

NEWS FROM THE ADIRONDACKS FALL/WINTER 2023

Adirondacks Update

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE NATURE CONSERVANCY:

Coming Together for the Boquet
Gathering at Niagara with Indigenous Partners
How Does Wildlife Cross the Road?
Art and Nature for All

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



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Dear Friends of the Adirondacks,

This summer, we saw some of our communities devastated by flooding. Given the increase in temperatures and extreme weather events, we know that we have only years, not decades, to take on the interconnected crises of climate change and biodiversity loss.

The Adirondack ecosystems are complex and interdependent, and so are the organizations, local governments and individuals who work tirelessly to ensure that this region is resilient and can thrive in the face of climate change. By working together, we're overcoming barriers to the solutions that the Adirondacks need.

Together, we find a way.

Peg R. Olsen
Director



2023 Clarence Petty Adirondack Conservation Associate Bri Bilter © TNC

Team Spotlight

We connected with Bri Bilter, 2023 Clarence Petty Adirondack conservation associate, who is analyzing the lands we care for across New York State to advance our partnerships with Indigenous communities.

What kind of data are you looking at and why?

We embarked on this project with guidance from the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry's Center for Native Peoples and the Environment and the Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force. The goal is to help identify opportunities for the repatriation of ancestral lands, which can include returning land to Indigenous Nations, providing access for cultural uses like hunting and medicine gathering, and centering Indigenous traditions, languages, cultures, knowledge and viewpoints. To empower these partnerships, we need to understand and properly communicate the legal, ecological, historical and cultural aspects of the lands we steward, many of which are associated with living treaties, both upheld and broken.

In addition to identifying legal restrictions associated with our lands, we are analyzing historical and cultural significance through archaeological data. On the ecological front, we are focusing on opportunities for cultural provisioning. What lands are ideal for gathering food and medicine? What lands have been used for hunting? What lands have trails and are accessible to children and elders?

What drew you to this kind of work?

My background is in political science and journalism, and I worked at a legal research firm for two years after college. I had long considered becoming an environmental lawyer but was seeking more work experience to better inform my career path. I took a course in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to open more opportunities that would merge my background with my fascination and love for the natural world. I feel so lucky to get to be a part of this project with the Conservancy, and to be further building my GIS and research skills in alignment with my worldview.

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Cover: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and The Nature Conservancy survey the Boquet River. © John DiGiacomo

Join us today



The Nature Conservancy is a private, non-profit 501(c)(3) international membership organization. Its mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

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Coming Together for the Boquet



Measuring salmon fry in the Boquet River © John DiGiacomo

As soon as the ice is out, Dirk Bryant can be found knee-deep in the Boquet River, casting a fly rod with a colorful streamer fly. To master fly fishing, you must learn to read the water. And like many of us, over the years Bryant has been alarmed by the changes he's seen.

"The careful observation necessary for fly fishing is in some ways similar to how we practice climate science, because we're examining how our natural systems change over time," says Bryant, director of lands for The Nature Conservancy in New York. "The warming trend has been disheartening to say the least."

These changes don't just impact fish; they have a big influence on our communities, too. New York's 47-mile Boquet River is a major tributary to Lake Champlain, provides world-class recreational fishing opportunities and supports verdant land for farming. But human-caused climate change can wreak havoc on ecosystems services—the important benefits that rivers provide—and can increase the number and severity of destructive floods.

Working alongside partners, the Conservancy recently completed the three-year Boquet River Watershed Protection and Restoration Project to enhance the resilience of the watershed.

The project team developed a strategy that combined habitat protection and restoration with culvert replacements and a dam removal to mitigate negative climate impacts. The project focused largely on the North Branch of the Boquet, which provides cold-water habitat for brook trout populations and the best existing and potential spawning habitat for salmon in the region.

The team also established the Boquet River Partnership group to identify opportunities for collaboration and explore work beyond this project that can make an even bigger impact in the watershed.

Together, we developed a 'top 10 list' of barriers to be removed. Barriers to fish migration like obsolete dams and culverts cut off fish populations from sizable portions of their habitat. We identified 13 more barriers that need replacement, six of which have been or are being replaced, work that will create 93 miles of new habitat. We also determined the most important land to protect along the river, which led to 290 acres being protected by conservation easements with the Adirondack Land Trust, funded by The Nature Conservancy. Finally, we raised \$1.2 million in critical funds for culvert upgrades that not only let fish access cooler headwaters but also make our communities safer when there's flooding.

Our analysis ranks the Boquet River watershed as having high potential for climate resiliency. By coming together now to protect and restore it, Bryant hopes that we can mitigate the warming trend for the sport he loves—and all who rely on the river.

Funding for this project was awarded by the Great Lakes Fishery Commission to New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission, in partnership with the Lake Champlain Basin Program.

