

KENTUCKY FIELD NOTES

SPRING/SUMMER 2019



The Ataya Journey



I am writing with big news. Very big news.

This spring, The Nature Conservancy arranged the acquisition of the 100,000-acre Ataya property in the Central Appalachian Mountains of northeastern Tennessee and southeastern Kentucky. Located along the Cumberlands to Pine Mountain corridor and adjacent numerous public lands, the Ataya property represents the largest acquisition—by far—that The Nature

Conservancy has completed in Kentucky. The project also represents a significant step forward in our ongoing, coordinated, multi-state effort to protect a resilient and connected corridor throughout the Appalachian Mountains, home to globally important forests, the country's most significant wildlife migration pathway, source drinking water for millions, and some of the premier recreational lands in the eastern United States.

As you might expect, this acquisition was a long time in the making. I first joined the multi-state and multi-disciplinary team working on the deal back in the early summer of 2014, and folks had been at it for at least a year before I came aboard. While not always easy, the long hours we spent together on this project reaffirmed for me the Conservancy's unique ability to both envision a project at this scale and to marshal the resources and expertise necessary to pull it off.

It is also important that the project does not end with signing the deed. Indeed, in many ways our work on this landscape scale conservation project is just beginning. As the enclosed article highlights, the Conservancy will manage and restore the property as a working forest and will seek to demonstrate that sustainable forestry can yield both significant conservation outcomes and be good business. Our post-acquisition work will be longer, as intense, and just as important as all the team did over the last five plus years to acquire the property.

One of the fundamental challenges of conservation is delivering our work at a scale commensurate to the threats facing people and nature. To do so requires working more cooperatively and creatively, bringing in new and larger sources of funding, being willing to take some risks, and embracing deeper, long-term commitments. With a lot of work still ahead, I will not claim ultimate success with the Ataya project. But I will say we are off to an incredible start. Thanks for being part of the journey.

See you outside.

David Phemister, State Director

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COVER The Ataya property is the Kentucky chapter's largest-ever conservation and ecological restoration project.

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Important Conservation LEGISLATION

BENEFITS WETLANDS, PUBLIC LANDS

Congress recently passed two critical pieces of conservation legislation, a new Farm Bill and the reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). In both cases, The Nature Conservancy played a key role at state and federal levels to ensure positive conservation outcomes.

The new Farm Bill, officially called the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, provides \$59.7 billion of funding for conservation over a ten-year period, an increase of \$2.1 billion over the previous bill. The Conservancy advocated for strong conservation provisions, public-private partnerships, and increased funding for programs that help farmers implement sustainable agricultural practices on their lands. Of all the conservation programs included, the Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program received the largest increase. The WRE improves Kentucky's ability to enroll more acreage in wetland easements.

“The recent Farm Bill means our collective wetland conservation efforts can continue, with a strong source of funding to support the work,” says Shelly Morris, the Kentucky chapter's western Kentucky project director. “Without having a Farm Bill passed and in place, this work wouldn't happen. The Farm Bill is by far the nation's most important funding source for private lands conservation and this version was a tremendous victory.”

The Farm Bill also supports sustainable agricultural practices, with funding to help farmers protect water quality in nearby streams and rivers. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), for example, expanded from \$8 billion to \$9.12 billion with the new bill.

“This means that more farmers can receive assistance for practices important to the environment,” says Kim Barton, the Kentucky chapter's agricultural program specialist. “Having those funds available means that practices like cover cropping can increase.”

Another positive result of the new Farm Bill is an increase in funding for the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). This program provides competitive funding for existing Farm Bill programs, often offering the ability to focus funding on critically important resource concerns. The Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia chapters recently received \$5 million for forest conservation in the Central Appalachian Mountains from this program.

Congress also permanently authorized the LWCF, the nation's preeminent program for protecting public lands and increasing public recreational opportunities and access. The permanent authorization is the first in the program's 54-year history. The Conservancy's critical advocacy on Capitol Hill and here in Kentucky



helped lawmakers recognize the value of the LWCF and the importance of its renewal. In Kentucky, the LWCF directly benefits the Daniel Boone National Forest and other federally-owned lands. The fund has allowed the Conservancy to help the Daniel Boone purchase privately owned land within its boundary, decreasing fragmentation and adding land for the public to enjoy.

“Without the LWCF, the Daniel Boone wouldn't have money to purchase lands to fill inholdings within the Forest,” says Dian Osbourne, director of protection for the Kentucky chapter. “The permanent reauthorization of the LWCF provides the Daniel Boone a mechanism for funding the purchase of lands that provide wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and watershed protection, all for the benefit of the public.”

