

# 2019

## PENNSYLVANIA CONSERVATION LANDSCAPES

*Models of Successful  
Collaboration*

*“Conservation of land  
and conservation  
of people frequently  
go hand in hand.”*

*-Eleanor Roosevelt*

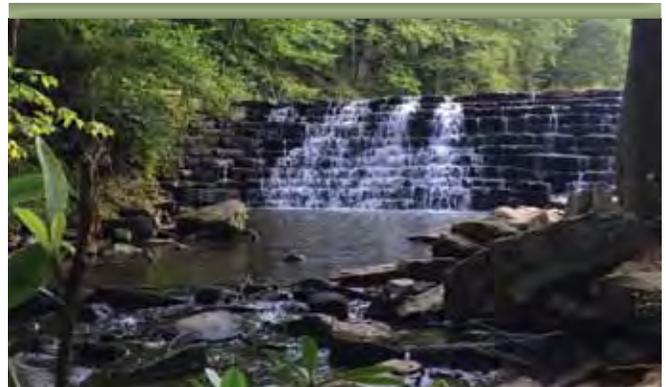
## Introduction

Pennsylvania's Conservation Landscapes are an innovative framing of the conservation and stewardship of natural resources that contribute to the long-term sustainability of special regions throughout the commonwealth. Through place-based partnerships these landscape-scale initiatives are being widely recognized as models for successful collaboration in Pennsylvania and the nation.

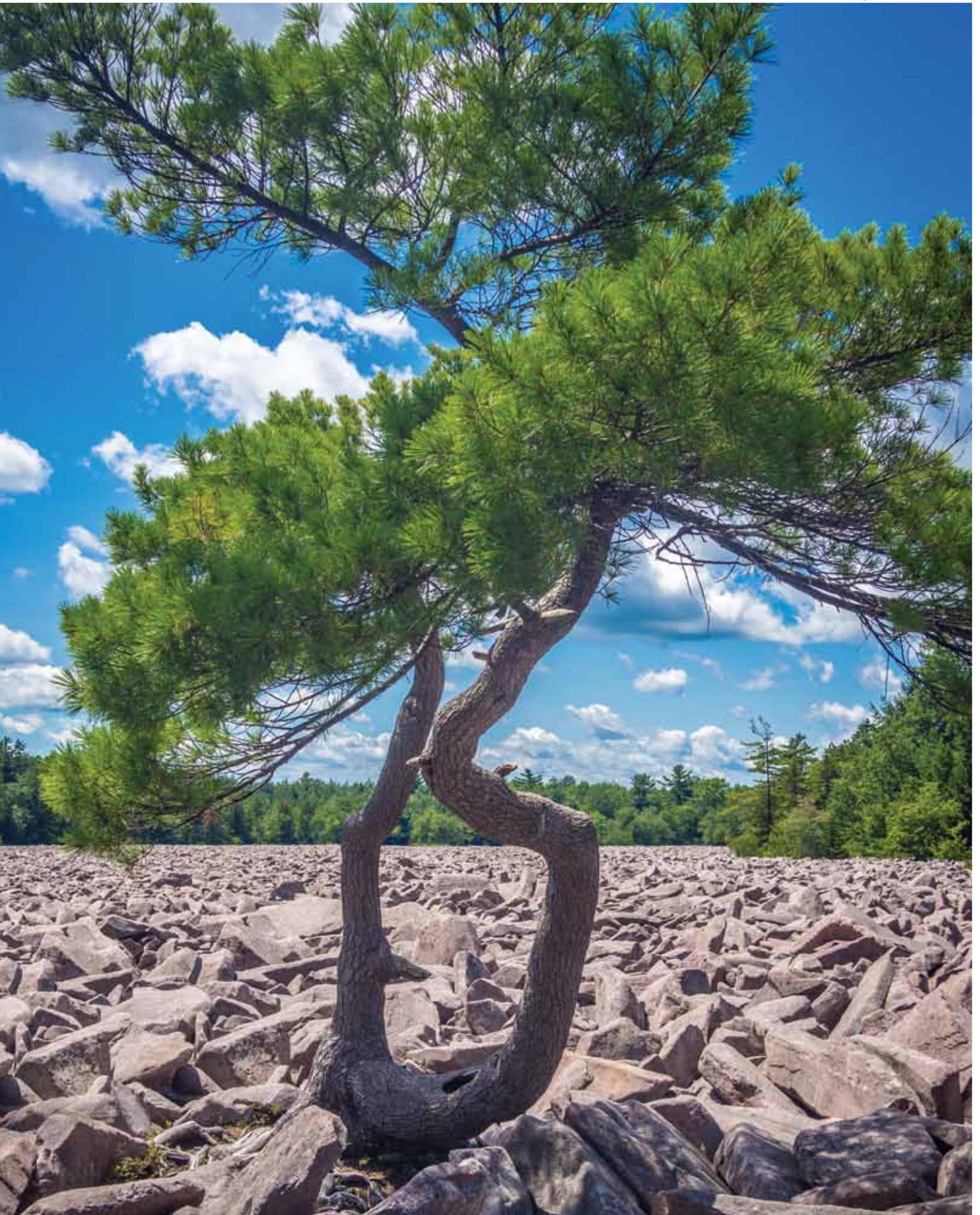
The Pennsylvania approach recognizes that people are connected to nature and the landscapes where they live – they need them to survive and thrive. As a result, the Conservation Landscapes are framing their work from the perspective of how people will use the resource for outdoor recreation, water quality, tourism and sustainable economies rather than strictly for biodiversity or ecological values.

This work in Pennsylvania, now more than 15 years in practice, can inform a growing recognition nationally that landscape-scale resource management is the most effective way to tackle the increasingly complex challenges we face—from wildlife management to watershed protection, from habitat loss to addressing the impacts of climate change.