Gathering at Niagara with Indigenous Partners

The sun broke through the clouds and lit up a silvery mist as 160 Nature Conservancy team members and guests from around the world experienced the energy of Niagara Falls thundering around them.

The group chose to meet in Buffalo and Niagara, New York, for the Conservancy's second Voice, Choice & Action (VCA) Gathering because the area lies at the heart of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The six nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora—form the oldest continuous participatory democracy in the world.

Holding the gathering in New York, where The Nature Conservancy got its start 70 years ago, was also an acknowledgment that in our organization's history, we have failed to adequately understand, engage and incorporate the rights, needs and views of Indigenous communities. We have played a role in perpetuating harms against Indigenous Peoples, and have benefited from colonial practices and systems.

In her opening remarks, Brie Fraley, North America Indigenous landscapes and communities director, described the gathering as an opportunity for healing. "It's about the responsibility we all have: to come into balance, to recognize our privilege and to use it to repair our relationships. We focus on three global solutions* at the Conservancy, but there is a fourth solution as well—one of right relations."

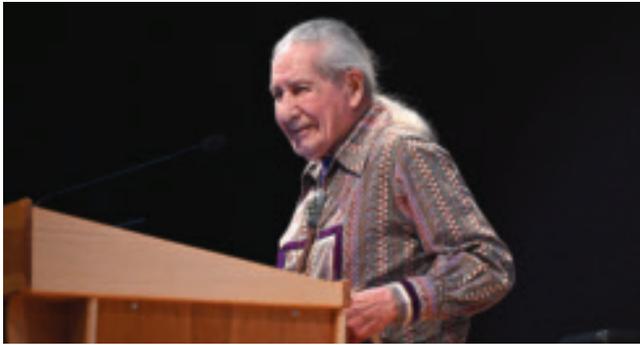
The idea of 'right relations' comes from Indigenous thinking and activism and was one of several themes that flowed through four days of listening sessions, guided discussions and ceremony in Buffalo.

In keeping with Haudenosaunee tradition, the gathering began with a reading of the Ganö:nyök or Thanksgiving Address, by Clayton Logan, Wolf Clan of the Seneca Nation, on whose territory the group gathered. The "words that come before all else," spoken in the Seneca language, reverberated through the dark auditorium and grounded everyone in a practice of gratitude—just as they have for thousands of years.

* The three global solutions are tackling climate change, protecting ocean, land and fresh water, and providing food and water sustainably.



Attendees of the second Voice, Choice & Action gathering at Niagara Falls, New York. © Nancy J. Parisi



Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation speaks at the gathering. © Nancy J. Parisi

In his keynote address, Oren Lyons—a highly recognized global advocate of Indigenous rights, key architect of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and long-time professor at the University at Buffalo—called global warming a “soft” term. “This is an existential crisis we’re in,” he said. “We have to be the family that we are—the human family. We’re in the last round of the fight but it’s not over.”

In introducing Lyons, Bill Ulfelder, executive director of The Nature Conservancy in New York, recounted how, in 2018, Lyons challenged the Conservancy to do more on climate and for Indigenous sovereignty. Ulfelder described steps the organization has taken in New York since to collaborate via The State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry’s Center for Native Peoples and the Environment and identify opportunities to rematriate ancestral lands. “Holding the gathering here in Haudenosaunee territory allows us to polish the silver covenant chain of friendship,” Ulfelder said.

The New York team also developed the Indigenous Partnerships Program to build our competency and capacity to partner with Indigenous Peoples. Our work is based on establishing trust, building relationships and honoring self-determination and sovereignty. This conceptually dates back to the Haudenosaunee Two Row Wampum Treaty. The wampum belt contains two rows of purple lines that represent a canoe and a ship traveling down the river of life in parallel, bound together in their journey but also completely autonomous.

Ultimately, the Voice, Choice & Action gathering emphasized that the world is at a crossroads and that love is essential in giving people the courage necessary to bring forth the future we want.

“We have to tap into not only the power of the brain but the power of the heart,” said Ruchatneet Printup, a member of the Turtle Clan of the Tuscarora Nation. “That’s where those innovative ideas are going to come from.”

Andrea Burgess, director of The Nature Conservancy’s Global Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Program, added: “We are coming together in this moment to center what Indigenous and Traditional worldviews and vision have to offer us—what is still within reach that can offer a different reality than the one we are in now. This moment is a ripple effect of the thousands of ancestors who envisioned a more profound global orientation—an orientation that puts us back into balance.”

Please visit [nature.org/newyork](https://www.nature.org/newyork) for the full story and video.



Brie Fraley (left), director of the Conservancy’s North America Indigenous Landscapes and Communities Program, Robin W. Kimmerer, Potawatomi Nation, SUNY-ESF, Dawn Martin-Hill, Mohawk Nation, McMaster University, Beverley Jacobs, Mohawk Nation, University of Windsor, and Mariana Velez Laris, IPLC network manager. © Nancy J. Parisi

How Does Wildlife Cross the Road?



