



# Our Kentucky

WHERE NATURE MAKES A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

CAMPAIGN IMPACT REPORT

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## Dear Friends,

After five years, we closed the *Our Kentucky* campaign on June 30, 2021. It was, without question, an unqualified success on both the conservation and philanthropy fronts. **\$32.23** million raised against a \$24 million goal. The largest conservation project (Cumberland Forest), the largest stream restoration (Green River dam removals), the largest wetland restoration (west Kentucky floodplains), and the largest urban science experiment (Green Heart) in our and the state's history—just to name some of the accomplishments.

After securing a gift that took us over the finish line on our cash goal, I called my parents (also donors) to share the news. My mom asked me how I felt, and I said more than anything, I felt humbled and grateful. Yes, some pride and relief mixed in, but the word that came most strongly to mind was “thanks.” When you step off the proverbial cliff at the start of a campaign, it is ultimately the donors who decide whether you fall or soar. All of you made us soar, and, on behalf of all our staff, I am truly grateful. In different ways to be sure, but undoubtedly so too are the ruffed grouse, elk, whippoorwills, white oaks, coneflowers, dragonflies, slippershell mussels, waterfalls, forests, floodplains, and other plants, animals, and places that have a healthier and more secure future thanks to your investments.

As our supporters heard us say throughout, this campaign was about both seizing the opportunities in front of us right now and building the strength, capacity, and resources to continue our work well into the future. Here too, I believe we have been very successful, and not simply because we have raised funds for our present work and secured bequest commitments for future growth. We have also invested in the completion of longstanding efforts like dam removals on the Green River while strategically growing our staff to develop new work and secure new wins in the Appalachians, on agriculture, and in the policy realm. As such, the formal end of this campaign is not so much a conclusion as it is a beginning, and we are excited to use the momentum your generosity generated to set our sights even higher in the coming years. With you, we will celebrate our successes, but our eyes are on the future.

Once again, I am humbled and grateful. Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "D. Phemister".

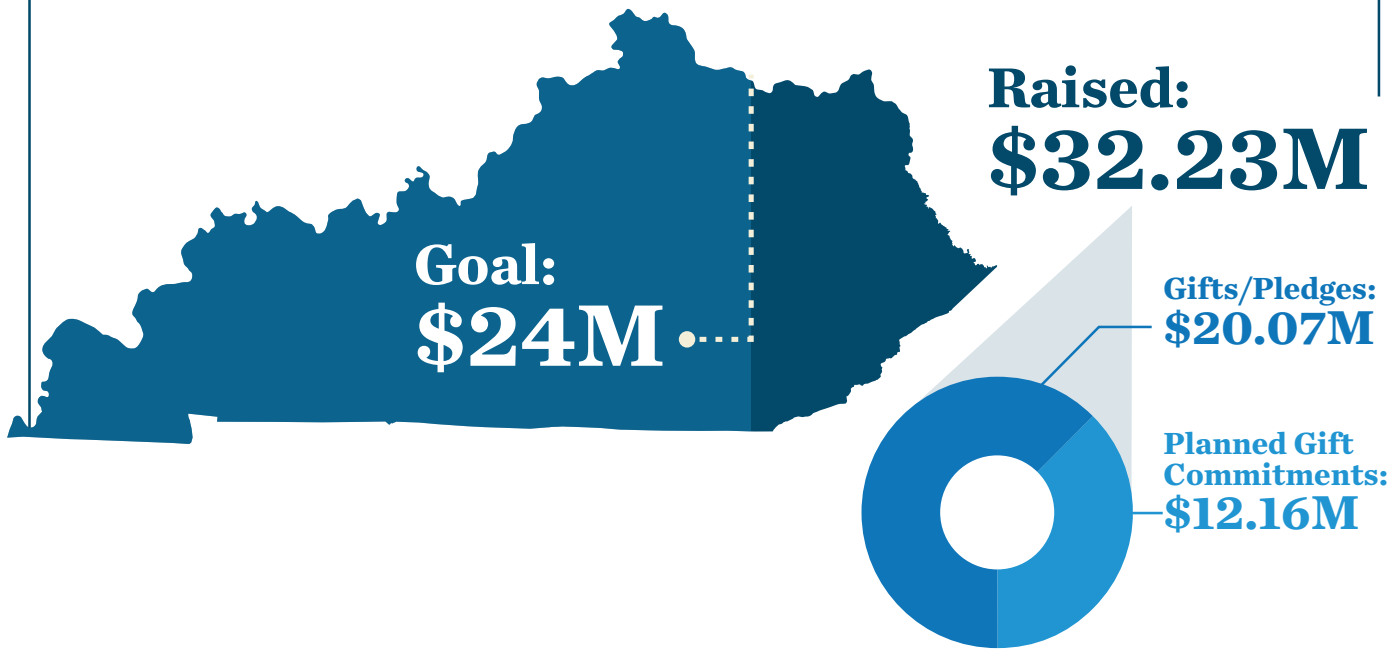
David Phemister  
Kentucky State Director

ON THE COVER:  
The Kentucky chapter transferred this 460-acre tract of land  
to the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area.

