

OUR STRATEGIC DIRECTION: PROTECT *and* CONNECT

Great organizations never waver from their core, and they continually evolve. This might sound like a paradox, but it's the only way to stay true in a constantly changing world.

For 65 years, Heritage Conservancy has worked in partnership with communities, landowners, businesses, governments, and other mission-focused organizations to protect the land and connect with history. As we articulate our strategic direction for the next several years, we reaffirm our dual mission and accept the challenge of discovering and actualizing what it means today – including playing a larger role in connecting people in our communities with the lands around them and the history that unfolded on them.

Protecting the land

Our lands are our lifeline. They clean the water we drink and the air we breathe. They are the fields and forests that provide food, fiber, and wood for us. They are habitats for wildlife and places of beauty where we go to walk, or sit, or listen to birds singing or a flowing stream. And, as has become even more evident since the pandemic, access to green spaces provides important benefits for body, mind, and spirit.

Heritage Conservancy has worked to protect over 16,000 acres, including some of the most important and most beautiful lands in our region. We own more than 50 conserved properties and hold conservation easements on more than 250 additional properties.

We celebrate this legacy even as we acknowledge there is so much more to do. In the face of development pressure, climate change, and other challenges, we need to accelerate the pace of land conservation to deliver even more of the benefits highlighted above. To achieve this, we will:

- Collaborate with other conservationists in the nonprofit, private, and public sectors;
- Work with others to generate more public funding for conservation at the municipal, county, and state levels; and
- Inspire more individual donors to support our efforts even more generously.

As we do this work, we will prioritize conservation of sites that connect with previously protected lands, in order to secure larger natural areas, as well as sites that improve equitable access to green spaces and their benefits. We will also make key Heritage Conservancy properties more welcoming to visitors.

In response to habitat loss, the globalization of diseases, and climate change, we also seek to accelerate the pace and scale of our habitat restoration and management efforts, both on lands

we own and in partnership with other landowners. Examples of future habitat initiatives include:

- Watershed restoration projects to improve water quality for both nature and people;
- Forest regeneration projects to address the loss of iconic trees, such as hemlock and ash, due to invasive diseases and insects;
- Meadows for bees, butterflies, and other pollinators; and
- Vernal pools for frogs, salamanders, and other amphibians.

Addressing climate change

Climate change is the overriding environmental challenge of our time. Our region is experiencing more frequent and more severe weather events, and we are seeing climate-driven changes on the lands Heritage Conservancy is dedicated to protecting: shifts in the ranges of plants and animals, accelerating spread of invasive species and insect-borne diseases, earlier bird migrations, and other impacts.

Land conservation has an important – and cost-effective – role to play in addressing this challenge. Lands kept in natural cover absorb carbon dioxide through photosynthesis, helping to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. They also lower ambient air temperatures and slow and absorb storm and flood waters, helping protect communities from the harmful effects of a warming climate.

We will work at the intersection of land and climate and be champions for nature in the face of climate change. We will protect more land, build an understanding of the changing world into how we manage those lands, and communicate both the relevance of climate change to our mission and the importance of land conservation in addressing it. In addition, we will work to address our own carbon footprint at Historic Aldie and other properties we own.

Connecting with history

Our region has a rich and dynamic history of human settlement and communities, from the first Native American presence thousands of years ago to the arrival of Latin American and Asian immigrants in recent decades. In between came successive immigrations from various parts of Europe (England, Germany, Italy, and Poland, among others) from the 17th through the 20th Centuries, intertwined throughout with African American presence, from slaveholding in our region through the Underground Railroad and the Great Migration northward in the 20th Century.

Some footprints of this history are visible on the landscape as historic houses, barns, and other structures. Throughout our 65 years, Heritage Conservancy has been at the forefront of historic preservation in our region, working to ensure the survival of these structures in a number of ways, including: partnering with municipalities to identify, evaluate the significance of, and document historic resources; helping to place more than 40 properties and historic districts onto the National Register of Historic Places; maintaining our own Register of Historic Places

that now includes over 700 entries; and providing consulting services to landowners and others eager to understand the history of buildings they own.

Looking forward, we recognize that our past engagement with our region's history has been incomplete. To begin with, structures alone do not tell the full history of the people who created, lived in, and worked in them. Moreover, because not all historical footprints are equally visible on the landscape, historic preservation as traditionally pursued inevitably focuses on certain aspects of history and not others. Most of the historic structures that have survived are more relevant to the history of people of European descent (and mostly of *northern* European descent) than to the history of the Native American and African American presence in this region, or even to the history of people who came from southern or eastern Europe.

As we continue our existing historic programming, therefore, we wish to broaden our approach to the history side of our mission and identify how Heritage Conservancy might work with others to increase public understanding of the full history of our region. Examples of directions we will explore include:

- Expanding our field of view beyond structures alone to encompass sites, which can provide a platform for engaging with the history of Native Americans, African Americans, and others whose structures may have been temporary or did not survive subsequent history;
- Moving beyond structures alone to stories, a direction with which we have experimented recently in the "Untold Stories" on our website; and
- Collaborating with other organizations whose mission is to engage with history and share it with the public.

Connecting people with nature and history

Full success in our mission comes not just from preserving land and historic structures; it also involves connecting people and communities with the lands around them and the history that unfolded on them.

Heritage Conservancy connects people to our work in three primary ways:

- Our environmental education programs engage more than 1000 students annually;
- We offer dozens of public events and programs every year, including guided hikes, historic tours, and presentations on nature and history; and
- More than 400 volunteers donate their time and passion to helping us advance Heritage Conservancy's mission.

Our environmental education programs have focused on supporting science curricula by providing outdoor learning opportunities and interactive activities for elementary school students. We wish to grow this body of work, both by expanding the universe of schools with which we partner and by looking for avenues to provide opportunities to middle- and high

school students as well. Our goal is to help ensure that all children have the chance to understand and experience the outdoors, enjoy the benefits nature offers, and grow in their commitment to protecting our environment. Building on this work, we will explore similar partnerships and programming focused on the history of our region.

For most of our 65 years, our community engagement efforts primarily touched down in central and upper Bucks County; in recent years they have evolved to include a growing focus throughout our region. We hope to strengthen this focus by engaging people across the full spectrum of the community to foster connections with nature and history, while advancing equitable access to nature, offering meaningful outdoor experiences, and promoting civic action to help cultivate resilient communities. We are also committed to advancing volunteer engagement throughout our region to amplify our educational and community engagement efforts.

In all our work, we will strive to ensure that our mission is relevant to people of all ages, including the younger voices calling for more commitment to environmental stewardship and social justice.

Conservation *with and for all*

As a mission-driven organization, Heritage Conservancy exists to make the world better. We believe this must apply not only to the work we do, but also to *how, with whom, and for whom* we do it.

Not all members of our communities have had the same experiences of nature and history in their family or neighborhood contexts, educational opportunities, and working lives. We need to pay attention to these differences as we strive to make our properties, projects, and programs welcoming to all, and as we work to make our staff and board more fully representative of our communities.