



ADOPTED
September 21, 2017

Strategic Plan
2018-2020

Our Mission

HeartLands Conservancy's mission is to connect, conserve, and restore the diverse natural and cultural resources that sustain the people and communities of southwestern Illinois.

Our Vision

We envision a future for southwestern Illinois where people, wildlife, and natural habitats thrive together because the community — private citizens, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies — has invested in the conservation of our natural places and resources.

Our Guiding Principles

The following guiding principles provide the foundation for all strategies, policies, and organizational decisions:

- **Integrity:** We strive for excellence and accountability in the development and delivery of our programs, products and services. We honor and uphold the trust placed in us by others and remain open, ethical and forthright in our activities.
- **Innovation:** We research and apply innovative technologies and practices in our programs.
- **Conservation:** We are committed to the conservation and stewardship of the region's natural and cultural resources for the environmental, social, and economic benefit of the region.
- **Data:** We use scientific research and reliable data to guide our decisions and to evaluate the results of our projects, policies, and initiatives.
- **Diversity & Inclusion:** We recognize that our differences make us stronger; therefore, we are committed to seeking out a diverse staff, board, volunteers, and membership that share our vision. We strive to include and engage a diverse spectrum of southern Illinois communities.
- **Collaboration:** We enthusiastically partner with others who share our vision and respect others with diverse viewpoints and perspectives.

Strategic Priority – Land & Water Conservation

Conserve Natural Areas, Farmland, and Cultural Resources. We will protect our region’s landscapes, waters and habitats—the places in southwestern Illinois that provide a healthy region for wildlife, plants, and people. Because of rapid development, we risk losing essential habitats, cultural resources, and restoration opportunities that will affect our quality of life forever. This closing window of opportunity demands that we work together, with immediacy, to ensure the character and resiliency of our region into the future. Our focus is to protect and restore biodiversity within natural areas, as well as, working farms and our region’s cultural resources.

GOALS:

1. Conserve rivers wetlands, streams, and the forests that surround them. Protect and restore lands that support the health of the Mississippi River, Kaskaskia River, as well as other creeks and rivers in our region.

○ Desired outcomes:

- Restoration of one significant wetland in the American Bottom (Judy’s Branch) watershed.
- Conservation of 2-3 properties containing significant riparian areas in the priority watersheds of Lower Kaskaskia River, Cahokia-Joachim, and Middle Kaskaskia River
- Restoration of riparian areas, stream banks, and associated forests in other watersheds as opportunities arise.

2. Conserve and restore oak-hickory forests and prairies. Protect lands that host vanishing native prairie and oak-hickory forest plants, animals, and insects.

○ Desired outcomes:

- Conservation of two to three properties containing prairie (prairies include black soil, hill, and sand primarily) and/or oak-hickory forest habitat in the Cahokia-Joachim, Lower and Middle Kaskaskia, Shoal, Peruque-Piasa (in coordination with other land trusts), and Upper Mississippi-Cape Girardeau watersheds. Locations are prioritized when they reduce habitat fragmentation, connect or expand habitat, or protect threatened habitat of significant size (40 acres or more).
- Conservation and restoration of two to three properties in the above watersheds for sand prairie habitat to support the state-threatened Illinois Chorus Frog, Ornate Box Turtle, Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake, Monarch Butterfly and other pollinators, and other threatened/endangered sand prairie plant and animal species.
- Establishment of long-term management practices for prairie and oak-hickory forest lands conserved by HeartLands Conservancy.
- A scientific oak species study is completed to understand causes of oak leaf wilt and tree death deep within our region’s natural areas so that appropriate action may be taken.

3. Conserve bluff, karst, and floodplain lands to protect water quality, reduce erosion, and provide habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife along the Mississippi River flyway and Kaskaskia River Bottomland Forest.

