

2025

Michigan annual report

Dear friend of conservation,



It's hard to believe that we have reached the end of another outstanding year in conservation. Through uncertain headwinds, our steady focus, perseverance and partnerships have led to big results and impact in the protection of Michigan's freshwater, coastline and rivers, restoration of landscapes, natural climate solutions, and support for communities.

In this annual report, we will share how we leaned into the challenges of biodiversity loss and a rapidly changing climate by advancing conservation that makes a lasting difference for Michigan's lands, waters and people. From planting thousands of trees in the Ottawa National Forest to advancing fisheries restoration in our Great Lakes, our work is restoring habitats that wildlife and people depend on. In Detroit, we've partnered with local leaders to support the expansion of tree canopy and launch green infrastructure projects that build resilience where it is needed most. And through the Michigan the Beautiful initiative, we are helping shape a vision for conserving and connecting the places that matter most.

However, we have much work yet to do. Our work in Michigan is vital to achieving The Nature Conservancy's ambitious 2030 goals for our communities and for the planet. Our partners and generous supporters, like you, make it possible. Together, we are conserving the lands and waters upon which all life depends and assuring a future for the generations that follow. Thank you for understanding and supporting this important work.

Yours in conservation,

Helen Taylor
State Director

Year in review

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"Our partners and generous supporters, like you, make it possible."

Helen Taylor, State Director





The Nature Conservancy

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The Nature Conservancy's global 2030 goals

We face two imminent and intertwined challenges globally: the loss of biodiversity and a rapidly changing climate. In 2020, TNC established our 2030 goals to address these challenges. The following are our 2030 goals and how our teams across the Great Lakes region and Michigan are helping build a future where people and nature will thrive.



**Climate
mitigation**

3Gt

We will avoid or sequester **3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions** (CO₂e) annually: the same as taking approximately 650 million cars off the road every year.

In Michigan: Through restoration and improved practices our forest and regenerative agriculture programs are helping store more carbon and reduce emissions while supporting people and nature. By expanding this work across Michigan's forests and farmlands, we are increasing carbon storage, improving soil and water health and creating natural climate solutions that benefit both communities and ecosystems.



**Climate
adaptation**

100M

We will help **100 million people** at severe risk of climate-related emergencies, such as floods, fires and drought.

In Michigan: Our work grounded in nature-based solutions is helping both urban and rural communities throughout Michigan become more resilient to climate impacts, such as flooding and heat and health impacts. From tree planting, wetland and coastal restoration to green stormwater infrastructure, we are helping nature, people and communities adapt and build greater resiliency.



**Healthy
lands**

1.6B

We will conserve **1.6 billion acres of lands**, such as forests and grasslands—an area twice the size of India.

In Michigan: Through collaboration, restoration and acquisitions, we're building a connected network of resilient lands and waters to help Michigan's unique landscapes, wildlife and communities adapt and thrive in a changing world. Projects like the Keweenaw Heartlands are developing community-based approaches to conserve lands for people, wildlife and resilience.

THIS SPREAD Farmer Steven Tait and Michigan's Agriculture Program Director Ben Wickerham examine the health of the soil. © Jason Whalen/Fauna Creative; Kayaking Lake Superior at the Bete Grise Wetlands Preserve © TNC; Wilderness Lakes Reserve in Baraga County © Bob Anthony





Healthy
oceans

10B

We will conserve nearly **10 billion acres of ocean**—more than 10 percent of the world's ocean area.

In Michigan: Here in Michigan, we are conserving our freshwater oceans—The Great Lakes—through strong partnerships to restore native fish species, reduce runoff entering the lakes and conserving coastal shorelines. We are also advancing efforts to map and restore spawning habitat and reefs to strengthen the health of the lakes and the communities that depend on them.



Healthy
fresh water

74M
630K

We will conserve more than **74 million acres of lakes and wetlands and 620,000 miles of river systems** (enough river length alone to stretch around the globe 25 times).

In Michigan: With many partners, we are protecting our watersheds and water quality by restoring wetlands, protecting our river corridors and temperatures with forest restoration, and working with farmers to reduce sediments and nutrients entering our waterways.



People

45M

We will support **45 million people** from local and Indigenous communities whose well-being and livelihoods depend on healthy oceans, fresh water and lands.

In Michigan: We are focused on building ever-stronger partnerships with growing Indigenous nations and communities, farmers, foresters and fishers, as well as government agencies, local organizations, businesses, universities and more—to support community-driven conservation initiatives that benefit people and nature throughout the state. From our tribal partnerships in fisheries and forest restoration to working alongside grassroots leaders in Detroit, our conservation work begins with people.



