MISSOURI
2026 IMPACT REPORT



CELEBRATING
70 YEARS
IN MISSOURI

A legacy of conservation.
Reflecting on the chapter's origins and its continued growth

Story on pages 3-5.

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ON THE COVER: A canoer navigates an Ozark river. © Ian McGee



Dear Friends,

This year marks The Nature Conservancy's 70th anniversary in Missouri. I wasn't there at the start (far from it, thank you very much), but I recognize something familiar in those early members: they were problem solvers.

TNC has long understood that action moves us forward. Pair it with the best science, strong partnerships and the courage to take informed risks, and you have the formula we have used to conserve more than 150,000 acres of Missouri's wild places.

I recently revisited that history with Doug Ladd, our retired director of conservation science in Missouri. We dug into the projects, partnerships and decisions that have shaped TNC's work and Missouri itself. *(You can read more about that on the next page or listen to the podcast episode at nature.org/mopodcast.)*

The discussion reminded me that there have always been challenges, and people willing to solve them. In this report alone, you'll read about expanding habitat for bison, helping farmers sustain productive working lands, and launching a bridge program to reconnect free-flowing rivers.

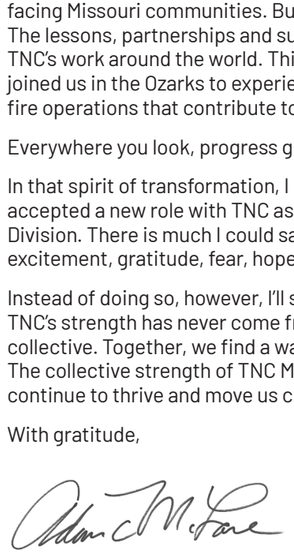
Each reflects how practical conservation solutions can address challenges facing Missouri communities. But their impact extends beyond our state. The lessons, partnerships and successes developed here help inform TNC's work around the world. This summer, TNC CEO Jennifer Morris joined us in the Ozarks to experience the rivers, wildlife and prescribed fire operations that contribute to TNC's 2030 global goals.

Everywhere you look, progress grows from our deeply rooted principles.

In that spirit of transformation, I have some personal news: I have accepted a new role with TNC as deputy director for our Great Plains Division. There is much I could say or share about this change—excitement, gratitude, fear, hope, confidence. I am feeling them all.

Instead of doing so, however, I'll share a deeply rooted principle of my own. TNC's strength has never come from any one individual. It comes from the collective. Together, we find a way. We always have, and we always will. The collective strength of TNC Missouri, including supporters like you, will continue to thrive and move us closer to the world we all envision.

With gratitude,



Adam McLane, *Great Plains Division Deputy Director*





The following story is adapted from a two-part conversation between The Nature Conservancy's Adam McLane and Doug Ladd, TNC Missouri's longtime director of conservation science, who retired in 2018 after more than three decades with TNC.

Seventy Years of Conservation, Guided by One Question

In 1956, a small group of students, professors and conservation-minded citizens in St. Louis gathered around a simple question, **what should we do about it?**

They had spent months discussing Missouri's remarkable natural heritage and the threats facing it. Studying nature was not enough. They wanted to protect it. Their question led to the creation of The Nature Conservancy's Missouri chapter and launched a conservation journey that continues 70 years later.

Looking back on that history, Doug Ladd sees a story driven less by a master plan and more by curiosity, science and a willingness to act.

A state worth protecting

For Ladd, Missouri itself is the beginning of the story.

Originally from New England, he visited the Ozarks as a graduate student and quickly realized he had discovered something extraordinary. The region's ancient, rugged landscapes escaped the glaciers that reshaped much of North America, and unique plants, animals and natural communities evolved there over millions of years.

Missouri's position between eastern forests and western grasslands created an ecological crossroads that was unique.

Visitors often arrive with few expectations. Many are astonished by the clear rivers, dramatic rock formations and forested hills of southern Missouri. Others are surprised to learn that fragments of the vast tallgrass prairie ecosystem that once covered much of the continent still survive in northern Missouri, and restoration efforts now support grazing bison and grassland wildlife.

