



### **Year in Review**

Massachusetts

2025 Fall/Winter Issue



A Lasting Impact in Massachusetts and Beyond

I'm incredibly excited to have stepped into my new role as state director for The Nature Conservancy in Massachusetts this summer. TNC's work is close to my heart. Growing up with a deep love for the outdoors, particularly the ocean, I developed a passion to engage people in protecting the environment—the clean water and air, and species we all rely on.

I came to this role with a background in natural resources and public health. I believe community well-being and quality of life are intertwined with the health of our planet, and when we make that connection, we inspire a deeper level of care and action. It's why TNC's aim to create a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving nature resonates so deeply with me.

In my first few months, I've been diving into our strategies to tackle climate change and protect healthy lands, rivers, ocean and coasts. One of TNC's superpowers is its reach, from global initiatives to local projects. One example is a project I visited early on at Watson Park in East Braintree, where the city built a living shoreline—using native plants and natural elements like oyster shells—to address erosion and flooding. TNC is helping facilitate knowledge exchanges and supporting planning capacity so that what's learned from these projects can be shared across the northeast to help communities adapt to climate change. (*Read more on page 5*.) This work contributes to our national and global efforts to help 100 million people who are at severe risk of climate-related emergencies.

Another reason I was drawn to TNC is its strong reputation for relying on science. As we face the crises of biodiversity loss and climate change, making difficult choices is inevitable. Having solid science that informs our decisions is essential. In Massachusetts, we have been—and I am sure will continue to be—a leader on biodiversity conservation, clean energy and climate adaptation, with incredible opportunities from the Gulf of Maine to the Berkshires. TNC's priorities align with our state's robust conservation and climate goals, and I'm eager to help continue this important work.

I'm excited about our work taking place in the ocean—where TNC has a history of pioneering innovative approaches to restoration, community and coastal resiliency, and sound fisheries management. So many rely on the ocean for livelihoods and nutritious seafood, and of course it regulates the climate and provides oxygen to breathe. If we continue to lead in this area, scaling approaches with other states and countries, we can make a tremendous impact.

TNC's work in the Berkshires on landscape connectivity—part of the larger Appalachians strategy—is also key. We know that climate change is challenging species and migration, so working to create connected pathways to help animals and plants move and adapt to climate change is essential. (Read more about a recent win to support this strategy on the next page.)

COVER Headwaters Trail, Coles Brook Preserve © Richard Getler; THIS PAGE © Richard Getler; © Kris Sarri f facebook.com/ConserveMA
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Of course, we can only accomplish our goals with partnerships—with other environmental and community organizations; cities, towns and communities; and supporters like you. I am eager to continue building and strengthening the relationships that are fundamental to ensuring a world where people and nature thrive.

I'm thrilled to be a part of the world's largest conservation organization, working with a strong team here in Massachusetts to make a lasting global impact. As recent transplants from Maryland, my husband and I are excited to explore the beauty of the Commonwealth and connect with people who are similarly dedicated to protecting our environment.

Kris Sarri State Director

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#### **A New Cross-Pike Nature Connector**

Interstate 90, known to many in Massachusetts as the Mass Pike, is a busy thoroughfare for humans traveling east and west across the state. However, it also bisects the entire Appalachian region in Western Massachusetts—a barrier to south-north wildlife movement. At a time when many animals are shifting their ranges north in response to the warming climate, this "asphalt wall" stands in the way of their migration between protected landscapes.

The Nature Conservancy—as well as other environmental organizations and state government agencies—share a vision of a connected and resilient landscape throughout this key corridor, known as the Berkshire Wildlife Linkage. TNC's Appalachian Program aims to create a 2,000-mile biodiversity superhighway of high-quality habitat for plants and animals throughout the entire mountain chain, within which the Linkage plays an important part.

To support this goal, in July, TNC purchased 578 acres in Blandford, Massachusetts. The seven parcels, situated on both sides of the Mass Pike, are within the Westfield River watershed, offering one of the best opportunities for large-scale forest and freshwater conservation in southern New England. The parcels link existing protected land—including the Chester-Blandford State Forest and land protected by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Trustees of Reservations—creating a continuous block of nearly 40,000 acres of conserved land.