As we strive to accelerate the pace and scale of conservation efforts to match the scope of these challenges, a better understanding of what makes these efforts successful is critical. Since the extent of this collaborative work is nontraditional for government, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) requested an evaluation of the approach be conducted in 2019 to include recommendations for improving and sustaining the initiative.



*The Pennsylvania approach recognizes that people are connected to nature and the landscapes where they live...*



# The Context for Pennsylvania's Conservation Landscapes

Pennsylvania helped fuel the nation's Industrial Revolution. That role took a toll on its natural resources, and towns and cities across landscapes as industries changed and relocated. A wealth of conservation leaders worked toward a vision of clean and healthy forests and rivers, and vibrant communities, bolstered by millions of acres of Pennsylvania public lands available to all for outdoor enjoyment.

These investments in recovery and recreational infrastructure attracted visitors to hunt and fish, and more recently to seek other outdoor adventures.

This abundance hatched an idea among the new generation of conservation leaders. What if these assets were linked together on a landscape scale, engaged the support of regional partners, and focused on the needs of both Pennsylvania's residents and visitors?

And so, in 2004 an initiative that became known as the Pennsylvania Conservation Landscapes was launched. Within five years this DCNR Program was advancing work in seven Conservation Landscapes across the commonwealth.

Each landscape is focused on delivering what is most important to address the needs of their specific region of Pennsylvania. In the western part of the state, landscapes are experiencing a declining population and intense energy development, and the desired outcomes are focused on community revitalization and tourism.

In the eastern half of the state, a major issue is rapid urban encroachment and the priority is land conservation, trails, and recreational development.

Every Conservation Landscape utilizes the principles of locally driven planning, natural resource conservation, community renewal, and civic engagement.

After more than a decade these landscapes are meeting their stated goals and have shown great resilience adapting to leadership changes and to local community needs. All are thriving, and are positioned to move forward to tackle the challenges of the 21st century. Recently, an eighth conservation landscape has been added to DCNR's program. The Kittatinny Ridge Conservation Landscape encompasses the ecosystem stretching across 12 counties in Pennsylvania from the Delaware Water Gap to the Maryland border.

**See the Conservation Landscapes Map on page 6.**

*Along the D&L Trail, Bethlehem, PA*

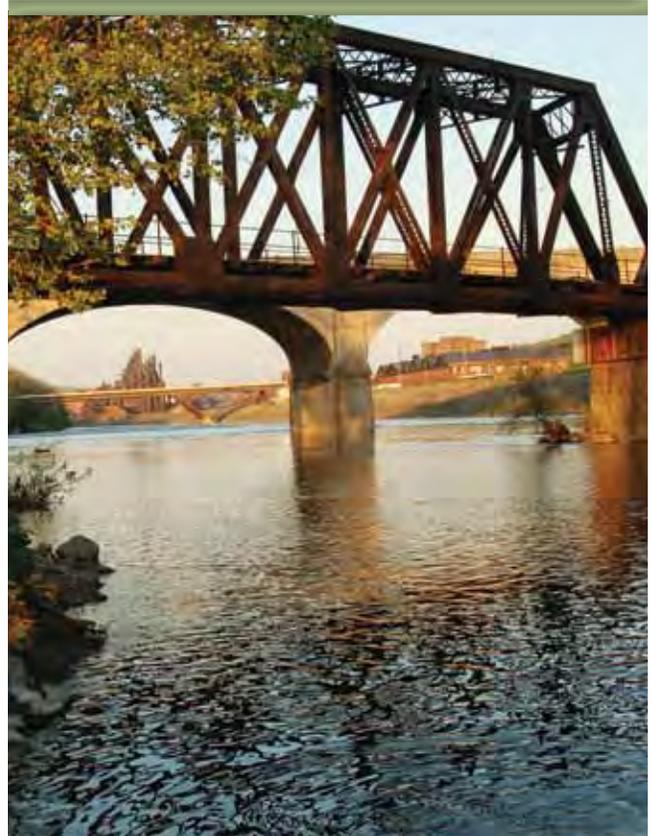
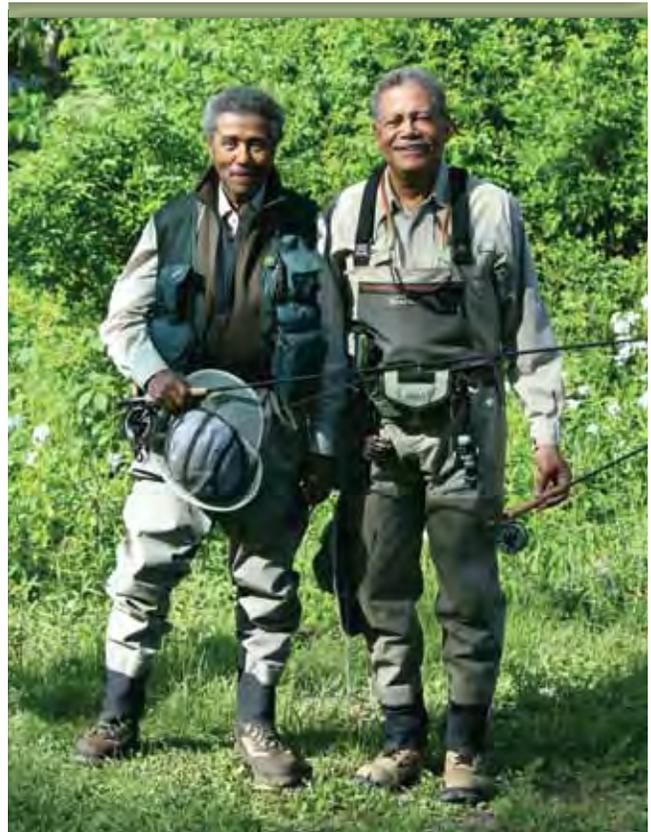


Photo Credit: Doris Oravec



# Demonstrating Success of the Landscape Approach

A key element of success for the Pennsylvania Conservation Landscape program is the recognition of the importance of local context and conditions. Each conservation landscape shares some key commonalities:

- Contain a core of public lands such as local or state parks, state forests, and/or long-distance trail systems;
- Engage community members and partners in resource conservation and sustainable development to help set and achieve shared goals and priorities;
- Encompass natural resources and ecosystems, built assets and communities;
- Create new opportunities for DCNR to integrate and deploy staff expertise and resources strategically in a place and on a landscape scale.