© Ben Childers

# OUR KENTUCKY CAMPAIGN

## PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY FOR KENTUCKY



## GLOBAL PRIORITIES

**Goal:**  
**\$1M**



## PUBLIC FUNDING LEVERAGED

**Goal:**  
**\$10.4M**



“This campaign is about impact and lasting results. Five years ago, the Kentucky chapter of The Nature Conservancy launched this

ambitious conservation campaign to make a real difference, and we focused our efforts on projects that would provide the most benefit to nature and people. Thanks to the many passionate people across Kentucky who believe in our mission as much as we do, we have surpassed every one of our campaign goals”

—**Dottie Cordray**, Campaign Co-Chair



“It is an honor to have been part of such an important effort and a privilege to work with so many passionate volunteers and our

incredibly dedicated staff. As the entire world grapples with the challenges of climate change and a growing population, our mission has never been so important. The financial support shown during this campaign has been humbling and our conservation results give me great hope for the future.”

—**Gordon Dabney**, Campaign Co-Chair



“I am moved by the beauty of the natural world, and I want this beauty to be here for my children and for future generations to enjoy. Our responsibility to conserve nature is more important than ever as our planet deals with the impacts of a changing climate.

I feel strongly about supporting The Nature Conservancy’s work for many reasons. We are getting real conservation work done, we are working in cooperation with diverse partners and stakeholders, and we are making an impact that will endure.

As we wrap up *Our Kentucky* campaign, I am energized to roll up my sleeves to continue the Kentucky chapter’s important work. The challenges are still immense, but so too are our opportunities to secure a better, greener, and healthier future where nature and people thrive.”

—Mike Mays, Board of Trustees Chair

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# OUR FORESTS AND GRASSLANDS

## IN APPALACHIA AND BEYOND, PROTECTING LAND FOR THE FUTURE

### A New Economy

In the mountains of eastern Kentucky, a transformation is underway. This region has long depended on an extractive economy, but with the decline of the coal industry, finding new and more sustainable opportunities is increasingly critical to those who call these mountains home. The Nature Conservancy and its 253,000-acre Cumberland Forest Project are part of this transformation, from opening the region to new investments in carbon markets, to promoting sustainable forestry, to enhancing the outdoor recreation economy.

### A Critical Corridor

As the climate changes, animals and plants will need to adapt to survive. We can help by ensuring they have a resilient and connected pathway to more suitable habitats. The Central Appalachians, which run through eastern Kentucky, are a continentally important migratory corridor for wildlife, from migratory birds to salamanders. The Nature Conservancy has plans to protect much more than the Cumberland Forest Project. Working in cooperation with other state programs from Alabama to Maine and Conservancy leaders throughout the organization, we have plans to protect hundreds of thousands of forested acres and store millions of tons of carbon across the Appalachians in the coming years. Transformative philanthropy, innovative impact investments, and new public funding opportunities through the Great American

Outdoors Act make these ambitious plans possible, and we are excited for what lies ahead.

### Protecting Land

When *Our Kentucky* campaign began five years ago, we set our sights high for land protection, with a goal of 15,000 acres over the course of the campaign. We are proud to say that we far exceeded that goal. On the 55,000 acres of the Cumberland Forest Project that touch down in Kentucky, we are working hard to show that nature and people can thrive together. In the Green River region, we acquired the largest conservation easement in chapter history, later buying the property outright, to protect 400,000 federally endangered Indiana and gray bats on nearly 500 acres of critical habitat. Most recently, we acquired and transferred 460 acres of land to the National Park Service to protect the northern reaches of the Cumberland River’s Big South Fork.

### The Power of Prescribed Fire

It isn’t enough to simply protect land, however. Lands often need management for health and resilience. The transformative power of prescribed fire supports biodiversity, improves forest health, and lowers the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Working with our partners, we have implemented prescribed fire across nearly 52,000 acres during the campaign, a huge increase over previous years.

