

Testimony before the House Committee on Agriculture, Food Resiliency, & Forestry
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The Nature Conservancy is an international organization, located in more than 70 countries and all 50 states. TNC is a science-based, non-partisan organization focused on finding solutions for people and nature. TNC in Vermont has helped conserve more than 300,000 acres in Vermont, currently owns and manages more than 25,000 acres, and 23% of all Vermont state lands were initially acquired by TNC. Conservation is in our name and as an international organization focused on conserving and restoring our natural resources for the benefit of all people, TNC Vermont is excited to support the goals of H.126. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on it today.

As we consider our changing climate, alongside developmental needs and pressures the decade ahead presents, planning for biodiversity protection is an essential part of our survivability equation and has deeply rooted concerns regarding equity.

- Ecosystem conversion and resultant biodiversity collapse is a leading cause of pandemics;
- biodiversity loss threatens food security, which is already a pressing need in Vermont;
- loss of biodiversity and species abundance threatens our economic prosperity
 - 55% of GDP is reliant on healthy ecosystems and biodiversity;
- land conversion that reduces biodiversity also threatens our collective climate resilience;
- ...and more.

And yet, we know climate change and biodiversity loss are here and happening before our eyes.

- Globally, we've seen a decline in 68% of our vertebrate populations in the last 50 years alone.
 - The rate of species extinction is *at least* tens to hundreds times higher than averaged over the past 10 million years.
 - We've also seen an 82% decrease in mammal abundance since 1970.
 - In North America, we've seen a decrease in 3 *billion* birds since 1970.
- In Vermont, we've seen a 14% abundance loss in our forest bird species.
- The picture is even more dire for our freshwater vertebrate populations, which have declined by 84% since 1970, twice the rate of terrestrial or marine biome loss.
- Our species are moving northward 11mi northward and 36ft upslope each decade in order to find survivable habitat in a changing climate.
- And we know that Vermont is getting warmer (+2F) and wetter (+7.5") since 1990, which has major implications on our landscape, our communities, our health, and our economic sectors.

Recognizing these current impacts and worsening models, COP 15 held a Biodiversity Summit in Montreal in December to address the growing crisis of biodiversity collapse and the 188 participating governments adopted a Global Biodiversity Framework which includes a 30% conservation target for 2030. This framework, importantly, acknowledges the role that sustainably managed agricultural and forested lands play in conserving biodiversity while also increasing the productivity and resilience of these systems on which we all rely. Similarly, H.126 offers Vermont the opportunity to develop a thoughtful, statewide conservation plan centered on both biodiversity and community resilience.

Connectivity of habitat is essential to support biodiversity – true for both terrestrial and aquatic species. The findings of H.126 reference TNC’s cutting-edge Resilient & Connected Landscape science of Dr. Mark Anderson. This landscape scale mapping effort:

- was developed by a team of scientists specifically looking at biodiversity and climate resilience along and throughout the Eastern United States;
- identifies Vermont as a *keystone* geography in the northeastern corridor for species movement alongside climate trends;
- is fully contained within Vermont Conservation Design, reinforcing our most critical areas for habitat connectivity and biodiversity protection; and
- recognizes that although 57% of our state falls within this critical corridor, only 28% of the network has been conserved (using the USGS Gap 1-3 status as considered conserved).

“Investing in strategic conservation to increase the pace of permanent conservation towards 30x30” is one of the strategies in the Climate Action Plan, and doing so will not only support biodiversity, but will have measurable human and climate-related benefits:

- Improved flood resilience through headwater storage and connected floodplains
- Increased carbon sequestration and storage to meet our carbon reduction requirements
- Increased access to the outdoors and natural spaces for all Vermonters
- Improved air and water quality aiding in our collective public health
- Support for our natural and working lands economy
- Increased revenue in outdoor recreation sectors
- And more

The decade ahead of us is critical to meet the existential stakes of our dual crises of biodiversity loss and climate change through higher ambitions for the protection, management and restoration of nature.

It is also essential that as we collectively work towards these conservation targets, we are not solely focused on the “how much” but also the question of “where”.

- We must consider the essential factor of connectivity and prioritizing investments in those areas.
- Ensuring that investments in conservation are statewide to improve equitable access to nature and outdoor recreation.

We will need to be clear about our collective definition of conservation, acknowledging differing categories which increase wildlands and old growth forests alongside those that allow for sustainable management practices that support our natural and working lands economy while still yielding measurable biodiversity gains. H.126 recognizes the need for these thoughtful conversations to be had in the development of a conservation plan, with a list of key partners. Having this diverse group of partners come together to thoughtfully identify areas for conservation – and those areas that promote resilient community development – will be invaluable for planning at the state, regional, and local levels.

To close, creating clear targets for meeting 30% conserved lands by 2030 is going to take the collective effort of members of this body, Federal, state and local governments, the forestry and agricultural communities, NGOs, state, regional and local planners, private landowners and managers, and beyond. TNC is supportive of the role that conservation plays in biodiversity protection *and* community resilience, and thus supports the goals of H.126. Thank you.