○ Desired outcomes:

- Working with the Middle Mississippi River Partnership and other partners, conservation of two to three Middle Mississippi River properties to restore floodplain function and improve water quality in the Mississippi River.
- Conservation, and restoration as needed, of two to three properties in the floodplain of the Mississippi River and/or Kaskaskia River to protect functional hydrology.

4. Conserve working farms and forests. Collaborate with partners and communities to protect working farms and managed forests, both of which support the local economy and families.

○ Desired outcomes:

- Two to three farms in the Cahokia-Joachim, Wood River, and/or Silver Creek watersheds have been protected.
- Forest management plans have been adopted and implemented on all of HeartLands conserved forest properties.
- A HeartLands Conservancy farmland protection strategy and implementation plan has been created.
- Worked with local farmers and other organizations to complete twenty (20) water quality/nutrient loss reduction projects as a part of the farmland protection strategy and water quality goals (see Healthy Communities priority).

5. Protect and steward HeartLands Conservancy's conserved lands in perpetuity. Ensure that our lands are restored, protected, and managed in a way that reflects our strategic land conservation vision.

○ Desired Outcomes:

- Increase the acreage of lands protected by 10% by 2020.
- Conservation lands and easements are monitored on an annual basis 100% of the time.
- Encroachments and easement violations are addressed in a timely manner and legal actions are avoided to the greatest extent possible.
- Restoration projects are complete within three years of acquisition.
- All HeartLands Conservancy fee-owned properties have up-to-date management plans.
- All HeartLands Conservancy conservation easements have baseline reports.
- Routine maintenance, including invasive species control, is implemented according to each property's management plan.

6. Conserve and elevate the rich cultural heritage of southwestern Illinois by collaborating and connecting natural resource conservation with historians, archaeologists, tribes, artists and communities.

○ Desired Outcomes:

- Designation of Cahokia Mounds as a National Historical Park.
- Conservation of one Mississippian Mound site.
- Extension of the Mounds Heritage Trail Plan.
- Installation of interpretive materials at HeartLands' fee-owned properties.

Strategic Priority – Resilient Communities

Build Healthy, Resilient Communities – We will improve the resiliency and quality of life of communities and rural areas in our region. We will assist communities in addressing complex development and environmental issues through planning and policy, ordinances, active outdoor recreation and natural resource guidance, restoration projects, education, and training. We will provide innovative programs for the diverse communities of our region – rural communities, legacy cities, and suburban growth centers.

Goals:

1. Partner with communities to manage existing and create new opportunities for outdoor recreation and active living.

○ Desired Outcomes:

- In partnership with local governments and agencies, developed two to three park/recreation master plans for communities and counties.
- In partnership with local governments and agencies, developed two to three bicycle and pedestrian master plans for communities and counties.

2. Work collaboratively in the region to improve water quality and air quality for the health of people in our region.

○ Desired Outcomes:

- Collaboratively created watershed plans for six HUC10 watersheds in southwestern Illinois.
- Collaboratively created landscape scale forestry roadmap for two counties in southwestern Illinois.

3. Promote strategic growth and investment in southwestern Illinois communities by assisting communities with planning, community visioning, and other policies that affect quality of life for all.

○ Desired Outcomes:

- Partnered with four to five communities on their comprehensive plan updates, community visioning efforts, and other policies.

4. Promote the use of natural solutions to manage stormwater (i.e. green infrastructure) and mitigate flooding to reduce costs of infrastructure and promote a healthier environment.

○ Desired Outcomes:

- Partnered with communities, counties, townships, and/or other agencies on two to three plans or projects that adopt or implement green infrastructure practices (beyond watershed planning).

- At least one educational event/workshop/seminar/field trip is conducted each year focused on green infrastructure.
- One additional project is completed from the East St. Louis & Vicinity Ecosystem Restoration and Flood Damage Reduction Study.

5. Work with communities and partners to increase access to nature, biodiversity, and opportunities for active, healthy living for all of us, but particularly neighborhoods lacking such opportunities.

