



A mother and daughter enjoy Sally Brown & Crutcher Nature Preserves. © Mike Wilkinson

## Turning to Nature in Uncertain Times

### Pandemic deepens love of natural world

On March 31, The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky closed its nature preserves to the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with the closure of restaurants, bars, stores and other businesses, as well as many public lands and natural areas, people had been increasingly gathering at the Conservancy's open preserves. Parking lots were full, and overflow parking created unsafe traffic conditions and trespassing issues. Social distancing became more difficult to maintain as the number of visitors grew.

"People wanted to get outside," says Chris Minor, director of land management and fire manager for the Kentucky chapter. "It was one of the only things they could do, with everything closed. People wanted a breath of fresh air, and there weren't many areas left to get outside and do that."

Closing these popular and important areas was not an easy decision. The Conservancy weighed the public's need for outdoor space during the pandemic with the need to safeguard the health of visitors. Ultimately, it became necessary to close the preserves for public safety.

"When I went to Mantle Rock to close it up, it was peak wildflower season," says Shelly Morris, director of floodplain strategies for the chapter. "The wildflowers were just amazing. I was walking around, looking at them with tears in my eyes. I thought, people could really use these wildflowers right now."

The popularity of the areas speaks to people's need to experience nature, particularly during difficult times. The preserves also are a reminder of the Conservancy's roots.

"One of the things that has always distinguished The Nature Conservancy

is that at some level we are a place-based organization," says Kentucky state director David Phemister. "Long ago, we summed up our work as, 'Results you can walk around on.' Even though our work has gotten much more complex, ultimately preserves and the direct protection of important lands and waters are central to our mission and central to our work."

Even beyond the pandemic and the closure of businesses, the emergence of spring drew people out into nature. As winter gave way to warmer and longer days, the natural world seemed to confirm that things would continue to unfold even as the rest of the world stood still.

"It was really comforting and ultimately uplifting to see the rhythms and patterns of the natural world unfolding when all of our other rhythms were disrupted," Phemister says. "Daffodils were continuing

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The Kentucky and Tennessee chapters now collaborate on sustainable agriculture, lock and dam work, and more. © Mike Wilkinson

## NATURE KENTUCKY

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to bloom, bloodroot was pushing up through the forest floor, bird song was getting richer and more diverse as migrants started coming through. To see that all of that was still happening gave me a lot of comfort.”

Perhaps another lesson to be taken from the natural world during the pandemic is nature’s ability to heal itself. With fewer



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drivers on the road and less human activity overall, many places in the world experienced dramatically better air quality and a greater movement of wildlife.

“I think we see if we give the natural world some space, its power to be resilient and bounce back is there,” says Phemister. “If we can take some steps to address how we live in this world, there’s a message of hope and resilience.”

The Nature Conservancy reopened its nature preserves in June. It is our hope that visitors will find solace and meaning as they enjoy the natural world during these uncertain times.

## Partnering with Tennessee

### Chapters join together for greater impact

The Nature Conservancy’s Kentucky and Tennessee chapters have joined forces on several conservation efforts to achieve greater results while saving resources. The chapters now share personnel for floodplain conservation, sustainable agriculture, prescribed fire, and lock and dam removal. Additional shared initiatives include programs in the Central Appalachians, where the Ataya property spans Kentucky and Tennessee.

“The Conservancy has grown, and increasingly we’re working across these large geographies—large watersheds like the Mississippi River, large mountain ranges like the Central Appalachians,” says Alex Wyss, director of conservation for the Tennessee chapter. “How do you work at that sort of scale? It just makes sense that we sort of erase these state boundaries. The forest doesn’t stop at the state line.”

The two chapters found that each had expertise in particular areas and could share that expertise to save resources. For example, Kentucky’s director of land management and fire manager, Chris Minor, has deep experience in prescribed fire, something the Tennessee chapter needed. Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers program director, Rob Bullard, has knowledge about lock and dam removals that the Kentucky chapter needed. The chapters recently hired director of agriculture, Zach Luttrell, to work in both states.

“In addition to our landscapes being very similar, we also have similar conservation issues and cultures,” says Danna Baxley, director of conservation for the Kentucky chapter. “We don’t have large staffs, but we do have a deep pool of talent. It allows us to do bigger work and to leverage the resources we have within and across our states.”

Part of the Conservancy’s Shared Conservation Agenda includes leveraging these staff resources to achieve shared goals. Combining resources also fulfills the organizational value of “One Conservancy,” which encourages chapters to work together to make the greatest impact.

“I would love to see this One Conservancy approach with Tennessee continue and expand,” Baxley says. “Working together increases efficiencies and effectiveness and delivers a bigger conservation return on investment.”