> "It was always about asking what nature needed. Then figuring out how to make it happen."
>
> —Doug Ladd

Top: Birding at Wah'kon-Tah Prairie © Date and photographer unknown; Inset: Doug Ladd and Adam McLane © Kristy Stoyer/TNC



From volunteers to a conservation force

For nearly three decades after its founding, TNC Missouri was run entirely by volunteers.

Board members organized meetings, raised funds and protected important natural areas across the state. Early efforts focused primarily on acquiring vulnerable lands and placing them into conservation ownership.

By the early 1980s, however, the organization began to transform. A dedicated Missouri office was established in St. Louis. Staff were hired. Scientific planning became more rigorous. Instead of simply protecting any available natural area, we began asking larger questions. Which ecosystems were irreplaceable? Which species faced the greatest risk? Where could investments create the biggest impact?

At the same time, the broader conservation movement was evolving.

“We realized you could save all the landscapes in the world, but if you didn’t think about the human context and people’s needs, you weren’t going to have conservation success,” Ladd reflects.

That shift toward science-based, measurable outcomes helped shape the Missouri chapter’s modern approach.

Taking risks that others couldn’t

One theme from TNC’s history surfaced repeatedly, TNC’s willingness to test ideas that were sometimes far from mainstream. Perhaps no example illustrates that better than prescribed fire.

When Ladd began advocating for controlled burns in Missouri’s woodlands and grasslands, the concept was controversial. Decades of fire suppression had convinced many people that all fire was harmful. Yet ecological research increasingly showed that periodic fire had shaped many of Missouri’s most diverse natural communities.

Before joining TNC’s staff, Ladd volunteered to help conduct prescribed burns on TNC properties. Those early efforts were met with skepticism, and in at least one case, outside leaders tried to stop a planned burn altogether. But TNC pressed forward.

Leaders asked questions, weighed risks and ultimately allowed staff to test a strategy supported by emerging science.

Today, prescribed fire is widely recognized as one of the most important tools for restoring healthy forests, woodlands and prairies. State agencies, federal partners, nonprofits and private landowners routinely work together to apply fire across Missouri’s landscape.

The lesson, Ladd says, extends well beyond fire. Time and again, TNC has stepped into innovative spaces to test a new technique whose outcome was uncertain. By taking carefully considered risks, we often helped demonstrate what was possible so others could follow.

The power of partnership

While innovation has played a central role in TNC Missouri’s history, Ladd believes partnership has been equally important. No single organization, agency or landowner can conserve Missouri’s natural heritage alone.

The restoration of northern Missouri’s grasslands offers a powerful example. Prairie conservation evolved from scattered acquisitions into a landscape-scale vision that connected landowners, government agencies and conservation organizations around shared goals.

Properties like TNC’s Dunn Ranch Prairie became more than protected landscapes. They became demonstration sites that showed how large-scale prairie restoration could support wildlife, improve habitat and reconnect Missourians with an ecosystem that once covered millions of acres.

The same partnership model has shaped work on rivers, forests and agricultural lands across the state.

For Ladd, effective conservation is rarely about drawing lines between people and nature. It is about finding solutions that benefit both.

Looking ahead

After seven decades of progress, conservation remains an unfinished story.

Today’s challenges are different from those we faced in 1956. Climate change, shifting land use, renewable energy development and growing demands on natural resources require conservationists to think at larger scales and anticipate new pressures.

Ladd notes that some future challenges will arrive unexpectedly.

Others may emerge as opportunities that conservationists cannot yet fully imagine. He believes the key is maintaining the qualities that have guided TNC for decades: scientific inquiry, adaptability and a willingness to learn.

“We have to think about how everything is connected,” he says. “People and nature are always part of the discussion.” That philosophy mirrors the one that inspired TNC Missouri’s founders 70 years ago. Their work began with a simple question and a conviction that action mattered.

