Confluence

Fall 2022

Brogden Bottomlands showing Neuse River
Photo by Rupert Hester

tlc
TRIANGLE LAND CONSERVANCY

Now, More Than Ever

I like to share TLC's successes in this space. Still, today I want to tell you what keeps me up at night: land is getting more expensive, disappearing faster than ever, and fewer landowners wish to donate even a tiny portion of the value of their property, not to mention the impact of climate change and related weather events on the region.

Even though I am incredibly proud of the progress we are making to meet the goals laid out in the Strategic Plan (https://tinyurl.com/TLC-SAP), it is getting harder to maintain this pace. We have conserved over 23,000 acres in perpetuity, built more trails, engaged more people, and monitored thousands of acres annually. But without signi cant support from individuals, we will not be able to meet our "big goal" to protect 25,000 acres by 2025 and to continue to conserve at least 1,000 per year into the future.

TLC was able to purchase our most beloved preserves – Brumley, Horton Grove, Williamson – thanks mainly to landowners willing to donate a signi cant portion of the sale price. We combined that with local government funding to protect these spaces forever. In contrast, TLC paid the total appraised value for the last major project we completed – the 665 acre Cape Fear Bottomlands in Lee County. A combination of state funding and a signi cant contribution from an anonymous individual donor made this project possible.

With your support, TLC will continue prioritizing the most critical lands for conservation (see Prioritizing Land Protection, page 9). We will also seek new and creative ways to conserve more land (see Good Ground, page 7) and hire and support a dynamic and talented team to get it all done (see photo at right and page 14).

Sandy Sweitzer / Executive Director

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TLC staff, Americorps and interns together at the Boxyard RTP for an in-person meeting in July –something we're glad to be able to do again.

Brogden Bottomlands aerial photo by Rupert Hester

Increasing The Pace Of Conservation In Johnston County: Protecting Lands We Love

The State's Purchase Continues The Protection Of One Of North Carolina's Most Critical And Diverse Landscapes; Plans To Add It To The Mountains To Sea

South of Smith eld, lies a sprawling swampy quagmire. It's a vast wilderness of the Neuse River oodplain known as the Lowgrounds, which has been a long-term priority area for TLC. Although it was once thought to be the county with the least risk of development in the Triangle, today Johnston County is the fastest growing County in the state. It was just named 19th in the country for the most farmland loss expected in the next 20 years. Our conservation work here is more urgent than ever.

In 2019, TLC acquired Brogden Bottomlands, a 1,120 acre parcel that is one of the most signi cant contiguous areas of undeveloped land in this part of the State. It is an important natural heritage site full of wetlands, sloughs, levees, and home to mature cypress forests. The name Brogden Bottomlands is a nod to the area's topography and nearby community.

From bobcats to wood ducks, this is one of the most diverse ecosystems in the entire Piedmont.

These wetlands and swamps house important habitat for wildlife, providing shelter, breeding ground, and food to various species, including birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals.

In fact, the area is known locally as the "Let'Lones" because of the quantity and diversity of animals and plants, in addition to quicksand and bottomless ponds- people thought it was better to just " *let it alone*"

Together with Howell Woods across the Neuse River, this area protects the entire oodplain in the heart of one of the most extraordinary wilderness areas in the Southeast, wholly undeveloped and roadless for 72 square miles (or 36,000 acres), providing a vital wildlife habitat corridor.

Brogden Bottomlands includes 620 acres of oodplain and 500 acres of farm and forest land transitioning to meadow. It also has oxbow lakes where the winding Neuse River has cut o old meanders.

Brogden Bottomlands also has an interesting human history.

Leigh Ann Hammerbacher, TLC's Director of Land Protection and Stewardship East, who facilitated the project, noted that the entire region likely was an important settlement area for the Tuscarora and other native peoples because of the discovery of arrowheads and other historical artifacts on the site.

There's also a pop culture connection with movie star and Johnston County native, Ava Gardner. "The house in which she was born is right across the road from this property," Hammerbacher said, adding "we imagine she probably tramped around the woods that are now part of this parcel."

Transferring Brogden Bottomlands To The State

It's clear why this wetland is a treasure: it creates a nearly 4,000 acre conservation corridor in North Carolina's largest river basin. Our priority for Brogden Bottomlands hasn't changed: TLC purchased the property to safeguard its unique ecosystem and the valuable sites for water quality protection and ood controls, and to work with the NC Division of Parks and Recreation to establish a park along the Mountains To Sea Trail.