"This is a big win for nature," says Richard Cavanaugh, land protection manager for TNC in Massachusetts. "By connecting these protected lands, we will be enhancing critical passageways for wildlife across the landscape and even beneath the Mass Pike through culverts. It also represents a significant step forward in helping to reach the state's biodiversity goals."

Approximately two-thirds of the property is within BioMap core habitat, areas that are crucial for the long-term persistence of rare species, exemplary natural communities and resilient ecosystems. Data from several TNC assessments of culverts and wildlife movement show that this area is a critical spot for connecting protected lands, as well as a hotspot where there are large numbers of wildlife collisions on the highway.

TNC plans to transfer the lands to the Massachusetts
Department of Conservation and Recreation to expand the
Chester-Blandford State Forest and to the Department of
Fish and Game to become one of its Wildlife Management
Areas. TNC will retain an access easement to facilitate
Department of Transportation efforts to assess wildlife
connectivity opportunities at the site and potentially enhance
two culverts that run underneath the Pike to allow for safer
wildlife movement.

© Richard Getler



## Proactive relocation away from rising waters

Several years ago, Nature Conservancy in Massachusetts Climate Adaptation Director Emma Gildesgame was standing next to a marsh in Winthrop, talking about flood hazards in the neighborhood with staff from the town, colleagues from partner nonprofits and consultants. The discussion focused on building resilience in the face of climate impacts.

Gildesgame posed the question that started it all: "Is anyone thinking or talking about helping people move out of harm's way for a more long-term solution to flooding?"

The answer from municipal staff? "We can't talk about that." That kind of action was too complicated, political and expensive, and just not an option that was "worth" discussing at the time. Gildesgame asked if it would be helpful for TNC to start talking about it, laying the groundwork to help people navigate a future in which flood-prone residents may need to relocate to safer housing on higher ground. They said yes.

Fast forward a few years to May 2025, and Gildesgame is back in Winthrop, this time hosting a community conversation with 25 people who specifically came to talk about managed retreat, including their potential interest in property buyouts. The residents discussed concerns and their experiences, as well as what they'd want for their community after potential retreat and relocation.

#### Planning resilient approaches

The community meeting is part of an initiative TNC has been building for the last few years, with partners at the Urban Harbors Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, Communities Responding to Extreme Weather (CREW), Carri Hulet of CH Consulting, and UMass Amherst Extension. Together, they've engaged with experts in the field and convened practitioners to understand the barriers to planning for relocation away from the edge of the coast

as a long-term climate resilience solution. In June 2025, the group convened more than 70 professionals for a day-long workshop to discuss challenges, effective approaches and how they can help one another in this arena.

This work is supported by a grant from the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management, through which the group leads a coast-wide peer learning network, community listening events and the development of a resource database.

#### Adapting to rising waters

Managed retreat is one tool in the toolbox for adapting to flooding effectively for the short- and long-term. Unlike many other commonly used tools, like living shorelines, sea walls and temporary storm barriers, managed retreat eliminates risk for those who move out of the floodplain. The other tools are necessary and useful in the short term, but strategies for buyouts and rezoning—as well as moving structures and realigning utilities, roadways and transit—are needed for the areas that most frequently and intensely flood.

"Flooding is here, it's bad, and the status quo is not always an option—we need new solutions," says Gildesgame. "It's hard. We're talking about reshaping our relationship to our coasts, places in which community identities are deeply rooted. Moving can be hard on many levels; getting flooded out of your home can be even harder."

Most towns have a relatively small percentage of these highest-risk homes that would benefit from a buyout. But in a state with a severe affordable housing crisis, we need to think carefully about how to help those residents. And we need to help make it possible for those who want to stay in their communities—near their social, financial and other support systems—to find equivalent, affordable housing in safer nearby areas.