Each also operates in a distinct geography. Across the diversity of geographies and contexts of each landscape, the following best practices have emerged, been tested, and shown to be critically important to the success we see happening within them.

*Wilkes Barre River Commons*



## Tackling big projects together

The Conservation Landscapes—through a program-wide emphasis on bringing a diverse group of partners together—represent an all hands-on deck approach to completing large complex endeavors such as long-distance trails that cross multiple jurisdictions. The 165-mile Delaware and Lehigh Trail in the Lehigh Valley Greenways landscape is a good illustration which exemplifies the need for patience and an inclusive approach in the pursuit of big projects. It also demonstrates how big projects can be a nexus around which collaboration can be nurtured and sustained over the long term.

## Power of partnership

This is an important theme repeated in all landscapes that has helped each of them thrive. But in the South Mountain landscape, it has been a defining principle that helped partners, across geographies and sectors, build a shared identity and sense of place where none existed before. Conservation Landscapes are also using strong and robust partnerships as an antidote to parochialism and a way to make complex projects a reality.

## Using mini-grant programs

Support for small projects through mini-grant programs in Conservation Landscapes has been effective in engaging more partners in landscape work and in getting local priority projects completed. Funded by DCNR but operated by external landscape lead organizations, this makes state funding more accessible to local partners. As demonstrated in the Pocono Forest and Waters landscape, these grants can flexibly address local needs in a streamlined, efficient manner—while also building collaborative connections that can be critical aspects of bigger projects important to advancing a broader landscape vision.

## Cross promotion of regional tourism assets

The central role of well-known and well-loved public amenities—like the state parks and forests found in each landscape—has encouraged collaboration on visitor-focused initiatives, and created opportunities to reaffirm the connection between conserving and promoting these landscapes. A best practice emerging in the Laurel Highlands landscape is a strong program to empower frontline staff, at both state and partner tourist destinations, to function as regional ambassadors to the broader landscape.

**Collaborating makes connections possible despite development pressure**

In the rapidly growing eastern part of the Commonwealth such as the Poconos, Lehigh Valley, Schuylkill Highlands and Susquehanna Riverlands, the conservation landscape approach has allowed connections to be made among assets despite development pressure. This is especially critical when high land values stretch land conservation dollars challenging a landscape's ability to meet key objectives for linking natural and cultural assets for either ecological and recreation purposes. Landscapes have been successful by focusing on strategic collaboration around the big picture, regular and effective communication among partners and finding ways to share resources.

**Public investments are foundation for locally-based entrepreneurship**

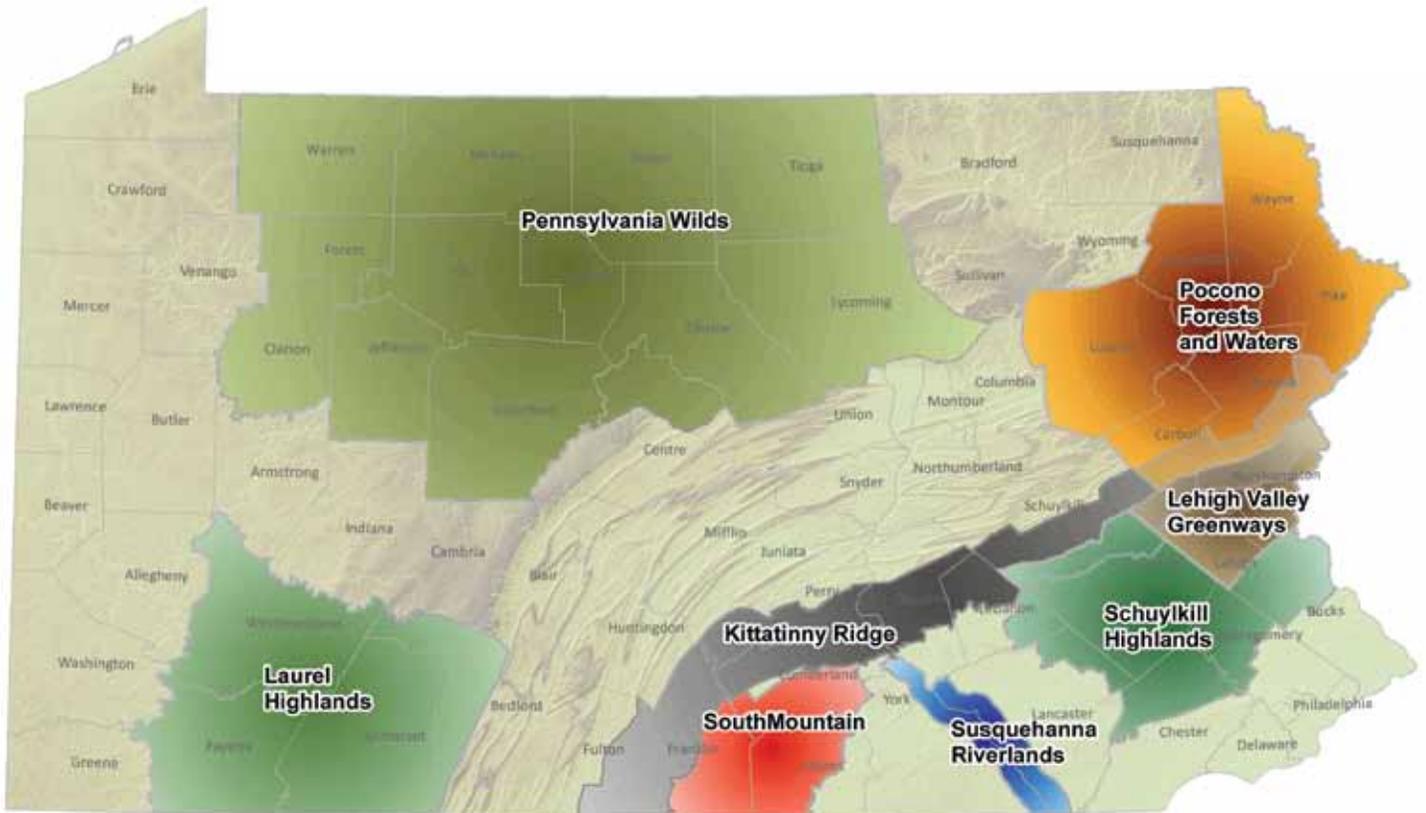
This highly impactful practice is most evident in the Pennsylvania Wilds conservation landscape, a very rural place with more public land than anywhere in the state. A new and vibrant outdoor recreation industry is taking hold here because of significant and strategic investment in public lands and facilities in the region and in the communities that serve as gateways to these public lands. These investments are robust economic engines that not only are making the outdoor tourism economy possible but also, are revitalizing communities, building pride of place and increasing quality of life for residents.