○ Desired Outcomes:

- Worked with regional partners, such as the Missouri Botanical Garden and OneSTL Biodiversity Working Group, to create county-wide natural resource inventories in two to three counties.
- Completed four (4) vacant lot-to-native habitat restorations (Lots of Love) in communities experiencing disinvestment.
- Increased or established partnerships in legacy communities of Belleville, Alton, East St. Louis, Cahokia, Madison, Granite City, Wood River, and East Alton/Hartford/Roxana to help them integrate nature, biodiversity, and active recreation.

6. Refine and implement the regional green infrastructure plan, a framework for connecting the region's habitat, improving water quality, enhancing biodiversity, and restoring and conserving priority lands. Engage local communities, decision-makers, conservation organizations, natural resource agencies, and businesses to implement and refine the regional green infrastructure framework.

○ Desired Outcomes:

- Four to Five communities and/or counties have integrated the regional green infrastructure plan into their comprehensive plans.
- The regional green infrastructure framework has expanded to include Monroe, Randolph, Bond, Clinton and Washington Counties.

Strategic Priority – Engagement & Education

Engage People with Nature and Foster Connections to the Land – We will develop the next generation of conservationists in our region. We will engage a diverse spectrum of the public in an effort to illustrate the importance of our landscapes to our health, economy, and way of life through public access to properties as appropriate, recreational opportunities, stewardship activities, and educational programs. We will provide opportunities for all the people of our region to directly experience and enjoy the beauty, excitement, and value of our lands and waters.

Goals:

1. Increase community connection and support through public engagement with HeartLands Conservancy’s properties and activities. Provide recreational and educational access to conserved properties, where appropriate and feasible, while protecting fragile habitats and ecosystems.

○ Desired outcomes:

- Public access to HeartLands Conservancy properties are developed and implemented incrementally according to financial capabilities and organizational capacity.
- All fee-owned properties that will be owned by HeartLands Conservancy in perpetuity include interpretive and educational signage about the habitat and environment.
- At least one trek is held each season (4+ per year).
- Membership increases 5% each year and membership retention is above 80% year-to-year.

2. Strengthen and create new partnerships to achieve greater success by collaborating with businesses, community organizations, decision-makers, conservation groups, and agencies to share our skills, strengths, and volunteers, and collectively work to achieve a shared vision.

○ Desired outcomes:

- Collaborating scientists are involved with at least two restoration and monitoring projects.
- Collaborating organizations are consulted on every land acquisition transaction.

3. Engage diverse audiences in meaningful dialogue to foster a commitment to conservation. Share stories and experiences that resonate with the interests of the people in our region.

○ Desired outcomes:

- Compelling stories, using media and technology, are created that are tailored to identified audiences’ diverse interests.

- Ten to Twenty speaking engagements occur each year to civic groups, businesses, organizations, and partnerships, to expose HLC's work to other communities of interest.

4. Partner with youth organizations and schools to connect young people to HeartLands Conservancy's programs, projects, and properties for environmental education and scientific exploration.

○ Desired outcomes:

- Five to ten school events/field trips/explorations/work days, etc are conducted each year.
- Reach 200 students per year, with a preference toward multiple grade levels in multiple schools throughout the region.

5. Provide training and education to landowners, communities, volunteers, and inclusive audiences about land stewardship, outdoor safety and recreation skills, invasive and native species, and other natural and cultural resource issues.

○ Desired outcomes:

- A prioritized plan for education, outreach, and engagement is developed each year.
- Two to three educational seminars and skills-training workshops (such as chainsaw certification, prescribed fire training, canoe and kayak training) are held each year.
- Conservation easement holders are contacted and provided resources at least once each year.

Strategic Priority- Long-Term Organization Vitality

Ensure Long-Term Organizational and Financial Vitality – Because our mission is so critical to the health of people in our region, we must be financially and organizationally resilient for years to come. Our goal is to diversify funding sources. We will strive to become more targeted and innovative, seeking efficiencies and cost-sharing opportunities where possible. With collaboration as our cornerstone, the board and staff will work together to build conservation skills while we enhance organizational health and leadership.