The State intends to add Brogden Bottomlands to the Mountains To Sea Trail –a trail stretching almost 1,200 miles across North Carolina, from Clingmans Dome in the Great Smoky Mountains to Jockey's Ridge on the Outer Banks. With the State's purchase of the land later this year, and their plan to maintain the property and establish the preserve, we can all be reassured the land will be permanently conserved as a swampy paradise for wildlife while continuing to provide ood control and water ltering bene ts to residents. State funding resources prevent subdivision and development of the land, except in cases where buildings are associated with park facilities.

Urgency Of Conservation

"In 2018, TLC set a goal to double the pace of conservation in the Triangle by protecting 1,000 acres annually until 2025. Although we are making great progress towards this goal –with 23,000 acres conserved to date –development pressures have increased exponentially in the past two years so the need is more urgent than ever.

"We depend on willing landowners, generous donors, and local and state governments to protect 25,000 acres by 2025," said Sandy Sweitzer, TLC's Executive Director.

For example, Johnston County Commissioners recently approved $625,000 for TLC in their scal year 2023 budget which TLC will use to conserve 600 acres, split over six tracts of land across the county. One proposed deal would protect a 105 acre farm with 1,500 feet of frontage on the Little River, Hammerbacher told commissioners. Johnston County Commissioner Ted Godwin proclaimed in the Johnstonian, "we have evolved with our commitment toward this kind of passive recreation; this is a way to leverage other funds to accomplish that."

As the population grows and development continues to spread, there are fewer and fewer large, undeveloped tracts like this in the Triangle.

Safeguarding these areas is vital, both for wildlife and to be able to maintain healthy thriving communities for people in the Triangle and beyond. We are currently in a window of time where it is still possible to conserve these habitats and farmland, and ensure we can protect the environmental bene ts that they bring to everyone in our region. However, we face increasing pressure and need your help. TLC continues to seek additional funding resources and tools for land protection. Member support remains the foundation that allows us to leverage millions of dollars in additional funds for land protection across the Triangle. Join us in protecting more wild lands and guaranteeing they remain wild for generations to come.

Wood Ducks. Photo by Don Kinney

Enhancing Bird Habitat At Brumley North

Have you heard that in May, Brumley North ranked second on the eBird Hotspot for North Carolina out of 2,528, measured by the number of bird species reported? While Brumley North may not be able to compete with coastal sites in terms of total species reported over a year, being in the top eBird Hotspots for any month is quite an achievement for a site in the Piedmont.

The unique combination of at least six di erent habitats at Brumley North contributes to the variety of birds seen at the preserve. The diverse landscape for wildlife includes rushing water in Stony Creek, calm waters in three ponds, mature hardwood forests, open elds, pine forests, and wetland areas created by beavers. Brumley North has a mixed land-use history and has been both a dairy farm and a hunting reserve over the last 50 years. In addition to bene cial habitats, this land legacy has also resulted in less-bene cial invasive species and stands of machine-planted loblolly pine. To enhance the bird habitat, TLC applied for and was awarded a grant from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology as part of their Land Trust Bird Conservation Initiative.

This grant will allow TLC to improve habitat quality to bene t breeding, migrating, and residential bird species, as well as other wildlife found on site. One species TLC has targeted for habitat improvement e orts is the golden-winged warbler, a species of concern in NC and beyond. This declining species has been found closely associated with open-canopy habitats.

Stewardship sta , working with volunteers, will incorporate habitat management prescriptions into the preserve's long-term management plan, including invasive plant removal, native plant establishment, prescribed burns, and edge feathering where dense loblolly pine stands abruptly meet open elds. Invasive removal e orts will focus on Tree-of-Heaven (Ailanthus altissima) throughout Brumley North, as well as Johnsongrass (Sorghum halepense) and fescue (Festuca arundinacea) from elds and open habitats. Once the invasives are removed, bene cial native plant species will be established to ll these open areas and increase the plant diversity of the elds. TLC is working with the NC Botanical Gardens to develop a species list and to source native seed for this e ort. Native plants are vital to local wildlife because they provide diverse and plentiful food sources and shelter. Hundreds of caterpillar species are supported by native oak trees!

Finally, monitoring the bird populations is key to the project's success. We are fortunate that the birding community has embraced Brumley North, so we have a robust dataset on species occurrences.