*Sinnemahoning State Park*



Photo Credit: Kyle Yates

# Pennsylvania's Conservation Landscapes



Pennsylvania's Conservation Landscapes are working together to drive strategic investment and actions around sustainability, conservation, community revitalization, and recreational projects.

These collaborations are taking place where there are strong natural assets, local readiness and buy-in, and state-level investment and support.

Arising out of a region's sense of place and resource values, conservation landscapes motivate citizens and elected officials to take on the challenge of effective land use planning, investment, civic engagement, and revitalization.

In the pages that follow, you will learn more about seven of the conservation landscapes and how they are making a difference as models of successful collaboration.

*After more than a decade these landscapes are meeting their stated goals and have shown great resilience adapting to leadership changes and to local community needs.*



Photo Credit: Julie Reinhart

## LAUREL HIGHLANDS

*Reinvigorating tourism economy through collaboration and cross promotion*

For many decades, the Laurel Highlands has been celebrated as a traditional vacation and tourism destination for the Pittsburgh and Johnstown region. With its magnificent mountain scenery, well-loved state parks such as Laurel Hill and Ohiopyle, and an array of historical and cultural attractions including world class sites such as Falling Water and the Flight 93 National Memorial, the Laurel Highlands Conservation Landscape (LHCL) is well positioned to grow its appeal to a larger number of heritage and recreational visitors while improving local quality of life.

In the past, the prevailing narrative pitted economics and the environment against one another. It suggested that a choice must be made between jobs from the energy industry and the protection of the natural landscape. Convened by the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, DCNR's external lead organization for this landscape, the LHCL has played an important role in promoting a different vision for the future—one that highlights the special character of the region by creating model programs for tourism and sustainable economic development. With significant support from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, landscape partners are accomplishing this by building capacity and a constituency for a tourism economy that revitalizes communities while sustaining the landscape's ecological, cultural and recreation resources.

The Ohiopyle State Park Visitor Center project, a signature investment in the landscape, is an exceptional illustration of building capacity through collaboration. Here diverse partners worked toward a common purpose made possible by a \$4 million grant from the Federal Highway Administration's National Scenic Byways Program. Such collaboration, including innovative leveraging of grant monies is a good example of the kind of results being achieved by the Conservation Landscape Program.

Another initiative, sparked by a discussion at the landscape's Tourism, Outdoor Recreation, and Gateway Communities Committee, empowers front-line staff in the region's state parks and forests to be ambassadors for the natural resources, and to cross-market outdoor assets in the region. Capitalizing on a program conducted at Laurel Hill State Park designed to teach staff about the multi-park complex, managers from Ohiopyle and Keystone state parks and Forbes State Forest, joined forces to educate their large seasonal staff about all of the landscape's assets. With this knowledge staff are more prepared to connect visitors to many types of resources and experiences. It also increases understanding and pride of place for these staff that not only work in the region, but also live there. The results have been very positive and relationships amongst staff at different locations has created mentoring opportunities and economies of scale on some projects.

The program has now expanded from state properties to multiple tourism venues. Investment in increasing landscape-level awareness of front-line staff may be a factor in boosting visitation and strengthening the tourism economy, which saw a 3.5 percent increase in the Laurel Highlands Visitor Bureau region between 2016 and 2017.

*Flight 93 Visitor Center*



*Ohiopyle State Park Visitor Center*



## LEHIGH VALLEY GREENWAYS *Tackling big projects in an urbanized landscape*

Lehigh and Northampton, the two counties that make up the Lehigh Valley Greenways Conservation Landscape (LVGCL) are some of the fastest growing in the commonwealth. Residential growth is consuming agricultural lands and open space at a rate of four-square miles per year. Since 2013, more than 75 percent of the valley's industrial development has been warehouse development. In 2016 alone, nearly 1,000 acres were subdivided for warehouses. In addition to rapid development, the valley has limited public lands and parks compared to other parts of the commonwealth. For this reason, offering the public additional opportunities to enjoy the outdoors like DCNR's new Jacobsburg Environmental Education Center, has been a guiding theme for partners in this landscape. The Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor (D&L) is DCNR's external lead organization and on-the-ground convener for landscape work.