Along the way, volunteers became conservation leaders. Small projects grew into landscape-scale efforts. New ideas changed how Missouri manages forests, rivers and prairies.

Most importantly, generations of supporters, donors, scientists, landowners and community partners continued asking what could be done and then taking the next step forward. Ladd believes those founders would be proud of what followed.

“I don’t think they would have anticipated outcomes this big,” he says.

The story continues

Seventy years after a group of students and professors gathered to discuss Missouri’s natural future, the same spirit continues to shape conservation across the state. The landscapes they cared about still inspire people. New challenges continue to emerge. New opportunities continue to appear.

And the question that launched TNC Missouri remains as relevant as ever: **What should we do about it?**

HEAR MORE

This story captures only a portion of Adam McLane’s two-part conversation with Doug Ladd. Listen to the full conversation, visit **nature.org/mopodcast.**







Top to bottom: Doug Ladd leading site monitoring with partners; 1980s TNC fire crew; Seed collecting at Dunn Ranch Prairie © TNC

Rainbow in the Ozarks © Terra Fondriest/TNC Photo Contest 2018





The Power of Connection

At first glance, a low-water crossing in the Ozarks and a bison tunnel on a northern Missouri prairie seem to have little in common. One is a simple slab or culvert that allows vehicles to cross a stream; the other is a structure running beneath a road. But both are part of a larger effort to solve one of conservation's greatest challenges—keeping wildlife connected.

For thousands of years, Missouri's rivers flowed freely and its vast grasslands stretched for miles, allowing animals to move where they needed to go. Fish traveled upstream to reach their spawning grounds. Bison roamed across the prairie in search of fresh forage. Birds navigated open grasslands shaped by grazing herds. Today, roads and other human-made barriers can interrupt those natural movements, fragmenting habitat and limiting animals' access to the resources they need to survive.

As scientists work to understand why so many species are declining, one answer continues to emerge. It's not enough to preserve habitat. Wildlife also need the ability to move through it.

Reconnecting Huzzah Creek

For fish, a river is more than water. It is a pathway connecting the places they need to feed, find cover and reproduce. When that pathway is blocked, even a healthy stream can't give fish everything they need.

On Huzzah Creek in Crawford County, three aging crossings at Willhite Road, Seller's Ford and John Coleman Road had long interrupted the river's natural flow. Working with the Crawford County Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service and Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration, The Nature Conservancy helped replace those crossings with bridges that are higher above the water, allowing the creek to move freely beneath them.

Together, the projects reconnected 113 miles of stream habitat between the mainstem Huzzah and its tributaries—nearly the distance between St. Louis and Columbia.

"People see three bridge replacements," says Rob Pulliam, TNC's freshwater conservation strategist. "What we see is more than 100 miles of connected river where fish can once again move freely to find the habitat they need."

But the benefits reach beyond wildlife. During heavy rains and flooding, low-water crossings can become impassable, disrupting travel for nearby communities. The new bridges provide more reliable access for people and services that depend on them, while allowing the river to function naturally.

"As we look at the future, we're not just replacing bridges," Pulliam says. "We're creating connections that make rivers healthier and communities more resilient."



Top to bottom: Newly constructed bridge on Willhite Road along Huzzah Creek © Zach Beers; Willhite Road crossing before construction © Rob Pulliam/TNC

Room to roam

On the prairies of northern Missouri, movement shapes the landscape. Bison evolved to roam across large landscapes, following fresh forage and shaping the grasslands as they go. Their constant movement creates a patchwork of habitat that benefits everything from prairie wildflowers to grassland birds.

At Dunn Ranch Prairie, one county road stood between the herd and an additional 600 acres of grazing habitat. To reconnect that landscape, TNC worked with partners and local stakeholders to install a bison underpass beneath the road, creating a safe passageway between the two areas.

The tunnel allows bison to move freely without crossing the path of traffic, reducing the risk of vehicle collisions while opening access to new grazing grounds. Those additional acres will support the herd to grow, improve the animals' health and expand the ecological benefits bison bring to the prairie.