Alissa Fadden surveys the critter shelf installation in 2017.
© Kurt Gardner

It started with one critter shelf. In 2017, Alissa Fadden, wildlife connectivity project manager at The Nature Conservancy, implemented a first-of-its-kind critter shelf in New York. She partnered with the New York State Department of Transportation to install a platform bolted to the inside of a culvert that would help wildlife like bobcats and raccoons pass under a busy road between the Adirondacks and Tug Hill Plateau.

“No matter how much land is protected, wildlife won’t persist over time if their habitat becomes too fragmented due to roads and other development, especially in the face of climate-driven migrations,” says Fadden. “There are also an estimated 1 to 2 million crashes between motorists and large animals every year in the United States. It has a huge societal toll.”

Since that project, Fadden’s work has expanded exponentially. She’s now leading The Nature Conservancy’s Transportation and Connectivity Project, with engagement from every Department of Transportation and Fish and Wildlife agency across eight states in the northeast. The project is focused on providing agencies with the science and tools needed to identify opportunities for wildlife-friendly infrastructure improvements and trainings and resources to support connectivity planning and implementation.

As part of our larger Appalachians vision, this project is an example of how to work with partners at a regional scale, tap new public funding like the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and steer that funding to the Conservancy’s conservation priorities on the ground. Currently, only a quarter of the Appalachian corridor from Alabama to Canada is protected

and we need to conserve and connect more of this landscape to help sustain nature and people in the eastern U.S.

“We’re excited to build on our success by enhancing and extending our connectivity work in pursuit of a fully connected Appalachians,” says Fadden, who leads a team of staff from across the region on this project. “Wildlife-friendly infrastructure helps address the climate and biodiversity crises by helping animals reach the habitat they need and enhances public safety by reducing vehicle collisions. It’s a clear conservation win.”

Years after the critter shelf project, Fadden is seeing the incredible impact of how one small shelf for wildlife crossings can be built upon and applied at scale.

Staying Connected on the Ground

Founded as an international public-private partnership that works to maintain landscape connectivity, the Staying Connected Initiative and our partner Berkshire Environmental Action Team received the 2023 International Conference on Ecology and Transportation Stewardship Award for efforts to advance transportation and wildlife solutions at the local, state/provincial and international scale.

Art and Nature for All

Growing up spending time outdoors often leads people to value conservation. Yet the opportunity to hear the thrilling rush of a waterfall, feel cool mud underfoot or grasp a crayfish out of a stream is not available to everyone.

For Takeyce Walter, a landscape painter and Nature Conservancy trustee in the Adirondacks, taking her son outdoors to play was a priority. As a young mother, she regularly loaded her son into the car and drove to the countryside. “My love for the Adirondacks began with a glacial pond,” says Walter. “We came around a curve in the road one day and saw sunlight hitting the water, surrounded by mountains that reminded me of the Blue Mountains where I grew up in Jamaica.”

Walter has dedicated herself to helping other people, and especially children, experience and express the joy and wonder of nature and art. She brought an idea to Peg Olsen, the Nature Conservancy’s Adirondack director, and to her friends at Black Dimensions in Art, a nonprofit in Albany, New York, that educates people about the unique contributions of artists of African descent. Together with a local church, the organizations developed an immersive three-day program in

the summer of 2022 for children in the Albany area. Based on that success, they held the program again this past July.

Walter taught lessons about the color wheel, how to manipulate light in art and other topics. The group hiked to a waterfall at the Conservancy’s Christman Sanctuary, scouted for crayfish and painted outside. Conservancy team members talked about the region’s ecology and wildlife. According to Walter, “Our goal was to help them see that they belong in these places, and that painting is another way of being present. There will never be another moment just like this one, and you can capture and share it.”

The partners plan to continue to help young people find their way to nature through art. The successful program is also influencing broader change within the Conservancy. “We are thinking about our preserves in new ways,” says Olsen. “How can we improve the physical assets, signage and transportation access so more people can visit? How can we better communicate so everyone feels welcome and safe on the lands we care for? And what entry points, such as art, can bring people of all ages to nature?”



Students discuss their artwork with Takeyce Walter, Adirondack trustee. © TNC

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A right-sized culvert installation in Jay, NY. © John DiGiacomo

Upgrading Culverts Across the Adirondacks

Some of our Adirondack communities suffered catastrophic flooding this summer. Because of climate change, there is more moisture in the air, which can result in torrential rain. One important action we can take is to make the urgent and significant upgrades to culverts that divert water under roads.

The Nature Conservancy has been inventorying and upgrading culverts across the Adirondacks for over a decade. Our prioritization work is even more critical now that Adirondack communities can apply for money from new sources of state and federal funding.

Climate change demands that we do things differently. The Nature Conservancy is working closely with community members, public leaders and diverse partners to adapt and build a safer world for all of us.