

Wednesday, February 22, 2023

TO: Kumar Barve, Chair of the House Environment and Transportation Committee; and Committee Members

FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; and Cait Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst

POSITION: Support HB 631 - Natural Resources - Land Conservation - Establishment of Goals and Programs (Maryland the Beautiful Act)

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 631 offered by Delegate Stein. TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

TNC is part of a global effort to preserve the world's remaining wild and near-natural habitats, with the goal of protecting 30 percent of the planet by 2030. HB 631 sets state-wide land conservation goals for Maryland, aiming to protect 30% of lands by 2030 and 40% of lands by 2040. These goals will ensure that open space will be accessible and available for current and future generations of Marylanders.

HB 631 will create funding mechanisms for private land trusts to better compete in real estate markets. TNC uses a similar process as an organization - the Land Protection Fund – to prioritize and fund land acquisitions across our North America program. Creating a Revolving Loan Fund through HB 631 would enable small and medium sized private land trusts, which may not be able to purchase lands without financial assistance, to preserve critical lands quickly in Maryland. Allocating grant funding towards land trusts and community nonprofits will support these organizations in enhancing stewardship opportunities and improving the land health. HB 631 will preserve lands that will benefit people and nature for years to come.

Each year, the United States loses an area the size of Delaware to development and unsustainable use. This land and biodiversity loss can often be irreversible. Here in Maryland, the lands and waters that surround us are precious resources. They are an invaluable part of our heritage, our economy, and our identity. The Appalachians are one of the most resilient, diverse, and productive ecosystems on Earth. TNC has prioritized conservation across this ancient chain of forested mountains, valleys, wetlands and rivers as a global imperative due to the high biological diversity of species, the carbon stored in the forests and the rich history and culture of this landscape, beginning with the original Indigenous stewards. The section of the Appalachians running through West Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania are a critical corridor for species migrating in response to climate change. This section, known as the Allegheny Front, is a priority landscape to preserve the rich biodiversity of the larger Appalachian range as climate change drives species to move and adapt. Serving as a habitat bridge between vast conservation lands in the southern and northern Appalachians, the Allegheny Front plays a critical role in keeping this continental ecosystem connected.

Climate change and a wide range of human activities are impacting habitats at an unprecedented and unsustainable rate. The precipitous decline in biodiversity is one of our global greatest challenges; it is jeopardizing food and water supplies and undermining global, social and economic stability. Economists have estimated that nature contributes trillions of dollars to the global economy each year, in the form of ecosystem services such as pollination and water filtration and storage. By passing the Maryland the Beautiful Act, we can take marked steps to reverse biodiversity loss in our state in order to create a future where natural places can support the most vulnerable species and can continue to provide valuable ecosystem services on which state residents depend.

TNC commends Delegate Stein for advancing legislation aimed at protecting habitats to maintain Maryland's biodiversity and preserving treasured ecosystem services as well as nature's intrinsic cultural and physical values.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 631.