**57,171** acres of land protected

**5.1** million tons of carbon estimated sequestered in Cumberland Forest

**51,945** acres of prescribed burns



The Cumberland Gap on the Ataya property in Kentucky. The Cumberland Forest Project protects 253,000 acres of Appalachian forest and is one of TNC's largest-ever conservation efforts in the eastern United States.

© Cameron Davidson



A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service dam removal crew uses rock hammers and excavators to remove a lock wall at Green River Lock and Dam #5, the largest dam removal in Kentucky history.

© Mike Wilkinson



# OUR RIVERS AND STREAMS

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## REMOVING DAMS, RESTORING FLOODPLAINS, IMPROVING WATER QUALITY

### Freeing the Green River

The Green River is one of North America’s most biodiverse, with an abundance of rare and endemic (found nowhere else) species of fish and mussels and a host of other wildlife. We lost some of the Green’s health, connectivity, and richness over 100 years ago when a series of locks and dams were constructed for commercial navigation. Last operated in 1951, these dams remained in the river, diminishing habitat, limiting fish passage, and posing dangerous obstacles to recreation.

*Our Kentucky* campaign set out to remove three of these defunct locks and dams, and The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other partners are well on our way to completing this goal. After the Conservancy shepherded enabling legislation through Congress in 2016, the partnership removed Lock and Dam #6 in 2017. Since then, we have been hard at work on Lock and Dam #5 and are removing it as this report is being written. Lock and Dam #5 is the largest dam removal in Kentucky history, and, coupled with #6, restores nearly 200 miles of free-flowing Green River once again.

### Restoring Floodplains

Our restoration story continues in west Kentucky. Here the challenge is finding the appropriate balance between

agricultural production, healthy wetlands, and an intact floodplain, a challenge made more difficult by a changing climate and larger and longer floods. The Nature Conservancy and our partners at the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service are restoring frequently flooded farmlands back to forested wetlands, a win for farmers, wildlife, water quality, and decreased flood risk downstream.

*Our Kentucky* campaign sought to restore up to 10,000 acres of Mississippi River floodplains as part of the largest wetland restoration project in state history. Working alongside our partners, we exceeded our goal, protecting and restoring over 9,000 acres in Kentucky and playing a leading role in enrolling thousands of additional acres in neighboring Illinois and Tennessee. As this restoration continues, we are quantifying the results with a 5-year, \$4.36 million scientific study that will provide data to better direct and scale future efforts across the Mississippi River basin.

With your support, we hired a new Director of Agriculture (shared with Tennessee) to engage more deeply with farmers and the agriculture supply chain, with a goal of achieving dramatically increased adoption of soil health practices that will protect water quality in the Mississippi River and other local streams and rivers.



“With our partners, we have long wanted to remove Green River Lock and Dam #5 and #6. These removals will almost instantly provide better habitat for fish and mussels on many miles of the Green and for the Kentucky cave shrimp underground in Mammoth Cave National Park. Additionally, these removals provide better and safer access to the river for families to enjoy this incredible resource.

The Nature Conservancy has been a phenomenal partner—really the glue that has held this long-term partnership together over nearly seven years. I hope we can roll this success right into our next dam removal on the Barren River.”

—**Lee Andrews**, Field Office Supervisor for the Kentucky Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

**12,800** wetland acres protected

**1.4** million trees planted

**197** miles of Green River restored to free-flowing conditions



“I love the outdoors. I can no longer do the things I used to do, such as hiking and camping, but I can enjoy nature around my house. The Green Heart project planted several shrubs and a beautiful magnolia tree. It has bloomed both seasons since the year it was planted.

I think nature is extremely important to our health. I have asthma, so air quality matters so much. I hope the Green Heart project can prove that trees improve air quality, and that there is a connection between nature and our health. If this project could help bring more nature into the cities, I think it would be amazing.”

—**Sherry Houchens**, Green Heart Project Tree Recipient



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## OUR CITIES

# BUILDING FOUNDATIONAL SCIENCE FOR HEALTHIER URBAN COMMUNITIES

### A City with Challenges

Cities face numerous challenges as the climate changes and more people move to urban areas. From air quality to stormwater runoff to the urban heat island effect, cities are looking for solutions to some of the most critical problems facing their residents. Louisville, located in the Ohio River Valley with its accompanying air quality and cardiovascular health challenges, is the perfect urban laboratory to test how nature may improve the health of people.

