valuable habitat which now comprise the Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve. Piece by piece, the Mitigation Commission purchased key inholdings within the preserve to help create contiguous protected ownership in partnership with TNC. In December 2020, these lands were formally conveyed to TNC for continued long-term management.

The Mitigation Commission has also been a driving force behind another important initiative: the Provo River Delta Restoration Project, a multi-year, partner-driven effort to

restore the interface between the Lower Provo River and Utah Lake. As part of this effort, TNC recently purchased a conservation easement on a 31-acre property that will help recovery efforts for the endangered June sucker.

“Every time we work with the Mitigation Commission, we know we’re going to see important results,” says Livermore. “The ambitious scope of projects like the Great Salt Lake and Provo River Delta are possible in large part because the Mitigation Commission is involved.”

Since its inception, the Mitigation Commission has approved more than 300 funding agreements with more than 60 partners, acquired over 26,000 acres and spent a quarter billion dollars on projects to safeguard Utah’s lands and waters. Over the next several years, the Mitigation Commission will transfer many of these lands to government or conservation organizations to be protected in perpetuity.

In December 2020, TNC honored the Commissioners and staff of the Mitigation Commission with the Utah Chapter’s special achievement award. At the time, Livermore summed it up best: “It is an honor to say thanks to the Mitigation Commission—one of our Utah Chapter’s greatest and most effective partners.”

The Congressional passage of the Navajo Utah Water Rights Settlement Act is a major win for people and nature. Navajo Nation President Johnathan Nez (inset) advocated for tribal water rights.



Utah Law-Making Goes Virtual

Conservation Policy Progress in an Unprecedented Session

LIKE EVERYTHING THESE DAYS, THE 2021 Utah Legislative Session was unusual. Law-making has always been a face-to-face, handshake-driven, sausage-making process. This year, though, as the session went virtual, the marble hallways of Utah's Capitol were largely empty, and Zoom calls dominated committee hearings. So what impact did that have on our conservation policy goals?

For Megan Nelson, TNC Utah's Director of Government Relations, who attended the Session virtually, the changes were challenging. "A lot of work is done in hallways or stepping out of hearings with legislators or stakeholders, and that just wasn't available," she says. "Plus, just like in a high school cafeteria, news travels fast in the Capitol cafeteria, but it travels much slower over text and email!"

Despite having to track legislation and lobby from her home office, Nelson points to some exciting progress this year. In recent sessions,

there was a new focus on protecting the Great Salt Lake, and this year legislators built on that momentum, approving funding for two new projects: one is a study that will better quantify the contribution of groundwater to the Lake and its wetlands, while the other is an effort to support local governments that are interested in incorporating smart water planning into their land use planning processes. "Getting more water to the Great Salt Lake is an urgent priority, so these are important developments," says Nelson. Utah lawmakers also put \$1 million into the LeRay McAlister Fund, the state's only fund for critical land protection projects.

Nelson is even more enthusiastic about an historic policy win this year for another important watershed—the Colorado River Basin. In late 2020, the U.S. Congress passed the Navajo Utah Water Rights Settlement Act, which was sponsored by U.S. Senator Mitt Romney and all four Utah representatives, and the Utah State Legislature ratified the act in this past session. The act settles the Navajo Nation's current and future tribal water rights in the state and provides over \$200 million in water infrastructure funding to the Navajo Nation. "This is the culmination of decades of collaborative work by the Navajo Nation,

state and federal government," says Nelson. "It reinforces tribal and state sovereignty while also providing crucial certainty for the management of the Colorado River."

The Colorado River Basin remains a major focus for TNC (see article, page 5). Late in the Session, the Utah Legislature also passed the "Colorado River Authority of Utah Act," setting up a six-member Authority, chaired by Utah's Colorado River Commissioner, which will lead the state on negotiations for the river. "We're still working through how this will impact our work and how we can best engage with the Authority," explains Nelson. "It does bring much needed focus to the Colorado River, for which TNC has long advocated."

As Nelson and her lobbyist team digest all the policy results, it's also a time to reflect on an unprecedented session—including some of the lighter moments. "There was this one surreal day when something went wrong with the video feed from the floor of the House," she chuckles. "For a few minutes, all the representatives looked like Smurfs." Looking ahead, Nelson sees much opportunity on the policy front. "With climate change and human demands, we're truly at a turning point for Western water issues. I'm excited to give nature a voice in a new way!"