The overall vision for the landscape is to link Lehigh Valley communities to greenways, trails, and outdoor experiences resulting in stronger local economies and improved public health, green infrastructure, and natural resources. Central to this is an ambitious plan to build a trail 165-miles long, stretching from Wilkes Barre almost to Philadelphia. The D&L Trail, which follows three historic transportation routes – Lehigh Valley Railroad, Lehigh Canal and Delaware Canal, runs through state park lands to the north and south of the Lehigh Valley. However, the 40-mile section through the valley itself has many gaps caused by urban encroachment. Connecting the pieces of this section of the trail before it is too late is one of the LVGCL's highest priorities.

Over the past decades LVG partners including the Wildlands Conservancy, D&L, Northampton and Lehigh counties and the Lehigh Valley Planning Commissions have tackled this project together, completing all but a 7-mile gap. Through these collaborative efforts, the region is realizing benefits for the local economy, health, environment, and overall quality of life. New supporters and funders are rallying around trail partners with hopes of completing the D&L Trail across the valley by 2023. This momentum also has given rise to other trail projects like The LINK Trail Network, a partnership between Lehigh Valley nonprofits, state, and local governments. It will create an interconnected network of 125 miles of trail with plans to close many of the region's priority trail gaps with 100 miles of multi-use trail possible in the coming years. Only through the efforts of many can these kinds of linkages be threaded through this built-up landscape. David Hopkins, Director of Public Services for the City of Easton says, "Since its inception, LV Greenways has been a tremendous resource and partner for us. The city today is on a much more sustainable course as a result of its partnership with the LV Greenways, and we are proud of the accomplishments achieved together."

*Jacobsburg Environmental Education Center*



*D&L Trail, Easton, PA*



## PENNSYLVANIA WILDS

*Public investments: a foundation for burgeoning entrepreneurial ecosystem and maker movement*

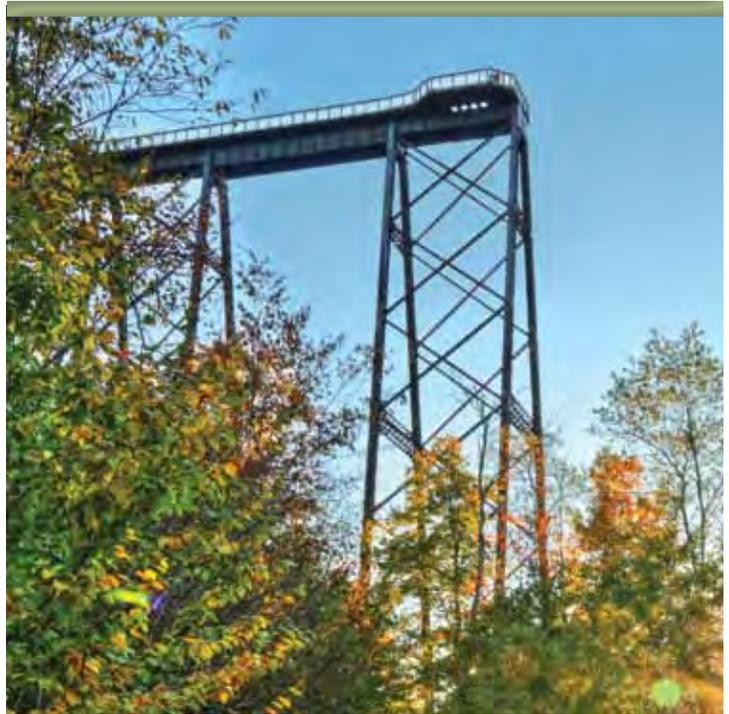
The Pennsylvania Wilds Conservation Landscape (PAWCL) is one of the most ambitious landscape-level initiatives in the United States. It is a rural 13-county region known for its small historic communities, rich heritage and the 2.4 million acres of protected public land including 29 state parks, 8 state forests, 50 state game lands and the Allegheny National Forest – in total, a block of public land equivalent in size to Yellowstone National Park! Boom and bust cycles of the past from timbering, mining and oil and gas drilling left their mark. But, by the turn of the 21st century, the once stripped hills were thickly reforested and remediation of acid mine drainage in the streams was gaining ground thanks to a generation of conservation leaders in the state. The recovering natural resources sparked a trend and tradition of visitors who came to hunt and fish. More recently visitors are coming to also enjoy other outdoor adventures enhanced by recent state investments in the landscape’s recreation infrastructure including assets like the Elk Country Visitor Center and the Kinzua Bridge State Park Skywalk and Visitor Center.

DCNR investments, in both new destination facilities and assets like trails, signage and wildlife habitat, as well as community grant projects, have brought new, much needed economic opportunity in their wake. For decades, demographic and economic trends have shown a net decrease in businesses and jobs, high unemployment rates, population loss, and a decline in young people choosing to stay and build careers in the region. Shifts in demand for forest products and globalization also resulted in loss of traditional jobs in timber and small manufacturing.

In 2003, with these negative trends in mind, state leadership launched the “Pennsylvania Wilds” initiative by engaging local government, private businesses and partner organizations in revitalizing communities around these investments and the region’s natural and cultural assets. Underpinning this effort is an intergovernmental cooperative agreement, the largest geographically in the commonwealth, giving county governments a voice in shaping the work and a unique framework for planning, cooperation and collaboration on a landscape scale.

The PA Wilds Center for Entrepreneurship (PA Wilds Center) is DCNR’s external lead organization for this landscape’s work. It convenes a broad array of partners and delivers programs that support the landscape’s overall mission “to integrate conservation and economic development in a way that strengthens and inspires communities in the Pennsylvania Wilds.” In five years, the Center’s work has grown by 900 percent, a testament to: the traction of the landscape initiative; its strong and diverse partner base; the region’s vibrant maker culture; and the organization’s tenacity and success in attracting additional investors.