#### An opportunity for restoration

A critical consideration for practitioners and communities is what happens to the land after homes and infrastructure are relocated. With proactive planning, relocation can help coastal habitats like salt marshes and sand dunes adapt to rising seas and increasingly intense coastal storms. Restoring the area to natural shoreline that supports wildlife, can absorb flooding and rising seas, and serves as a green space for the community ensures that the land continues to be an asset to those still located nearby.

A participant in a managed retreat community discussion in Gloucester agreed: "A nature-based solution would be great... people would like that if they knew they were creating open space."

#### **Centering communities**

Gildesgame and project partners are helping communities start thinking about relocation as an option for some residents in the neighborhood. Through outreach and engagement with coastal residents, like the community gathering in Winthrop, they share information about how people around the country are dealing with similar situations. This creates opportunities for those facing regular flooding to express their concerns and experiences, articulate their hopes for the future and ask questions about the difficult choices before them.

The lessons learned from these engagements, which are taking place across the coast, from Gloucester to Dighton, will help shape state and local action on managed retreat, including informing a state-wide feasibility study for a potential flood buyout program.

"If we get this right—a proactive, community-centered reenvisioning of what the coast can look like—we can reduce risks, create more space for functional coastal ecosystems, facilitate marsh migration and meet community needs," says Gildesgame. "And we can do it together in a way that honors their past, present and future."

Read the full piece at nature.org/macoastalrelocation

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## Boosting nature along the coast

Living shorelines are another tool that can help communities adapt to climate impacts along the coast. These nature-based solutions are a set of approaches that mimic coastal habitats while incorporating some structural elements to slow waves and reduce flooding. TNC and partner organizations have been piloting and researching living shorelines in New England and beyond, as well as codifying best practices across different shoreline types. Knowing what works allows us to replicate approaches to streamline the process.

Throughout spring 2025, TNC held a series of workshops at three living shorelines in Connecticut, Maine and Massachusetts, convening people from across the region for a knowledge exchange. The effort culminated in an online webinar that recapped key takeaways from the workshops, which attracted hundreds of attendees.

"To build on this effort, we're working in partnership with the Northeast Regional Ocean Council to provide training, increase planning capacity at the local level and jumpstart living shoreline projects throughout New England," says Dan Goulart, coastal project manager for TNC in Massachusetts.

Applications are open this fall for communities that are interested in developing nature-based solutions. TNC will select 10 applicants from across New England to receive training in coastal resilience planning and participate in developing concept designs for their site. This will enable communities to use proven nature-based approaches to protect people, infrastructure and wildlife habitat.

LEFT Belle Isle Marsh viewed from Winthrop with Revere in the distance © Loren Dowd/TNC; MIDDLE Emma Gildesgame speaks at the 2025 Coastal Relocation Workshop. © Chloe Tomasetta/TNC; RIGHT Living shoreline in Stratford, Connecticut © Ayla Fox









# Shaping state policy

The Nature Conservancy in Massachusetts plays a unique and critical role as a convener of public agencies, non-governmental organizations, the business community, legislators and other partners to catalyze policy change and action that is in line with our mission and goals. And Massachusetts' government has made strong commitments to addressing climate change and supporting nature, in part thanks to TNC and partners' advocacy, partnerships and expertise.

This spring, Zachary Sheldon joined the Policy and Partnerships team as the new policy manager, jumping into advocacy for several pieces of legislation on drought, natural and working lands and more. 2025 also saw the release of the Environmental bond, Biodiversity Conservation Goals for the Commonwealth, and updated renewable energy regulations and incentives.

Massachusetts' Environmental Bond—also known as the Mass Ready Act—is updated roughly every five years and provides capital funding for many of the conservation and restoration programs for which TNC advocates to reach our 2030 goals. As a member of the Bond coalition, we pushed for the Administration to focus on climate, water and health.

"More than ever, we need to make the connection between people, nature and well-being," says Sheldon. "Thanks in part to TNC's influence, the Bond provides funding and policy solutions to meet the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss."

As Director of Policy and Partnerships Steve Long noted at the Mass Ready Act announcement, it "provides the most holistic approach I've seen over four previous bond bills. It is like a Swiss Army knife with multi-faceted solutions to boost climate resilience, safeguard clean water, defend wildlife and nourish communities."

