



Big River Property © Cindy Pessoni/TNC

Big News on the Big River

How a gift of land is creating incredible conservation opportunities

There are big challenges on the Big River. But thanks to the generosity of a Missouri couple, innovative recovery strategies can now be developed at the water's edge.

The Big River flows through the southeast Missouri Lead Mining District, which was once the highest producing lead district in the world. Mining began in the 1700s, and decades of mining byproducts contaminated the river, adversely impacting wildlife, mussels and fish. Big River fish have been under consumption advisories since 1981.

A vital portion of the Big River watershed is about to become a rehabilitation laboratory. In February 2021, a Missouri couple donated nearly 250 acres in Jefferson County—consisting of pasture, woodlands and 1.5 miles of river frontage—to The Nature Conservancy, creating an incredible conservation opportunity.

The Big River hosts five species of federally endangered freshwater mussels and is the largest tributary to the Meramec River, one of the most biodiverse river systems in the midcontinental United States.

“The donation is really remarkable,” says Adam McLane, TNC’s Missouri state director. “This diverse property provides opportunities to test conservation strategies and practices in a river system we are deeply engaged in.”

The property is typical of most land along the river, with lead contamination in the bottomlands. Combating erosion along the Big River to stop the downstream progression of contaminated soils is a primary goal of the Big River Task Force—a collaborative effort that TNC has been engaged with for years.

“The contamination is slowly moving downstream,” says McLane. “If nothing

is done, the lead will eventually make its way to the Meramec, which supplies drinking water to over 200,000 people, and then will move into the Mississippi.”

Conservation plans for the newly acquired property could include a combination of reforestation, carbon sequestration studies, glade openings and streambank stabilization projects.

“This donation will have a big impact on conservation. We’re already working with the Big River Task Force to encourage landowners to get their soil tested and provide voluntary agreement to help stabilize the soil on their land,” says McLane. “What better way to be a partner and strengthen relationships with neighboring landowners than to actually go through the process ourselves.”



Researcher determines water volume flowing through a recently restored stream © Mark Godfrey/TNC

Creating Centers for Conservation Innovation

Accelerating research and shared learning

As pressures on our lands and waterways increase, the need for solutions-based research is more important than ever. The Nature Conservancy is taking a bold step toward accelerating conservation success by creating a network of dedicated research stations across Missouri.

“The goal is to establish high-quality demonstration sites and research facilities to inform critical conservation strategies,” says Holly Neill, TNC’s director of conservation policy in Missouri. “We want to increase the speed, intensity, availability and impact of data so better practices can be tested and implemented.”

The first Center for Conservation Innovation, or CCI, will be located at TNC’s Little Creek Farm in Harrison County. The existing farmhouse was renovated to create bunkrooms, private and shared living spaces, and a full kitchen that can accommodate several researchers.

“Place-based conservation is in our DNA,” says Neill. “We understand the value of protecting landscapes. And as a science-based organization, we want to learn everything we can about them and allow others to learn from them, as well.”

With 65 years of conservation leadership in Missouri, we continue to expand our vision and build upon decades of learning and experience. These centers will allow researchers and partners to immerse themselves in a variety of long-range and short-term protection, restoration and land-management research projects that will help improve our ecosystems. Locations for the additional CCIs are in the planning stages.

NATURE MISSOURI

29

number of TNC-owned preserves in Missouri that are open to the public

Explore Missouri



Exploring Wah'Kon-Tah Prairie © Dave Bryan

From forests, wetlands and savannas to caves, prairies and glades, Missouri offers exceptional opportunities to connect with the great outdoors.

With our first land purchase in 1957, TNC has been protecting critical Missouri landscapes, making them available for you to enjoy and explore.

Some of our preserves offer amenities, parking and established trails. Others retain their wild roots. But all inspire a deep connection to the lands and waters of our wondrous world.

The next time you’re looking for a place to hike, birdwatch or just restore your spirit, consider stopping by one of the TNC preserves in Missouri.

To see a list of open preserves and what they offer, visit [nature.org/mopreserves](https://www.nature.org/mopreserves).