Funding from the LWCF has helped the Conservancy add nearly 7,700 acres to the Daniel Boone National Forest since 1967.



Conserving ATAYA

KENTUCKY CHAPTER'S LARGEST- EVER LAND ACQUISITION CLOSES

The Nature Conservancy has arranged the acquisition of its largest-ever land conservation and ecological restoration project. Known as “Ataya,” this 100,000-acre property straddles the state line in southeast Kentucky and northeast Tennessee, connecting protected state and federal lands, including Cumberland Gap National Historic Park, Kentucky Ridge State Forest, and North Cumberland Wildlife Management Area in Tennessee. Ataya lies in the Central Appalachian Mountains, at the heart of the Cumberland-Pine Mountain corridor, an area Conservancy and other scientists have



identified as critical for wildlife migration in the face of a changing climate.

The Central Appalachians are home to a confluence of conservation values: a globally significant biodiversity hotspot, a major North American migratory corridor, and important watersheds. By managing and improving the health of the Ataya property, the Conservancy can protect wildlife and habitat, secure clean water for people and nature, and sequester atmospheric carbon, all while fostering important investments in local economies.

“The Ataya acquisition represents a deep investment in the Central Appalachians—its forests, its wildlife, its streams, its economy, and its communities—and a significant win for nature and people,” says David Phemister, state director for the Kentucky chapter. “As a land conservation opportunity alone the scale of this project is impressive, but this is much more than a land deal. Fundamentally the Ataya project seeks to demonstrate that sustainable forestry can yield conservation and financial returns, potentially

creating a model that the Conservancy, partners, and communities could replicate across the Appalachians.”

The Importance of Forests

The Conservancy will manage Ataya as a working forest, with an aim of improving forest health, composition, and value. As part of this effort, the Conservancy will enroll the property in third-party certification via the Forest Stewardship Council, the gold standard for sustainable forest management. Sustainable timber harvesting prioritizes a healthy and diverse forest, helps mitigate climate change, and helps protect the landscape long-term, all while generating revenues and contributing to the local economy. The quality of water supplied to nearby communities depends on the health and protected habitats of these forests, which absorb and filter water as it flows into streams and rivers. The Ataya property contains 200 miles of headwater streams, most of which flow into the Kentucky and Cumberland Rivers.

The forest will also be managed with the goal of increasing the storage of atmospheric carbon to help mitigate climate change. As a certified forest carbon offset project under the rules of the California Air Resources Board, the property will generate revenue via the sale of carbon offsets.

A legacy of mineral extraction

As is common in this region, the property has divided ownership interests: a surface estate, which was acquired in this transaction, and a sub-surface mineral estate, which will continue to be owned by third parties. The Conservancy has no control over those parties’ mining activities on the property. The Conservancy aims to work with regulators and mining companies using a collaborative,

science-based approach to advocate for best environmental practices and restoration that can minimize the impacts of mineral extraction.

As the surface owner, an affiliate of the Conservancy expects to receive compensation for any impacts these existing mining operations have on the property’s forests and infrastructure, and can direct those funds to restoration and conservation activities on the property. In addition, the surface owner is expected to receive royalties, which the affiliate plans to contribute in their entirety to third-party community organizations to support local economic and community development efforts.

“Doing conservation at scale in the Central Appalachians means understanding that mining remains a part of the landscape,” says Danna Baxley, director of conservation for the Kentucky chapter. “While this is a more complicated project than a standard Conservancy acquisition, the scale of the conservation gain is tremendous.”

Ataya is central to the local communities in and around it, providing various job opportunities and outdoor recreation such as hiking and hunting. The Conservancy is committed to supporting these relationships between people and nature and continuing to provide these opportunities.

“The property will be sustainably managed and will yield revenues through forest products, carbon offset sales, and recreational leases,” says Will Bowling, the Kentucky chapter’s Central Appalachians project director. “The Conservancy looks forward to working with local communities to conserve the property in a way that meets the needs of both people and nature.”

Planting trees in the MILL CREEK WATERSHED



Louisville Metro Parks employees recently planted approximately 100 trees in a wetland area at Wyandotte Park in south Louisville. The project is part of the revitalization of the Mill Creek watershed. The park also falls within the study area for the Green Heart project, a first-of-its-kind scientific study of the human health benefits of urban greening. The Nature Conservancy funded the planting with a grant to Metro Parks.