### The Green Heart Project

With the University of Louisville’s Envirome Institute and several other key partners, The Nature Conservancy helped launch the first-of-its-kind Green Heart project in 2017 to measure nature’s effect on human health. This six-year scientific study leverages funding from the National Institutes of Health and TNC’s generous donors to answer the question: Can trees improve cardiovascular health? University of Louisville recorded baseline health indicators from a group of more than 700 south Louisville residents, and the Conservancy is spearheading the greening

implementation—planting thousands of trees in the study area. With numerous auxiliary studies accompanying the main study, the Green Heart project could provide foundational science that leverages changes in public policies and increases investments in nature as a public health strategy in cities around the world.

### A Park for Mill Creek

The 34-square mile Mill Creek watershed in Louisville is a highly urbanized area with only 13 percent forest cover. When the Kentucky chapter began its work here in 2017, our goal was to enhance forest cover and improve water quality in Mill Creek. Thanks to The Nature Conservancy’s leadership, nearly 1,000 acres of land have been transferred to the natural areas program of Louisville’s Parks Department and our partners at the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources are embarking on one of the nation’s largest-ever urban stream restoration projects on Mill Creek. When completed, Mill Creek will be healthier, and residents of south Louisville will enjoy increased access to public green space in their neighborhoods.

**1,700** trees planted to date for the Green Heart project

**735** community members enrolled in University of Louisville’s HEAL study

**1,000** acres protected in upcoming public park in Louisville’s Mill Creek watershed





A tree planting crew member positions a large tree next to a busy highway for the Green Heart Louisville project. The planting is designed to protect the study area from highway air pollution.

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“As time goes by, we appreciate the opportunity to spend as much time outdoors as possible. Our favorite time is when we, as a family, get the opportunity to go hiking at parks and nature preserves. For us, the most important and interesting Nature Conservancy projects are restoration efforts—projects that seek to restore the health and resilience of natural systems, such as the removal of dams on the Green River and its tributaries.

We support The Nature Conservancy because we are convinced that the work it is doing is key to our collective future, both in the U.S. and around the world. We must work together to preserve, heal, and restore the world for ourselves and future generations.”

—**Dr. Alfonso Cervera and Dr. Patricia Bautista-Cervera**  
Kentucky Chapter Supporters



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# OUR PEOPLE, OUR FUTURE

## STRENGTHENING OUR CHAPTER FOR AMBITIOUS WORK

### Inspiring a Connection with Nature

Our nature preserves tell a compelling story. Can our spirits be restored by hiking a trail through the forest? Might our daily lives be enhanced with a visit to a clear-flowing stream? Our answer to these questions is unequivocally yes. That is why we invested in our public nature preserves during *Our Kentucky* campaign, adding interpretive signage, new trails, and improved parking access to increase visitation and enhance the experience. If we can connect more people with nature, we believe that will lead to a brighter future both for the visitor and for the land. When people learn to value nature, they are inspired to protect it for others.

Access to nature is particularly important for urban residents, whose numbers will continue to increase into the future. During the campaign, we opened Pine Creek Barrens Nature Preserve, just a 40-minute drive from Louisville, to the public. With a three-mile hiking trail, Pine Creek Barrens allows urban residents the opportunity to view a variety of habitats, from rare barrens, dense forest, open grasslands, and a tranquil creek. Using Pine Creek as a model, we also improved signage at our Mantle Rock, Dupree, Sally Brown, and Crutcher Preserves and plan to do so at Bad Branch this coming year.

### Influencing Policy

To have the greatest impact on nature, we must invest in public policy and government relations. Thanks to the generosity of our donors, we hired the Kentucky chapter’s first Director of External Relations during the campaign. With enhanced ability to engage with our elected officials, we have more of an impact on critical issues like clean energy, land protection, and a changing climate. We saw an early win in helping pass the Great American Outdoors Act, a once in a generation victory for land conservation and public lands management.

### Investing in Our Future

At the beginning of *Our Kentucky* campaign, we sought to raise \$4 million in new bequest commitments, a source of future support that would allow us to double our endowment and increase our financial strength and stability. Thanks to the incredible generosity of our dedicated supporters, we eclipsed our new bequest goal by more than \$8 million. The future of the Kentucky chapter is much brighter and more secure thanks to the success of this campaign.

**5** nature preserves with new signage

**158** acres in the new Pine Creek Barrens Nature Preserve

**4** new staff positions

Thank You.



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