By supporting our efforts, generous donors like you are driving positive impacts that extend far beyond your local community. Visit [nature.org/MidwestWins](https://www.nature.org/MidwestWins) to learn about our biggest successes in the Midwest region from the past year.





FRESHWATER

If you look at a map of our state, it's easy to understand why freshwater is central to everything we do in Michigan. The state is bounded by four Great Lakes, dotted with more than 11,000 inland lakes, covered by almost 6.5 million acres of wetlands, and veined by more than 76,000 miles of rivers and streams. Every action we take impacts freshwater. When we plant a tree, its roots filter and its canopy shades water. When we preserve tens of thousands of acres of forests, they protect the hundreds of miles of rivers flowing through them. When we restore coastal wetlands, we create habitat for threatened species and filter water entering the Great Lakes. When we incentivize sustainable agriculture practices, we prevent runoff from damaging the health of our lakes and streams.

We work with partners at the innovative forefront of science to restore the native fish species that the largest freshwater system in the world provides us—like whitefish, which have been depleted due to many changes, including the effects of invasive quagga mussels. Whitefish are a staple of “Up North” dinners and important both to the fishers who catch them and the local communities who transport, cook, serve and sell them. They are also an indicator of a healthy freshwater system. We're working with tribal, state and federal agency partners to find solutions to help whitefish recover.

This past February, we continued our partnership with the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians, the Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians, the Bay Mills Indian Community, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to stock 25,000 whitefish eggs in the Jordan River, where the newly hatched fish would have the food to grow. Whitefish historically spawned in Great Lakes tributaries before 19th century logging drives and damming destroyed their spawning beds and cut off their access. When our scientists returned after spawning season to monitor our success, we found whitefish fry downstream! If they return to the river to spawn as adults, we'll have given whitefish a better chance to recover and thrive. At the same time, we're using environmental DNA (eDNA) sampling to learn about fish communities on additional Great Lakes tributary rivers, where whitefish could be stocked to spawn in the future.

THIS PAGE Daybreak in the Michigamme Highlands © Rich Swanson; Lake Herring (Cisco) and Lake Whitefish © Paul Vecsei

Northern Lake Michigan reef restoration

Working this year with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), TNC completed a comprehensive study of spawning reefs in northern Lake Michigan to inform future reef restoration efforts.

Analyzing navigation charts, historic fish spawning reports, and mapping data from USGS and NOAA, and gathering data from underwater cameras and on-site dives, the team identified core habitat and produced detailed maps of 27 potential spawning reefs for native lake species, including whitefish, lake trout, walleye and cisco.

The maps detail the size and physical characteristics of the reefs, the fish that use them, and other species observed, including invasive species like quagga mussels. The report filled critical information gaps needed by agencies and fisheries managers to prioritize and plan reef restoration projects for the fish that need them and the people who rely upon the fish.

“Forests fight climate change. We know this because we know how trees grow. Remember what we learned in school? Trees capture CO2 and turn it into wood—we call that carbon capture, and it’s a powerful tool for protecting the planet from the climate crisis. TNC is on the leading edge of carbon capture, expanding its impact through research and improved forest management practices. That’s why I support TNC as much as I can.”

Larry Treul, Legacy Club Member, Munising MI

Regenerative agriculture

At the same time, what happens in our farm fields impacts freshwater in rivers and streams that flow into Saginaw Bay. That is why we work with farmers and businesses to find workable solutions for both farms and the Great Lakes. From innovative feed strategies to wetland restoration, our efforts show that freshwater and farming can thrive together.

This year, TNC celebrated leaders in sustainable agriculture through our Soil Health Hero Awards. We expanded the awards statewide to honor farmers and professionals advancing practices that protect soil and water. The 2025 awards will be presented at the Great Lakes Crop Summit in January.

Our Dairy Feed in focus program also grew, with more than 35 participating farms and nearly \$1 million in incentives for feed strategies that improve herd health while reducing methane emissions.

In partnership with the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, we advanced wetland restorations that filter and replenish 44.8 million gallons of water, and we are supporting the planning of five on-farm wetland projects that will filter an additional 5.1 million gallons through the tribe’s work.





LAND

Protection

Since our founding, The Nature Conservancy has protected more than 438,000 acres in Michigan, conserving forests, coast, wetlands, fens, prairies and riparian areas. Just in the past five years, we have protected 48,293 acres through large acquisitions, including the Keweenaw Heartlands, the Slate River and Wilderness Lakes Forest Reserve, as well as helping partners protect critical coastal lands, such as the Elberta Waterfront Community Conservation Project on Lake Michigan and the 14 acres of Lake Superior coastal land we transferred to the Ottawa National Forest's Black River Harbor Recreation Area this year.