Summer Tanager at Brumley Nature – Photo by Bo Howes

TLC is partnering with New Hope Audubon (NHA) to conduct formal, seasonal bird surveys to understand the impact of TLC's management on local bird populations. Together we will lead bird hikes and educational events to highlight native plant species bene cial to birds, harmful invasive plant species, and TLC's restoration activities. We will also teach the community how to use the eBird app to record bird sightings.

eBird is a Cornell School of Ornithology citizen science project that uses data crowdsourced from birdwatchers worldwide. eBird collects various data points, like the type of species observed and the date, time, and where on the property the birds are seen. The system also allows volunteers to ag rare birds for further review.

Through eBird, TLC has baseline data for species presence and abundances. Continuing to use the app, NHA and TLC will be able to track the impact of our management e orts on bird populations while also contributing data that will allow Cornell and researchers around the world to better understand changes in bird populations as our environment continues to change.

Although the grant is only for one year, TLC will build upon the habitat work initiated by the project and carry it on into the future.

Restoring degraded lands takes time, hard work, and patience.

Thanks to Cornell's grant and together with NHA, we look forward to sharing the process with our community by hosting outreach and workday events on site. Stay tuned for ways to join us and make a visit to Brumley North during peak fall bird migration season!

DID YOU KNOW?

Indigo Buntings y about 1,200 miles each way between breeding grounds in eastern North America and wintering areas from southern Florida to northern South America.
Via eBird

Conserving More Farmland While Supporting Farmers Of Color

Good Ground Committee members Taij Cotten, Victoria Cotten, Clarenda “Cee” Stanley, Hector Lopez, Paige Jackson, and Mavis Gragg ank Kierra Hyman (center), Good Ground Associate at TLC.

North Carolina is on track to lose 1.2 million acres of farmland to development by 2040, with much of the farmland loss occurring in the Triangle, making it some of the most threatened in the nation. TLC seeks to increase our farmland protection e orts because with good stewardship, these lands can sequester carbon in the soil, protect water quality, and provide habitat for diverse wildlife and native species.

At the same time, rural African American families own just over 2.5 million acres of farmland, down from between 16 and 19 million in 1910. Some of the loss is due to urbanization, but much of the land was taken from Black farmers through threats of violence, lynching, and racist laws.

Black farmers make up only 1.2% of the country’s 3.4 million producers.

There is a direct link between the lack of generational wealth and economic disparities today.

TLC seeks to address issues of farmland loss while also confronting racial disparities in land ownership and wealth building by using a conservation tool called Buy/Conserve/Sell to launch the Good Ground Initiative (GGI). Although other land trusts have used the Buy/Conserve/Sell model, this is the rst time (that we know of) that a land trust has tried to use it to address centuries of racial injustices that a ect the distribution of land ownership.

First, TLC, or a conservation buyer, purchases farmland that is at risk of development. Then, TLC works with investors, eligible funding sources, and participating farmers to place a Working Lands Easement (https://tinyurl.com/WorkingLandsEasement) on the property. Easements are voluntary agreements between land trusts or other public agencies and landowners to permanently limit certain land uses (mainly, subdivision and development) to protect the conservation values of the land. The conservation values of each parcel of farmland are di erent, but generally provide wildlife habitat and safeguard clean water if properly managed (read more about TLC’s land conservation values: https://tinyurl.com/ConservationValues

Because the right to develop is permanently severed from the land, the appraised value of conserved property is much less than its fair market value, allowing TLC to sell it at a reduced price to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers and growers. Not only does this model allow TLC to conserve more farmland, but it also helps begin creating generational wealth for BIPOC families and communities.

Since 1983, TLC has protected almost 6,000 acres of farmland across the Triangle, primarily by working with landowners to protect the important conservation values of their land with a perpetual conservation easement. Increasingly, farmers need to sell their land faster than we can purchase a conservation easement.

A generous grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation provided funding for TLC to hire a Good Ground Associate and share what TLC learns with other land trusts around the state and country in hopes that it will be replicated.

Request For Proposals: Join The Good Ground Initiative

TLC is pleased to announce the Good Ground Initiative's Pilot Project and invite Socially Disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (a term used by the US Dept of Agriculture to describe Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) to apply to purchase the property at the reduced value resulting from the placement of a perpetual conservation easement. The program's 50-acre pilot property, Terry Road Farm, is in Hillsborough, NC. The property includes 25 acres of open cropland currently used to grow corn and soybeans in rotation. The farm's location and natural and man-made features make it a great property to launch the Good Ground Initiative.