*Kinzua Skywalk*



*Kinzua Bridge State Park Visitor Center*



Growth and success also can be attributed to the strong nature and outdoor tourism market. Visitor spending in the region is \$1.8 billion annually. In 2015 alone, the region hosted 7.6 million day-trip visitors – 15 times the region’s population! This means real economic opportunity for local businesses and entrepreneurs. To capitalize on this, the center has built The Wilds Cooperative (WCO), an entrepreneurial ecosystem and rural value chain of 300 plus private sector partners positioned to meet the demand of the growing outdoor recreation industry.

A key component of this ecosystem is an innovative partnership with DCNR to operate PA Wilds Conservation Shops at busy state parks in the region where 90 percent of the products sold are regionally made by small businesses — boosting local economies and fostering community pride. ShopthePAwilds.com, an e-commerce platform under development will create a true on-line maker marketplace which will allow rural WCO businesses to drop ship from their locations and keep a larger cut of each sale, helping them thrive. The entire system helps local businesses leverage the trademarked PA Wilds Brand and high foot traffic at new DCNR facilities. WCO businesses reported that the PAWCL helped them create 99 jobs over the last two years.

#### *PA Wilds Conservation Shop*



Because the Pennsylvania Wilds has the greatest concentration of public lands in the commonwealth, conservation, stewardship and restoration of these lands and facilities is critically important to the landscape’s work. Currently there is a \$500 million maintenance backlog at state parks and forests in the PAWCL. To make visitors aware of this need, the center instituted a point-of-sale “check-out for conservation” campaign at both its online store ShopthePAwilds.com and the PA Wilds Conservation Shop at Kinzua Bridge State Park which sees more than 250,000 visitors each year. All donations collected are reinvested back into state parks and forests across the landscape. Not only are visitors to the public lands upping the demand for local products but also, they are being inspired to contribute to this important cause. In three months, more than \$8,000 has been donated to the campaign.

“A big part of our economy and way of life here revolves around our forest and public lands,” says PA Wilds Center Founder and CEO Ta Enos, whose family has lived in the region for four generations. Our public lands make possible our internationally-acclaimed dark skies and habitat for our world-famous elk. They support the region’s timber, oil, gas, and outdoor tourism industries, inspire our vibrant maker culture and are essential to helping our major employers attract and retain talent. These lands also are the reason for our clean water – and many other people’s, too. And, good land and water management is key to the pressing issue of climate resiliency. Through the PAWCL, we finally have a way to connect these dots and defy tired stereotypes you often hear about rural places, the private sector, and government.”

#### *Locally made jewelry and ceramics*



Located in northeast Pennsylvania and covering the six counties of Carbon, Lackawanna, Luzerne, Monroe, Pike, and Wayne, the Pocono Forests and Waters Conservation Landscape (PFWCL) has a rich and diverse past. This history includes immigrant settlements along the rivers and valleys as well as lumbering, anthracite coal extraction, railroad expansion, and iron-works all fueling the industrial revolution. The region also has been known for extensive outdoor leisure, sporting, and vacation activities. It has abundant natural resources, including the greatest concentration of wetlands in the state, and some large tracts of public and private forested lands. Guided by The Pennsylvania Environmental Council, DCNR's external lead organization for the landscape, the PFWCL works to protect and sustain these natural resources through three priorities: land and water conservation/stewardship; community education and outreach; and creating new and improved connections to the outdoors.

Of particular note in this landscape is a thriving network of land trusts known as the Northeast Land Trust Conservation partners that is convened by PFW three times a year. This network is critical to supporting and accelerating the landscape's efforts to conserve land and promote land stewardship. These gatherings are primarily a venue for networking and information-sharing, but have demonstrable value in advancing the landscape's land conservation priorities.

A total of 55,000 acres of new land conserved is contributing to significant water quality improvements across the landscape.

The highly regarded PFWCL Mini-Grant Program has proven to be an extremely effective and vital tool in achieving the goals of the landscape. A 2010 mini-grant enabled a partner, Natural Lands, to launch a tracking program for land conservation efforts within the region. In an effort that continues today, Natural Lands twice a year gathers data on protected lands from partners across the landscape, creating a comprehensive GIS mapping of these lands within the landscape. This has become a powerful tool for enabling partners to understand how their individual efforts fit within the broader landscape context, and empowers strategic approaches to future land conservation efforts.

Interestingly, based on this model pioneered within the PFWCL, the Pennsylvania Land Trust Association (PALTA) has launched a state-wide GIS database, and is now tracking protected land updates across the state.

The PFW's catalytic role in convening land conservation partners in the landscape and strategic use of mini-grants are two best practices that exemplify how this landscape work is adding value to conservation efforts within northeast Pennsylvania, one of the fastest growing regions of the state.

*Delaware State Forest, Pecks Pond*



## SCHUYLKILL HIGHLANDS

*Making connections to link assets*

The Schuylkill Highlands Conservation Landscape (SHCL) is at the nexus of two geographic features, the Pennsylvania Highlands and the Schuylkill River watershed. Focusing on the heavily forested Highlands area and a watershed that is the second most important water source for Southeast Pennsylvania, the work of the SHCL centers around water quality protection, habitat conservation, and recreational and compatible economic development. In such a populated and complex landscape, working with the many local, county and state government partners, land trusts, and nonprofit organizations to connect assets despite development pressure is one of the landscape's primary objectives as well as challenge.