On the heels of the Bond's release over the summer, the state also released Biodiversity Conservation Goals for the Commonwealth, a roadmap for how state agencies plan to protect and restore nature.

"Notably, the Mass Ready Act backs critical investments for implementing the biodiversity plan," says Long. "This includes a new program to empower municipalities, from creating pollinator gardens to community education."

TNC is also advocating for safeguards for people and nature within renewable energy siting and permitting policy, providing operational and scientific guidance. TNC significantly influenced the climate and energy law passed at the end of 2024, and as the state updated its solar incentive program—Solar Massachusetts Renewable Target—TNC provided science, expertise and decision-support tools. As a result, renewable energy policies now include meaningful protections for biodiversity and forest carbon resources. We also advocated for criteria that protect communities and empower them to host solar in ways that are best for them.

"These updates will not only accelerate renewable energy development in the state but are essential to align with the Commonwealth's new biodiversity plan," says Andy Finton, senior conservation ecologist for TNC in Massachusetts. "This is a big win for people and nature."

TOP TO BOTTOM Bee on joe pye weed © Jerry Monkman/EcoPhotography; Steve Long speaks at the Mass Ready Act announcement © Alison Bowden/TNC; An example of solar panels situated on farm land © Christel Hiltibran

#### Year in photos



Consulting with community | Since 2022, a team of TNC staff from Massachusetts and New Hampshire have been helping update the 2014 Merrimack Conservation Plan to center people alongside nature. As part of the process, the team connected with residents in the communities along the river to hear about their needs and priorities related to flooding, green space and urban heat. The updated plan was launched in October with priorities to benefit wildlife habitat and connectivity, forests and farms, water quality and quantity, and community climate resilience. Learn more at nature.org/Merrimack.

Our ocean, our coasts, and us I In March, TNC partnered with Catalyst Conversations to host presentations and a panel discussion about the challenges facing the coastline, from climate change to pollution. Catalyst founder Deborah Davidson talked with Climate Adaptation Scientist Emma Gildesgame, marine ecologist and TNC-Northeastern University Fellow Jessica Griffin, and artist Rebecca McGee Tuck about their work and how they bring visibility to often unseen coastal challenges. A recording is available at catalystconversations.org/eventarchive.





Honor the Earth | For Earth Month in April, Donor Relations Manager Zaskya Perez and Freshwater Manager Marea Gabriel represented TNC in Massachusetts at the Honor the Earth Fair co-hosted by Native Land Conservancy and the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe Natural Resources Department. They connected with community members and partners and were deeply grateful for the invitation to participate in this event and build relations with Indigenous communities.

Mill River reflections | Twenty years ago, the Whittenton Mill Pond Dam in Taunton nearly failed during heavy flooding, causing evacuations of downtown Taunton. This event catalyzed the formation of the Mill River Restoration Partnership, which has been leading an initiative to remove dams, construct fish and eel ladders, engage with the community, and restore the river. Several Northeastern University graduate students—pictured here at the river—have been working with TNC to study the impacts of these changes on the landscape and community. Stay tuned for their analysis!



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#### Introducing our newest trail

In July, TNC in Massachusetts celebrated the opening of the new Headwaters Trail at Coles Brook Preserve in the town of Washington with neighbors, supporters, partners and staff. Led by Land Steward Rene Wendell, attendees enjoyed a hike along the scenic 1.2-mile trail, stopping at notable spots to learn about the preserve's history and the teamwork that made the trail possible.

Featuring two natural stone staircases and a charming bridge over Coles Brook, the Headwaters Trail offers a peaceful escape through both young and mature forested land.

A wooden bench, recycled from the previous landowners, overlooks the brook and invites visitors to relax and take in the flowing water, wildflowers and surrounding woodland. The trail also includes an initial section that is suitable for people with power-driven mobility devices.

It was a joyful celebration of community, conservation and connection to nature. We're excited to welcome nature lovers to this tranquil retreat—and grateful to all who helped bring it to life. Visit nature.org/preserves to plan your visit today!