About Terry Road Farm

Terry Road Farm sits in a high priority conservation area where the local governments help fund the purchase of conservation easements. Next to the farm lies 166 acres of forested land owned and managed by TLC and which is under a conservation easement.

The South Fork Little River, which feeds into the Little River Reservoir, constitutes the northern perimeter of the property. Because the Reservoir is a vital source of drinking water for the City of Durham, Durham's Watershed Protection Program is investing in a conservation easement that will protect the river and stop runo . The property also protects wildlife habitat in the area.

In addition to prime farmland, Terry Road Farm comes with a home built in 1976 with three bedrooms, 2.5 bathrooms, an attached garage, a separate workshop, and a pavilion for storing equipment. The individual(s) chosen to purchase this property may take advantage of these structures to live on site and carry out many farm-related enterprises.

Relying On Experts

The Good Ground Committee, pictured at le t, comprises a group of BIPOC produce and livestock farmers, food sovereignty advocates, capital investment experts, attorneys, and other community leaders. They will review landowner applications, conduct interviews with candidates, and make recommendations on ways to improve the GGI. Their expertise and perspectives have helped TLC connect with nancial institutions, farm support organizations, and a ordable housing experts to support future Good Ground farmers. Conversations with this group and others in the community have helped TLC understand the many challenges that BIPOC farmers face, as well as the resources available for them.

A grant from the Burt's Bees Foundation will allow TLC to develop habitat enhancement plans for GGI properties in consultation with the property's new owners selected through the request for proposals (RFP) process. The grant could provide help with transitioning properties to conservation-focused management with funds to remove invasive species, purchase native plants and soil enhancements, install fencing to keep livestock out of stream bu ers, and otherwise support participating farmers as they steward their land.

Our goal is to create a streamlined process that makes land ownership attainable for a range of BIPOC farmers and agriculturalists. We will continue to learn so we can improve this innovative program to conserve valuable farmland and connect BIPOC farmers with the community, partners and resources necessary for their success.

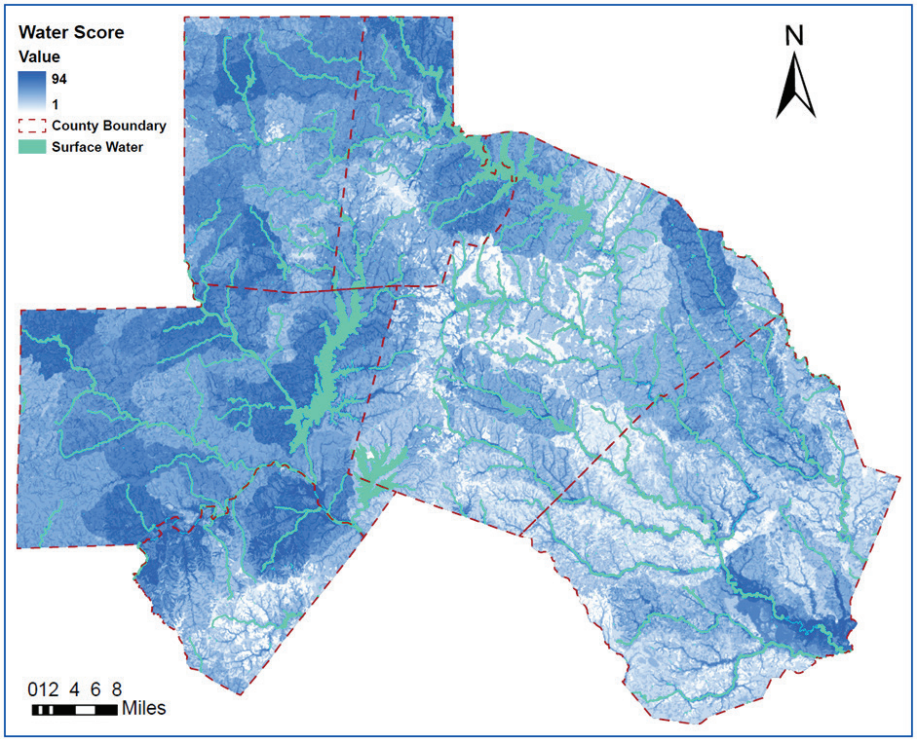
Prioritizing Land Protection

Analysis Done By Cole Wicker And Elsie Liu (TLC Interns From Duke University)

Rapid population growth in the Triangle is driving land loss at unprecedented levels, which is why TLC is accelerating the pace of conservation to preserve the highest quality areas of open space that remain. Due to the increased cost of land and the dwindling available open space, TLC must not only conserve more land more quickly, but must also more carefully prioritize in order to conserve the tracts with the highest conservation value before they are lost to development.