“I’m so happy to add more trees to the park,” says Mesude Duyar-Ozyurekoglu, forestry and landscape manager with Metro Parks. “We have the energy and we have the desire to plant more trees, but we don’t have the budget. The Conservancy has served as an advocate for this work and has provided funding for the project. We’re very proud of this.”

The wetland is being restored with appropriate tree species that will thrive in the area. These include bald cypress, swamp white oak, sweetgum, sycamore, and several others. Trees are spaced to form a complete tree canopy over the area in 10-15 years. Metro Parks has a three-year tree stewardship plan that includes watering, mulching, and pruning during the critical establishment period when new trees are most vulnerable.

“We’re so excited to get these trees in the ground in the Mill Creek watershed,” says Catherine Fitzgerald, cities project manager for the Kentucky chapter. “Partnering with Louisville Metro Parks has been a rewarding experience, and we hope these trees will provide healthy spaces for people and nature for years to come.”



A Tree for Green Heart

A class of third-graders from Semple Elementary School recently planted the Green Heart project’s ceremonial first tree. The catalpa tree was planted on school property, which rests within the project area. The tree planting recognized the partnership between Semple Elementary, the Compassionate Schools Project, and the Green Heart project.

“This catalpa replaces a beloved tree that the kids lost from their playground,” says Chris Chandler, urban conservation program director for the Kentucky chapter. “The heart-shaped leaves are symbolic for the Green Heart project and for the compassion these students show in their everyday lives.”

The class’s teacher Debra Hutchinson says the students are glad to have a new tree. “This was such a big deal for them,” she says. “The students worked really hard to present a song and choral reading for the ceremony.”

The Compassionate Schools Project is a health and wellness curriculum for elementary and secondary schools. It focuses on facilitating the integrated development of mind and body.

“One of the initiatives with this planting is to incorporate it into the curriculum as much as possible,” says Dr. Kandi L. Walker, professor of communication at the University of Louisville and coordinator of community engagement for the Green Heart project. “The students wrote messages of kindness and hope that they planted with the tree’s roots, so they can grow those messages along with the tree.”

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE A tag marks a swamp chestnut oak for planting in Wyandotte Park. © Louisville Metro Parks; Students wrote messages of kindness and hope to plant with their new tree. © The Nature Conservancy; Metro Parks employees from left: Steven Wilson, Steven Wicker, and David Winsch © Louisville Metro Parks

New Faces Jemma Kaluski

Jemma Kaluski is the new director of finance and operations for the Kentucky chapter. She comes to the Conservancy with seven years of experience at public accounting firm MCM CPAs & Advisors, where she was a manager of assurance services. She previously worked at a veterinary practice for seven years and was practice manager. She is a graduate of the University of Kentucky with bachelor's degrees in accounting and biology.

"I worked with nonprofits throughout my career in public accounting," Kaluski says. "That helped me realize I ultimately wanted to be part of an organization that I was passionate about. I've always been a supporter of the Conservancy, and I'm really passionate about the environment and nature."

Kaluski grew up fishing and hiking with her family and later went into the field of biology, where she took classes that focused on the environment. She says her love of the outdoors is rooted in her love of animals and wildlife.

"It's really eye-opening to see how much the Conservancy does that I was completely unaware of," says Kaluski. "The Green Heart project in Louisville is very interesting, with its focus on urban greening and the effects on people's health."



New Faces Holly Whiteman

Holly Whiteman is the Kentucky chapter's new office manager. A Winchester native, Whiteman graduated from Georgetown College with a bachelor's degree in communication and media studies and psychology. She brings five years of experience working for Equestrian Events, Inc. in Lexington, first as a development assistant and then as an operations manager.

"I hit a point where I wanted to learn something new and broaden my knowledge," Whiteman says. "I'd always felt passionate about the environment and protecting the natural integrity of Kentucky. I thought if there was some way I could play a role in conservation, then I definitely wanted to be a part of that."




Whiteman grew up in the outdoors, enjoying hiking in the Red River Gorge and kayaking on Elkhorn Creek. Her love of the outdoors also includes riding her two horses Brie and Prince, and taking her dog Marla kayaking with her. "I grew up appreciating nature and what it provides to us," Whiteman says. "I think it's really important that we protect it now."

Whiteman's new role includes supporting all of the Kentucky chapter's work, including development, conservation, finance, and human relations.

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The Appalachian Mountains © Ben Childers.

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