Conservancy Voices



Courtesy of Hope Braithwaite

Hope Braithwaite

In 2018, TNC and the Utah State University (USU) Botanical Center hired Hope Braithwaite, assistant professor in Watershed Sciences at USU, to be a full-time leader for the Wings & Water (W&W) Wetlands Education Program. The program, which features a field trip to TNC's Great Salt Lake Shorelands Preserve, has reached more than 20,000 students to date. While the W&W program had to go "virtual" last year, staff hope to have kids safely back out at the preserve this fall. Hope oversees the program's work with teachers, schools and volunteer naturalist guides.

"One of my favorite parts of the Wings & Water field trips generally happens at the top of the tower at the Preserve. We take time to quietly make observations using our senses: what we see, hear, smell and feel. There is so much to take in, especially with a birds-eye view. Then, there is the excited buzz as students share with each other all of the cool things that they noticed. It's incredible to experience the Great Salt Lake wetlands with students and it's inspiring to hear their enthusiasm as they explore and discover this diverse and unique place in their own backyards."



© Kody Rominger

Dr. Susan Meyer

One of the West's top shrubland scientists, United States Department of Agriculture research ecologist Dr. Susan Meyer has worked with TNC for years, especially providing her expertise on the rare dwarf bear poppy (*Arctomecon humilis*). Dr. Meyer uses TNC's White Dome Nature Preserve to study the endangered flower's population viability, seed longevity, germination, pollination, interactions with biological soil crusts and more. Recently Dr. Meyer and her team began using drones to enhance their plant research.

"One of the most exciting things about working on dwarf bear poppy ecology at the White Dome Nature Preserve is using drone imagery to see spatial and temporal population patterns and community-level processes that would never be obvious on the ground. One surprising finding is that each year is so different in terms of population structure and the factors that impact plants over the short term. For example, the major negative impact of rodent herbivory on roots had not been noted before but is readily tracked in the imagery this year. Without multiple-year, drone-based studies over relatively large areas, these impacts would be very difficult to evaluate."



Courtesy Gavin Noyes


Gavin Noyes

Gavin Noyes, previously the executive director for Utah Diné Bikéyah, is taking on a new advisory role with TNC. In the coming months Gavin will be helping our Utah Chapter engage with tribal leaders, guiding us on tribal policies and increasing our awareness of conservation and land use issues important to the Indigenous Peoples of Utah.

"Right now is such an amazing time to be doing conservation work in the West. I couldn't be happier than working alongside TNC experts to help protect the landscapes, waters, biodiversity and human communities which are vital to Utah's quality of life. I am also excited to continue to integrate Native American Tribes in decision-making processes and to confront long-neglected issues of environmental injustice. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that dramatically changing the world is not only possible, but also essential to our collective future."

STAY CONNECTED



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Pulling Off a Rare Cactus Rescue



(LEFT) Siler Pincushion Cactus © Seth Topham, (RIGHT) TNC Volunteers © Elaine York/TNC

IT'S A BIRD! IT'S A PLANE? ... NO, IT'S BOTANISTS AND TNC volunteers! For the Siler pincushion cactus, a species found only in small parts of Utah and Arizona, rescue came in the form of a gentle transplant process over the course of six days this past October and March. In Washington County, TNC rallied scientists and volunteers to carefully

move about 90 of these rare and threatened plants before bulldozers arrived to dig up the soil for a new development.

To prevent their loss, TNC's rescue team descended and carefully transplanted the spikey, globe-shaped cacti to a new and protected home at TNC's nearby White Dome Nature Preserve. "We had to act fast, and we are so glad we did," says Elaine York, TNC in Utah's West Desert Regional Director. "This was an opportunity to save a number of incredibly rare plants, which are an important part of this area's unique biodiversity."

The Siler pincushion cactus thrives in the fragile, gypsum-rich soil found in this region, which is often disturbed or destroyed by development and off-road vehicle use. When it blooms in spring, this cactus shows off yellow flowers with purple veins, which erupt from the top of each plant. York and her team hope the cacti "evacuees" will now thrive at the preserve, and she welcomes all of us to enjoy them. "I hope people visit the preserve and experience this beautiful flower and the many other rare and endangered species that call Washington County home."