In a region set for considerable growth, a top landscape priority is the preservation of the Hopewell Big Woods, the largest unbroken forest tract in Southeastern Pennsylvania. A partnership of 30 governmental, private, non-profit, and municipal entities is working to conserve 15,000 contiguous forest acres. This includes support from the Delaware River Watershed Initiative of the William Penn Foundation, another significant landscape partner. In addition to reaping water quality benefits, the landscape is working on recreational access and linking this forest hub to other assets. This includes trail connections between Hopewell Big Woods and key cultural and recreational assets like French Creek State Park, Hopewell Furnace National Historical Site, and the Schuylkill River Greenways National Heritage Area's Schuylkill River Trail (SRT).

Success in linking landscape hubs and spokes has been an exercise in real collaboration by SHCL partners. One project that exemplifies this is the connector between the SRT and French Creek State Park, which required acquisition of land through which a new trail, The Big Woods Trail, could be threaded. A regional land trust and DCNR's external lead organization for the SHCL, Natural Lands, helped put all the pieces together by working with the landowners, raising public and private funds, purchasing the land—and then turning the property over to the state. The Big Woods Trail emerged as the signature trail project of the SHCL, as it connects and traverses major features of the area linking so many visitors to so many landscape assets.

This Conservation Landscape's efforts to improve access to the Hopewell Big Woods forest hub did not stop with a new trail connections. New facilities to welcome visitors also were added, including an accessible parking lot and exhibit signage at the Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site. A three-panel migratory bird viewing station at Hopewell Lake, two interpretive signage maps at French Creek State Park telling the story of the landscape, the furnace and the surrounding natural resources also were installed. And, children's interactive signage at both parks allow for more child-friendly visitation experiences.

New trail connections with new partners are in the works. All partners are committed to protecting and preserving this critical landscape in a manner that will enable its vibrant sustainable economic future.

### *Big Woods Trailhead*



## SOUTH MOUNTAIN

*A diverse and engaged partner network is key to success*

Connecting portions of Adams, Cumberland, Franklin, and York counties and covering approximately half-a-million acres, the South Mountain Conservation Landscape (SMCL) is comprised of the Michaux State Forest and surrounding fertile agricultural valleys. No single element or feature defines the South Mountain landscape. Rather, a convergence of diverse natural, cultural, agricultural, and recreational resources is what makes the landscape special and unique.

The South Mountain Partnership, an alliance of diverse stakeholders – citizens, businesses, governments, non-profits and academic institutions – convenes the landscape’s work. It is dedicated to bringing people together across the landscape and across sectors to highlight the importance of the landscape and take action to secure its future. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy, DCNR’s external lead organization in the landscape, houses the South Mountain Partnership. The partnership’s vision is “a landscape of conserved resources and vibrant communities sharing a common sense of place and collaborating on well-planned growth and sustainable economic development.”

To achieve this vision and in recognition of the diversity of skilled and committed partners throughout the landscape, the partnership embraces working as a network to advance its goals. It also invests in building capacity of its partners and uses a collaborative approach to tackle large projects. The power of this approach has led to significant wins for the landscape.

The early White Rocks land acquisition project that demanded a sustained commitment of a critical array of partners, was successful in protecting 850 acres of valuable forested land on South Mountain in Cumberland County. The site was under serious threat of development and its protection helped provide a buffer and scenic view shed for the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. Partners included the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, DCNR, National Park Service, Central Pennsylvania Conservancy, and local trail clubs and citizens. To make the project happen, secured funding from the federal side of the Land and Water Conservation Fund was matched by DCNR Keystone Funds through the Community Conservation Partnerships Grant Program.



*White Rocks Scenic Vista*

The success of the White Rocks project created a confidence and momentum within the Partnership that has benefited other landscape endeavors. One is the Craighead House, the childhood summer home of renowned biologists Frank and John Craighead and author Jean Craighead George. The project supports the stewardship of this hidden treasure in the SMCL and underscores how history and conservation are often intertwined in a landscape. When a small grassroots effort began to preserve the house before it was sold, the partnership leveraged its network to build capacity for the Craighead House Committee. Knowing that successful historic preservation projects typically require local municipal support, the Partnership convened meetings between the Craighead House Committee and South Middleton Township. It also facilitated partners’ participation in a 2017, *Balancing Nature and Commerce in Gateway Communities* workshop offered by The Conservation Fund that led to a more strategic approach for the rehabilitation and development of the Craighead House.

*Craighead House and grounds*



## SUSQUEHANNA RIVERLANDS

*Capitalizing on strategic land acquisition opportunities*

The Susquehanna Riverlands Conservation Landscape (SRCL) is rich in natural resources and history including significant American Indian cultural sites, ecologically sensitive bird habitats such as the Conejohela Flats, and almost 3,500 acres of permanently protected publicly accessible land throughout 29 municipalities in Lancaster and York counties. The SRCL's work has focused land protection efforts along the lower Susquehanna. These large river buffers, wooded hills, and streams are vital to cleaning water entering the Chesapeake Bay. They have become central to shaping communities along the river, mitigating climate change and opening thousands of acres for public recreation, fishing and hunting.

The SRCL was born from DCNR, The Conservation Fund, Lancaster County Conservancy, Susquehanna National Heritage Area and other partners' efforts to protect land along the lower Susquehanna River when utility divestiture happened in the late 1990s. As part of Holtwood relicensing, 2,500 acres of utility and private lands were protected in perpetuity for public use.

Utility divestiture, a strategic opportunity that the landscape partners acted upon, uncovered the significance and potential of this landscape and the benefits of collaboration within it. That early momentum has now paved the way for additional land protection efforts that are creating critical connections and public assets across the landscape. One of these projects is the 75-acre Camp Snyder property in Martic Township, Lancaster County, using an adjacent 7-acre donated property as one of the matches. This land was previously owned by the Boys and Girls Club of Lancaster County and marketed for sale as a residential lot, with the potential for additional development. It contains an historic farmhouse and barn as well as a variety of habitats including Climbers Run, a pond, meadow, and forests.