"When people think about conservation, they often think about protecting land," says Brett Perkins, TNC's grazing and grasslands coordinator. "But wildlife also need a way to move through it. This underpass reconnects part of the prairie and gives bison access to the space they need to thrive."

Like the bridges on Huzzah Creek, the underpass may seem simple. By creating a new route for both wildlife and people, it helps restore the natural connections that have long sustained Missouri's landscapes.

Restoring movement

Whether it's a small fish swimming upstream in an Ozark creek, a bison crossing beneath a road to reach new grazing grounds, or a prairie-chicken following a path through tall grass, each journey depends on connection. Wildlife passages may differ based on whether they offer a route above, below or within the landscape, but they share the same goal—removing barriers and restoring movement.

At a time when habitat fragmentation threatens species across the globe, reconnecting landscapes is one of conservation's most powerful tools. Every stream made passable, every acre made accessible and every corridor restored helps stitch together the pathways wildlife have relied on for generations. By making room for movement again, we are doing more than helping individual species—we are rebuilding the connections that keep entire ecosystems alive.

Left to right: Bison underpass at Dunn Ranch Prairie © Brett Perkins/TNC; Bleeding shiners in Huzzah Creek © Zach Beers



Restoring Nature's Connections

The Ozarks are connected by far more than roads and rivers. Beneath the surface, a remarkable network of streams, caves and aquatic communities demonstrates the power of connection. These underground waterways support an extraordinary diversity of fish, mussels and other species, including some found nowhere else on Earth, that rely on connected habitats to move, feed and reproduce.

That same spirit of connection shapes conservation efforts across the region. Working with local communities and agencies, TNC is helping reconnect streams and rivers by improving crossings and removing barriers that can interrupt the natural movement of water and wildlife. Together, these efforts support healthier habitats, cleaner water and a more resilient future for the Ozarks.





Building Resilience on Missouri's Working Lands

The future of agriculture in Missouri is taking shape in diverse ways across the state.

Along the Missouri River near Columbia, newly planted pecan and walnut trees now grow where annual crops once stood. In northern Missouri, cattle rotate through carefully managed paddocks overlooking one of the state's largest remaining prairies. Near St. Louis and Kansas City, demonstration farms are showing how conservation practices can support productive agriculture while improving habitat and water quality.

At first glance, these places have little in common. But together, they tell the story of how The Nature Conservancy is helping advance regenerative agriculture across Missouri.

Agriculture touches nearly every corner of the state. In fact, farmland covers roughly two-thirds of Missouri, making agriculture not just an economic driver but one of the most important influences on the health of Missouri's water, grasslands and wildlife. As farmers face more frequent weather extremes and growing pressure on natural resources, the question is no longer whether agriculture and conservation can work together. It is how to make that partnership stronger.

Across Missouri, TNC is helping answer that question through two interconnected approaches: regenerative crop systems and regenerative grazing systems.

Advancing regenerative crop systems

At the Missouri River Center, regenerative crop systems are taking root on 164 acres of floodplain just southwest of Columbia. Developed in partnership with Missouri River Relief and the University of Missouri Center for Agroforestry, the site is being transformed into a demonstration landscape where agriculture, education, research and restoration come together.

For decades, much of the property produced annual row crops. In the fall of 2024, TNC planted 2,000 native trees across the site. In addition, we planted more than 400 pecans and walnuts in an alley-cropping system designed to demonstrate how trees and agriculture can coexist on productive working lands. Along the river corridor, a diverse riparian buffer is being planted to improve wildlife habitat, protect water quality, and showcase practical conservation options for landowners.

The transformation is also creating opportunities for research and education. Scientists are monitoring soil health, tracking bird and bat activity, and studying how regenerative agroforestry practices can improve the long-term resilience of floodplain landscapes like this one.

Several hours west, just outside Kansas City, another demonstration landscape is taking shape along the Little Blue River. The 270-acre property includes row crops, wetlands, timber, and grasslands, making it an ideal location to explore how conservation can be layered into traditional working lands. Native forbs and grasses support a diverse array of pollinators. Invasive species are being removed.