TNC knows that simply acquiring land is not enough to achieve our long-term conservation goals. The on-the-ground work of our foresters, field crews, scientists and stewards of the natural systems we protect extend far beyond our property lines. Removing invasive trees and plants on our lands restores the health, biodiversity and resiliency of these lands and prevents their spread to neighboring lands. Using prescribed fire promotes native plant growth, enriches soil and reduces wildfire risk, whether on our own or partner lands. And our natural feature inventory surveys ensure that we and future land managers safeguard rare and endangered species and features.

THIS YEAR BY THE NUMBERS

48,500

Trees planted in the Ottawa National Forest

2,700

Acres surveyed and monitored for invasive species

13,000

Acres of forest inventoried to support forest management operations.

310

Acres treated for invasive species—each acre restored helps native plants and wild-life rebound.

161

Acres restored through prescribed fire—though small in scale, fire is a powerful tool to mimic natural cycles, enrich soil, and build long-term ecosystem resilience.

Stewardship

Careful, science-based management and restoration ensure we're protecting native species, supporting wildlife and building resilience across Michigan's landscapes. In 2025, we continued this legacy of care on our lands and partner lands working alongside conservation groups, universities, Indigenous communities, government agencies and dedicated volunteers.

In the Ottawa National Forest, we worked with the USDA Forest Service to restore cool-water habitats impacted by spruce budworm infestations. TNC crews planted 48,500 native trees across 161 acres, building more resilient riparian corridors and improving stream health for trout and other species that depend on shaded waters.

Another highlight was enrolling all of TNC's forest reserves into the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' Bat Habitat Conservation Plan. While we have always managed our forests to benefit at-risk species like bats, this action shows fellow forest landowners that they don't have to choose between practicing forestry or protecting species: They can do both.

Our partnership with Michigan Technological University and the USDA Forest Service brought us deep into the Hiawatha National Forest, where we surveyed vernal pools—seasonal wetlands that support an astonishing diversity of life. Sometimes called the “coral reefs of the forest,” these pools provide essential breeding grounds for amphibians and invertebrates. By mapping and documenting their presence, we can help ensure these habitats are recognized and protected from disturbance.

We teamed up with partners across the state for conservation. With the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, we planted 300 pounds of wild rice in wetlands at one of our Upper Peninsula forest reserves. With our friends at Kirchoff Automotive, we planted 2,000 trees at TNC's Ives Road Fen Preserve, while Michigan United Conservation Clubs volunteers helped us install bat boxes at our McMahon Lake Preserve.

Each tree planted, pool surveyed and acre monitored reflects the dedication of people—our staff, partners and supporters—who make conservation possible. Together, we are building a future where Michigan's lands and waters remain vibrant, resilient and full of life.

“The dedication of our crew and volunteers turned ambitious conservation goals into real, lasting impact across Michigan this year.”

KIM STEINBERGER, RESTORATION PROJECT MANAGER



CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

Uniting people and nature for a resilient future



Climate change continues to be one of the greatest challenges facing Michigan's communities, landscapes and wildlife. TNC is working across the state to protect climate-resilient lands and waters, advance natural climate solutions,

and promote innovative strategies

that reduce emissions while strengthening biodiversity. Together, the approaches described throughout this annual report offer a vision where people and nature can adapt and thrive.

This year, momentum grew around *Michigan the Beautiful*, a statewide initiative to conserve, connect and restore at least 30 percent of Michigan's lands and waters by 2030. At the request of the Michigan Natural Resources Department, TNC is helping to design an actionable roadmap for the decade ahead to implement Michigan the Beautiful in partnership with state agencies, tribal nations, nonprofits and local leaders. At the Michigan Healthy Climate Conference, Tracy Melvin, TNC's Director of Conservation in Michigan, presented on the Michigan the Beautiful work, highlighting the importance of conserving our

land and water. Nearly 1,000 people from across Michigan and beyond attended the conference, making it a tremendous opportunity to foster connection, conversation and collaboration for the future. This work ensures that conservation is not only about protecting nature but also engaging Michiganders from all walks of life in caring for our natural resources.



THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT Tracy Melvin speaking at MI Healthy Climate Conference © TNC; Hummingbird at flower © Ed Nephler/TNC Photo Contest 2022; Red fox © Megan Lorenz/TNC Photo Contest 2018; Senator Peters and Danielle Basgall © TNC



Policy innovation for climate resilience

TNC is helping shape the role of innovative technologies in Michigan's climate future. This year, we participated in the Mi SUCCESS Coalition, a bipartisan partnership of businesses, labor, community and conservation organizations.



The coalition is positioning Michigan as a leader in capturing carbon emissions at their source and storing them deep underground in the state's unique geology. Carbon capture can complement natural solutions like forests and wetlands, which continue to play an essential role in absorbing greenhouse gases. These approaches, combined with greenhouse gas emission reductions are all part of the strategy to address the challenges of a rapidly changing climate.

TNC's priority is also to ensure that revenues generated through carbon capture benefit conservation. We are advocating for those funds to flow into Michigan's Natural Resources Trust Fund, securing long-term protection for forests, rivers and lands that sustain both people and wildlife. By working across sectors and political divides, TNC is demonstrating how science, policy and collaboration can drive climate progress for Michigan's future.





COMMUNITY

TNC is committed to strengthening community-based conservation and supporting the people whose lives are most connected to healthy lands and waters. In Detroit, once celebrated as the “City of Trees,” TNC is working to support partners with science to help renew that legacy. By working with The Greening of Detroit, the City of Detroit, DTE Energy and NV5, we are supporting local efforts to expand tree cover where it is needed most. TNC commissioned a new tree census and co-benefits study that will support and inform future plantings of our partners, bringing essential benefits to neighborhoods, such as offering cleaner air, reducing heat and related costs, helping to manage flooding, and building healthier communities. That same spirit of innovation is taking root on Belle Isle, where TNC is partnering with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to begin work on a green stormwater infrastructure parking lot. Designed with native plants and permeable surfaces, the project will reduce flooding, protect water quality and serve as the foundation for the next decade of improvements. To move the community closer to its realization of a Keweenaw Heartlands Community Forest, this year TNC worked closely with the Keweenaw Community Foundation to raise and secure funds that will start up and help sustain the Keweenaw Heartlands long-term. The Keweenaw Heartlands Forest Fund, with a goal of \$600K, will cover several years of initial governance and management costs of the Keweenaw Heartlands Community Forest. This will give time for a \$2M endowment held by the Foundation to grow, helping to ensure enduring stewardship of the Keweenaw Heartlands Community Forest.



THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Detroit, Michigan © Michael D-L Jordan; Joe Walters at Belle Isle Zoo © Heath Thurman/TNC; Detroit, Michigan © Michael D-L Jordan; Blue Jay © Andy Raupp/TNC Photo Contest 2023; Belle Isle Zoo © Heath Thurman/TNC; Autumn in Michigan's Upper Peninsula © Dietrich Ludwig; Brockway Mountain in Michigan's Upper Peninsula © Jason Whalen

Conservation supporter

We gratefully recognize the individuals, companies, foundations and organizations who make our work possible through their support—here in Michigan, across the Great Lakes and around the world.

We extend our deep appreciation to donors who supported TNC Michigan between **July 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025**, including those who gave cumulative gifts of \$5,000 or more, those who initiated or increased planned gifts, and the thousands of others whose commitments make our conservation results possible.

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DONOR HIGHLIGHT



Bobbi and Stephen Polk

Bobbi and Stephen Polk have deep ties to the Great Lakes, Michigan—and the Upper Peninsula, in particular. It's the place where they met and have returned with their family for many years to enjoy the splendor of the Northwoods and the majestic Great Lakes. Safeguarding the future of the U.P. is one of the reasons their relationship with TNC has deepened over the years.

A longtime member of TNC Michigan's board of trustees and former vice chair, Stephen says that protecting Michigan's landscapes and wildlife is "the most important legacy we can leave for future generations. In a world filled with uncertainty, what's certain is that TNC delivers the science-based solutions necessary to protect the lands and waters that are essential for the lives and livelihoods of our communities."

Stephen and Bobbi recently supported TNC's 2030 campaign with an unrestricted lead gift, allowing maximum flexibility to designate funds where they will have the greatest impact.

"We support TNC because of the lasting, tangible impact that their conservation work has achieved, both for the planet and for Michigan's communities," Stephen says. "TNC's 2030 campaign is ambitious and inspiring, and we're proud to help expand the impact and make sure that it endures."

"TNC's 2030 campaign is ambitious and inspiring, and we're proud to help expand the impact and make sure that it endures."

BOBBI AND STEPHEN POLK



nature.org/michigan

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