DCNR Community Conservation Partnership grant funds made it possible for the Lancaster County Conservancy to not only save this 82-acre high conservation value property, now referred to as Climbers Run Nature Preserve, but also to establish the Susquehanna Riverlands Research and Education Center using the existing barn. Now this popular destination in the landscape hosts events for the conservancy and partners, and is a hub of environmental education and research in Southcentral Pennsylvania. A DCNR-funded Conservation and Management Plan for the preserve/facility will help the conservancy use Climbers Run as a model for delivering educational programs related to land preservation and stewardship and urban greening, as well as providing a hub for collaborative partnerships within the SRCL.

"This area is under enormous pressure from suburban growth from Wilmington, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Harrisburg, making protection and restoration of these remaining forests in this river valley a clear priority for our board," said Phil Wenger, President of the Lancaster County Conservancy, DCNR's external lead organization for this landscape.

*Pinnacle Overlook*



*Susquehanna Riverlands Research and Education Center*



# Evaluation of Pennsylvania's Conservation Landscape Program

During 2019, an independent evaluation of the Conservation Landscape program was conducted to explore its achievements and challenges. This involved 27 interviews with program leaders, site visits and other in-depth conversations with staff at DCNR and partner organizations that lead the work.

## *Key findings include:*

### **LEADERSHIP ROLE OF STATE GOVERNMENT –**

DCNR has been the driving force in convening and sustaining landscape conservation work in Pennsylvania, a unique role for a state conservation agency. The state agency's role has been essential—as a primary landowner, as a powerful facilitator for bringing together disparate partners, as a force for marshalling resources, and as a vehicle for aligning policy and spreading lessons learned.

### **CONSISTENT STAFF AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT –**

Along with leading the program DCNR has continued to underpin the program with committed staff and annual funding allocations. The durability and success of the program is in many ways attributable to the sustained investment in ensuring that each Conservation Landscape has dedicated staff leadership. This is essential component in fostering and binding together the collaborative relationships that are central to these initiatives.

### **HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE –**

The Pennsylvania program stands out as addressing the social and economic needs of communities as well as natural resource conservation values. What the diverse Conservation Landscapes of Pennsylvania underscore is the value in convening a holistic conversation about how communities wish to see their futures unfold—and how the landscapes and natural resources that surround communities are central to those futures.

### **INNOVATIVE PLACE-BASED PROJECTS –**

Each of the Conservation Landscapes, while built on the same foundational principles, has been encouraged to develop programs that meet the priorities of the local communities and the regional conditions. This recognition of the importance of local context has allowed each landscape to forge genuine collaborations that are focused on the future of the specific landscape.

### **ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT –**

Based on the functionality of the program and staff commitment, all were found to be meeting their benchmarks including consultation with partners, and effective administration of grant programs and funding opportunities. Many of the Conservation Landscapes have gone through a re-assessing of their goals and governance. This ability to make needed course adjustment is a sign of strength.

### **CONNECTION TO CONSERVATION CHALLENGES –**

The Conservation Landscape approach could play a more significant part in tackling landscape-scale issues like climate change, invasive species, and resilient infrastructure.

### **MEASURING SUCCESS –**

Evaluation and measurement of impact has been underattended to across the Conservation Landscape program. Better measurement and communication of outcomes will more concretely document the value and impact of a landscape approach.

# Recommendations for the Future of Conservation Landscapes

Pennsylvania's Conservation Landscape program has grown over the last decades from an innovative experiment in landscape-scale thinking into a well-functioning program with many opportunities and pathways for continued growth. There are some actions and next steps that could be taken to strengthen it.

## **Leadership and Collaboration**

- Restate the program's goals to underscore importance of landscape-scale conservation to address climate change, invasive species, and infrastructure challenges.
- Continue robust financial and staff investments by DCNR, other state and federal agencies and other partners interested in investing in this work.
- Offer programs in partnership development and community engagement for conservation landscape staff and partners, as well as training on building collaboration-focused skills.
- Expand partnerships, where needed, including state and federal agencies, and heritage areas.
- Seek opportunities to participate in the national landscape-scale dialogue and learn from other landscape conservation efforts underway throughout the country.\*

## **Building on Success**

- Communicate to staff and partners the values of landscape scale work, partnership, and integrated workplace management.
- Continue to align each Conservation Landscape's work plan with the local partner organizations.
- Continue to emphasize the interconnectedness of communities and their biophysical landscapes.
- Prioritize ecosystem conservation.
- Integrate climate resilience and adaptation as a priority, as this framework provides the right scale for addressing large-scale challenges.

## **Establishing Outcomes**

- Create a uniform framework for evaluation/measurement that can be applied across all the Conservation Landscapes to demonstrate conservation outcomes and conveys the benefit of the program.
- Investigate new models that assess the effectiveness of collaboration and partnership activities.

\* A summary of other landscape-level initiatives around the nation can be found here: <http://landscapeconservation.org/our-work/landscape-conservation-initiatives-survey/>

## Conclusion

The successful Pennsylvania Conservation Landscape program rests on a strong foundation. DCNR has invested in supporting the collaborative capacity of each Conservation Landscape by funding leadership positions for each landscape, and by engaging with local partners to achieve a broad-based, holistic, and community-grounded vision for the future.

Collaboration—building the mutual trust and respect that are necessary to cement these relationships—takes time. There is strong evidence that over the past decade the Conservation Landscape program has created a number of impactful best practices and a culture of trust and respect with its partners that is a model for landscape scale initiatives across the country.

Small improvements and continued support will increase the value of all the programmatic investments made to this point. This landscape-scale approach is positioned to help Pennsylvania tackle the most challenging problems such as our changing climate and its impacts on infrastructure, wildlife, and health.



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