To this end, TLC sta and two summer interns recently conducted a region-wide geospatial conservation planning project to systematically identify the highest priority geographic areas for each of the four public bene ts of conservation outlined in TLC's mission: 1) safeguarding clean drinking water; 2) protecting natural habitats; 3) supporting farms and food; and 4) connecting people with nature. This analysis builds on previous analyses of current priority areas and gives TLC sta a tool to more e ectively evaluate tracts anywhere in our service region.

The results of this analysis also will help TLC identify speci c properties that are critical to advancing each of the four public bene ts to create a healthier and more vibrant Triangle region. TLC will then use this data to conduct proactive outreach to landowners in these areas, with the hope that some of them may be interested in conservation options. The example map on the right shows preliminary results of the safeguarding clean drinking water model and data analysis, and TLC will be working to re ne this work in the coming year. The data sources are already helping inform planning e orts across the Triangle.



The map above is a dra t of the Safeguarding Clean Drinking Water component of the analysis completed by Elsie Liu at Duke University.

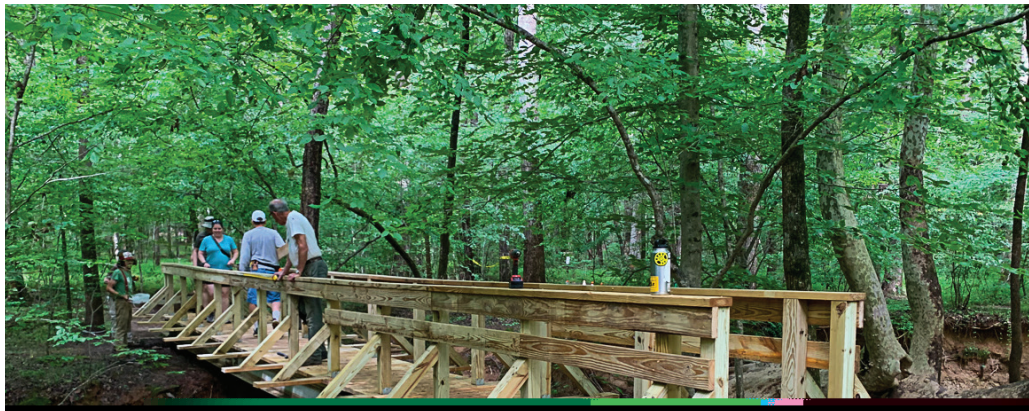
The areas in darker blue are the most important for clean drinking water, most of which align with TLC's existing priority areas. Once completed, all four layers will be added to the map.

Behind every eld, forest, trail, and structure at TLC's eight nature preserves is a team of people improving it for today's visitors (and tomorrow's too!) —and the work is never done. All the maintenance work across the preserves is the sole responsibility of TLC and we couldn't do the enormous job of keeping these green spaces beautiful and welcoming for both people and wildlife without the generosity of our community of members and volunteers!

For example, at Johnston Mill, we recently cleared numerous downed trees, installed trail markers, rebuilt a major bridge (pictured at right), and performed much needed trail maintenance. Soon we will install updated kiosk signage throughout the preserve which will feature improved maps to make it easier to navigate the Preserve. We have also added natural habitat and land history information to the signs and hope their durable and informative format will serve as a strong investment in the public's enjoyment of Johnston Mill.

At Brumley and Horton Grove, TLC is removing invasive species, re-establishing native plant communities, conducting bird surveys, and clearing downed trees.

At Swi t Creek Blu s, severe blockages caused by downed trees and other debris have increased localized ooding, accumulation of trash, and increased stream bank erosion that has forced trail closures.

To fund the maintenance and improvement work at Swi t Creek Blu s, we applied for and received a Stream Flow Rehabilitation Assistance Program grant. The North Carolina Soil and Water Conservation Commission funds projects that protect and restore the integrity of drainage infrastructure. TLC's stewardship team will lead e orts to remove the blockage to provide improved conditions along the stream and enhance the visitor experience.

TLC sta and volunteers are dedicated to being thoughtful stewards of the land entrusted in our care. If you are interested in volunteer opportunities at TLC, please visit: www.triangleland.org/give/volunteer.