Goals:

1. Increase and diversify funding from foundations, businesses, and individual donors.

○ Desired Outcomes:

- Unrestricted funds raised each year provide a surplus that provides a healthy reserve fund.
- 10 new major donors commit gifts of \$10,000 or above by 2020.
- One to three suitable projects are identified for targeted campaigns.
- Sustained or monthly giving program is established.
- Membership in the White Oak Society increases 20% by 2020.

2. Explore creative fundraising techniques.

○ Desired outcomes:

- 25% of funds raised come from third-party fundraisers and/or new demographic categories (such as “under 40”).

3. Manage financial assets prudently. Maintain and grow our stewardship endowment and unrestricted funds to ensure stable organizational resources.

○ Desired outcomes:

- The stewardship fund continues to grow at a level in which all conserved properties can be properly managed, monitored, and protected.
- A six-month operating reserve is realized by January 2020.

4. Strive for high levels of engagement and safety for staff, volunteers, participants, and visitors in all HeartLands Conservancy activities.

○ Desired outcomes:

- All staff and volunteers responsible for leading groups on our properties or projects have up-to-date first aid training.
- Safety is routinely discussed at events, work parties, projects, and staff meetings.
- No major incidents occur involving serious injury or fatality.

- All staff and volunteers applying pesticide to invasive species or running equipment, such as chainsaws, have proper certifications.

5. Maintain a high-quality work environment and retain excellent staff. Provide appropriate training, competitive employment benefits, and a supportive work environment.

○ Desired outcomes:

- An up-to-date training and succession/contingency plan is in place for all staff positions.
- Annual staff evaluations indicate high job satisfaction.
- Additional volunteers are secured to add capacity and maintain low overhead for outreach, events, stewardship, fundraising, etc.
- Each staff member attends at least one technical or soft skills training each year, based on the individual employee's needs.

6. Foster strong leadership and participation by the board of directors to achieve the organization's strategic priorities.

○ Desired outcomes:

- A plan for board member succession is in place and followed, such that a large pool of committed and qualified candidates has been recruited in advance and available for vacancies.
- New board and officer candidates are skilled and visionary leaders, are recruited six months in advance of vacancy, and plans are in place for smooth leadership transitions.
- Board members receive orientation within one month of joining the board.
- Board members receive relevant training in conservation trends, tools, nonprofit management, and fundraising twice per year.
- Board members have at least two opportunities per year for field visits at HLC's projects and properties.
- 90% of board members are in attendance at all quarterly board meetings.
- Board members evaluate their performance annually as a group and as individuals every 2 years.
- The board adopts a "give or get" fiduciary policy by 2019.

7. Cultivate an inclusive organizational culture, supported by a board of diverse and passionate leaders.

○ Desired outcomes:

- Postings for future job openings, and board member, internship and volunteer recruitment notices are advertised with diverse media and organizations to reach a broader pool of candidates.
- One to two outreach and educational programs per year target non-intentional users and non-intentional non-users of the outdoors. This demographic tends to include low-income landowners, landowners of color, and women.

- HeartLands Conservancy Executive Board is at least 50% women by 2020.
- HeartLands Conservancy Board of Directors is at least 33% people of color.
- Partnerships and/or relationships with two to three organizational leaders from organizations focused primarily on people of color are established.
- Staff, volunteers, and directors have participated in a diversity, inclusion and equity training.

8. Follow and adopt the standards set forth by the Land Trust Alliance. Strive for Land Trust accreditation.

- Desired outcomes:
 - Land Trust Alliance accreditation is achieved.
 - All Land Trust Alliance standards are adopted and implemented.

9. Locate our headquarters in a location that emulates our mission while providing efficiencies for staff and our clientele.

- Desired outcomes:
 - HeartLands Conservancy office moves to a new location that incorporates conservation, active recreation, biodiversity, and/or smart growth principles.
 - A feasibility study and capital campaign is conducted for the new headquarters.