Restoration efforts are improving habitat while maintaining productive farmland.

Northwest of St. Louis, TNC's 205-acre Tributary Farm showcases best management practices. The farm uses cover crops to build soil health and feed cattle. It is a model for how regenerative practices can improve both agricultural outcomes and environmental health. Portions of pasture have been restored with native grasses. New fencing and alternative watering systems support rotational grazing. Livestock have been excluded from sensitive stream corridors to protect water quality. Pollinator habitat, grassed waterways, terraces, and a two-stage ditch all work together to reduce erosion and keep nutrients on the land.

The rolling nature of this land once contributed an unhealthy load of nutrients and sediments into local waterways, but now a system of wetlands and buffers slows and filters water before releasing it downstream.

Like the Missouri River Center, these sites are less about promoting a single practice than demonstrating how multiple conservation tools can work together.

Strengthening grasslands through grazing

While regenerative crop systems are helping reshape Missouri's river corridors and agricultural landscapes, another important piece of the puzzle is taking shape in the grasslands of northern Missouri. The state is a leader in cow/calf production, making grassland stewardship and grazing management vital components of sustainable agriculture.

At Little Creek Farm, just across the road from Dunn Ranch Prairie, TNC has developed a sustainable grazing demonstration farm. Since acquiring the property in 2017, we have worked alongside local rancher Ryan Cox to test management strategies that benefit both livestock producers and the environment.

Native warm-season grasses have been interseeded into pastures, increasing biodiversity and improving forage quality. Cattle are rotated through 12 paddocks rather than continuously grazing the same fields. The result has been healthier pastures, a longer grazing season and greater flexibility for producers, demonstrating that environmental benefits and agricultural productivity can go hand in hand.

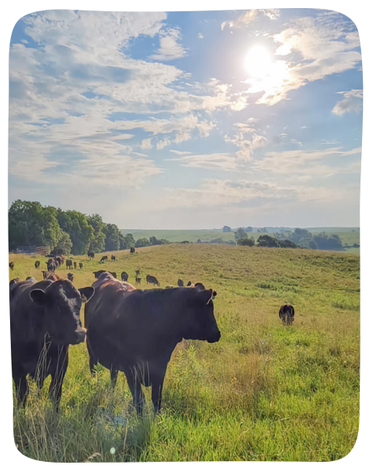
Nearby at Dunn Ranch Prairie and at TNC's grassbank, which sits on the northern end of the 4,000-acre prairie, emerging technologies such as virtual fences are ushering in the next generation of regenerative grazing management. Together, the two sites demonstrate how thoughtful livestock management can support productive ranching operations while improving grassland health, wildlife habitat and water resources.

A larger vision for Missouri's working lands

No two agricultural sites look alike. Each reflects its local landscape and the opportunities available in that region. Collectively, they reveal a larger vision. From agroforestry along the Missouri River to habitat improvements along the Little Blue River, from in-field and edge-of-field practices at Tributary Farm to rotational grazing at Little Creek Farm, these projects form a connected network of learning, experimentation and demonstration.

The lesson emerging from that network is simple: regenerative agriculture is not a single practice. It is a commitment to working lands that are productive, resilient and capable of supporting both people and nature.





Opposite page, top: An aerial view of the Little Blue River site © Jake Slobe/TNC; Inset: Trees planted at Missouri River Center in 2024 © Zack Miller/TNC; This page, left to right: Farmers and partners at a TNC conservation grazing workshop. © Zack Miller/TNC; Cattle grazing on TNC's Little Creek Farm in Missouri. © Kent Wamsley/TNC

"It was evident that everyone I talked to cared so deeply that, no matter what organization they reported to, they were willing to put aside institutional lines, roll up their sleeves and get the work done. That's very special."

—Jennifer Morris



The Power of Place

In Missouri with CEO Jennifer Morris

This summer, The Nature Conservancy's CEO, Jennifer Morris, spent three days crisscrossing Missouri's Ozarks, traveling from river raft to fire tower to experience some of the state's most treasured landscapes.

The journey offered a close look at the people and partnerships working to protect these places and the communities and wildlife that depend on them. It was also a glimpse of how TNC's ambitious 2030 goals take shape on the ground, in spring-fed streams, sprawling forests and habitats that support species found nowhere else on Earth.

As the leader of TNC, the world's largest environmental nonprofit, Morris oversees conservation efforts spanning more than 80 countries and territories. Her visit to Missouri offered a chance to see firsthand how that global mission takes shape in the Ozarks through the work of TNC and its partners. What stood out most, she said, was the shared commitment she witnessed everywhere she went.

"It was evident that everyone I talked to cared so deeply that, no matter what organization they reported to, they were willing to put aside institutional lines, roll up their sleeves and get the work done. That's very special," says Morris.

Reflecting on the trip afterward, Morris distilled what she had seen into three themes: parks, partnerships and people.

Parks

After lodging at Echo Bluff State Park, Morris and her traveling companions woke early to float the Current River. She was joined by TNC Chief Marketing and Communications Officer Meg Goldthwaite and Missouri's leadership team.

Paddling the cool, clear waters, they soaked in views of dolomite bluffs, which Goldthwaite described as "like something out of a storybook."

The Current and Jacks Fork rivers were the first river system protected as a national park area, now Ozarks National Scenic Riverways. The watershed is both an economic engine (1.3 million park visitors spent $66.8 million locally in 2023) and a biodiversity hotspot, with more than 35 species of global significance.

Missouri's state parks similarly shelter wildlife and boost the economy—a return of $1.5 billion statewide on a $68 million annual budget, according to a University of Missouri study. TNC is a key partner in the state's conservation efforts. Roughly a tenth of Missouri Department of Conservation land has passed through TNC. In the Current River watershed, we've conserved more than 12,000 acres through our Ozark Conservation Buyers Fund.

On the raft, the value was counted in minks spotted (two), a wealth of kingfishers, turtles, herons and countless fish species.

"Missouri has some of the most beautiful parks I've ever seen," Morris says. "And why? Because residents know the park system is the magic of Missouri, and they invest in that year after year."

Jennifer Morris © Fauna Creative

Partnerships

The following morning, the travelers headed for Stegall Mountain in Peck Ranch Conservation Area. The view from Stegall's fire tower sweeps across miles of oak-hickory forests and igneous glades more than a billion years old.

For decades, TNC has teamed up on prescribed burns in this rugged landscape with the Missouri Department of Conservation, National Park Service and a host of other partners. The burns protect the glades from being overrun by trees and maintain habitat for native species, such as collared lizards.

Today, visitors see thousands of unbroken acres, but it's multiple parcels of protected land quilted together by partners. TNC's Thorny Mountain Preserve is next door, and Ozark National Scenic Riverways lies just beyond. Even Peck Ranch is an amalgamation, expanded by 5,600 acres in 2022 when TNC transferred our Chilton Creek preserve—the epilogue to a 1991 land deal that saved 80,000 acres.

People

On the last night, Morris spoke to supporters at a dinner at Finley Farms in Ozark, hosted by Missouri's Board of Trustees.

She reflected on the scale of TNC's global ambitions, including goals to conserve 10% of the ocean by 2030, protect 1.6 billion acres of land—twice the size of India—and improve 620,000 miles of river, enough to circle the globe 25 times.

But Morris emphasized that progress on those ambitious targets depends on the local conservation work happening in places like Missouri.

Every stop was a reminder. Whether meeting with partners from a half-dozen agencies, chatting with trustees or putting on waders to examine streams with TNC staff, there was a direct path from world-changing strategies to places and people in Missouri.

"None of these things are possible without people like you."

—Jennifer Morris





Top to bottom: On top of Stegall Mountain © Kristy Stoyer/TNC, Dinner at Finley Farms © Doyle Murphy/TNC

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2026 Impact Report



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Current River © Byron Jorjorian