



NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

LAND TRUST

- STRATEGIC LAND PROTECTION PLAN -



FROM THE DIRECTOR

Northwest Arkansas is special. It is our home. It's where we live, work, play, and raise our families. And it is developing rapidly. What will our region look like tomorrow? What are we leaving to our children and our grandchildren? Will they enjoy the same quality of life that we do today?

The mission of the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust is to preserve and enhance quality of life through the permanent protection of land. We envision a region committed to saving land as essential to our vibrant communities and our future.

In 2018, we started the detailed process of developing a scientific, strategic land plan to help guide our land protection priorities. While the land trust will continue to protect land in all parts of our 13-county service region, this Plan provides a science-driven focus to ensure the wisest use of limited resources, and greatest impact toward achieving our mission.

Many hours were spent researching and analyzing land use data, collaborating with partners, and establishing these highest priority areas that, if kept natural, will do the very most for preserving clean water, protecting wildlife habitat, maintaining the scenic and outdoor character of our area, and creating a more climate-resilient future for our region.

We are proud and excited to share this document with you. Please join us in saving land today for the generations of tomorrow.



Best regards,

Terri Lane
Executive Director



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THIS PLAN IS DEDICATED TO CURRENT AND FUTURE RESIDENTS OF NORTHWEST ARKANSAS AND TO THE GENEROUS SUPPORTERS OF THE NORTHWEST ARKANSAS LAND TRUST.

SPECIAL THANKS TO THE LAND TRUST ALLIANCE, OPEN SPACE INSTITUTE, AND WALTON FAMILY FOUNDATION FOR THEIR SUPPORT OF THIS PROJECT.



PURPOSE OF THE PLAN

The lush forests, flowing rivers, rolling hills and scenic vistas of Northwest Arkansas provide life-sustaining benefits we cannot live without. Our natural lands give us clean water, fresh air, healthy wildlife habitat, access to locally grown foods, and places to escape the stress of daily life and connect with nature. These values are all important to our quality of life and protecting them depends on the success of a connected landscape vision.

As the area’s population grows from 600,000 today to one million by 2045, forests are turning into neighborhoods, farmland into shopping centers, and fencerows into highways. Today more than ever, it is critical that we save the places that sustain our high quality of life in Northwest Arkansas, before they are gone forever.

That’s why we are working across political boundaries to protect the larger ecosystems and natural processes upon which we all depend. In the absence of a coordinated, strategic effort, haphazard conservation will occur, resulting in conservation islands that do little to preserve our region’s important natural values over time. When landscapes are kept whole, however, wildlife can move to meet their seasonal needs, drinking water remains clean, and scenic views remain unspoiled.

ABOUT NORTHWEST ARKANSAS LAND TRUST

OUR MISSION

The mission of the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust is to preserve and enhance the quality of life in Northwest Arkansas through the permanent protection of land.

OUR VISION

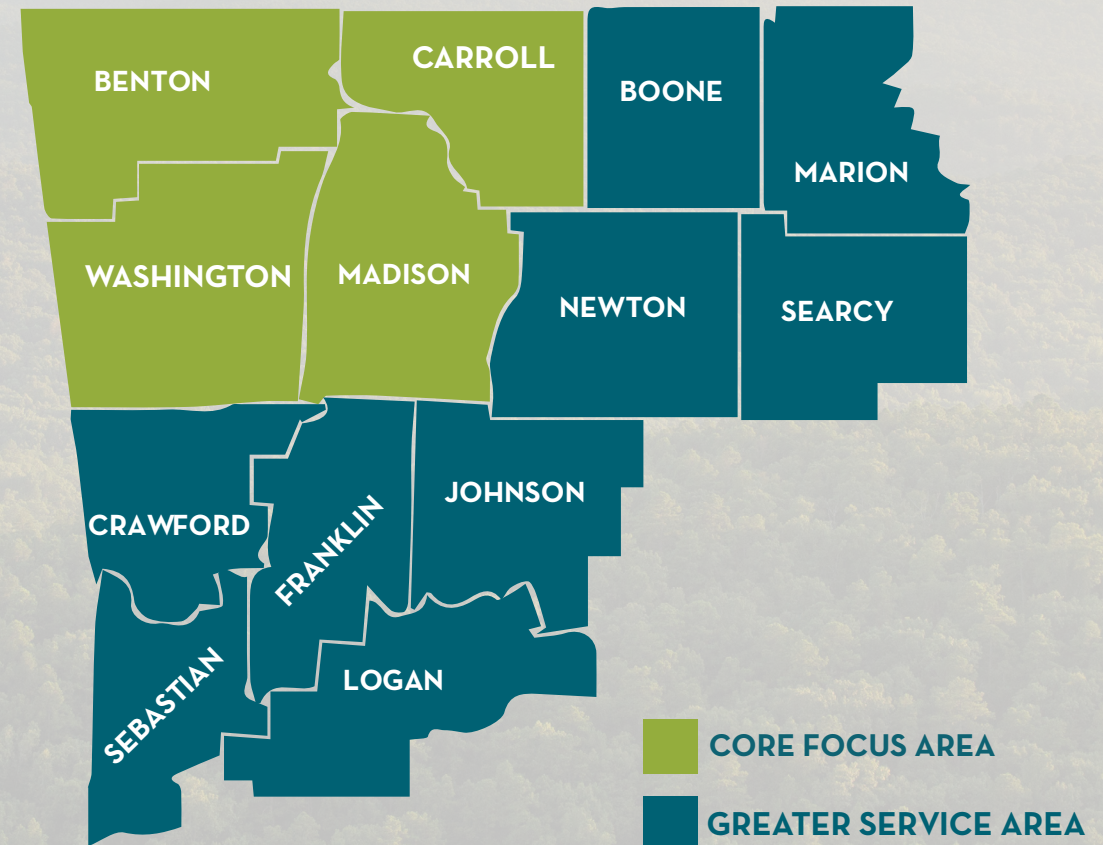
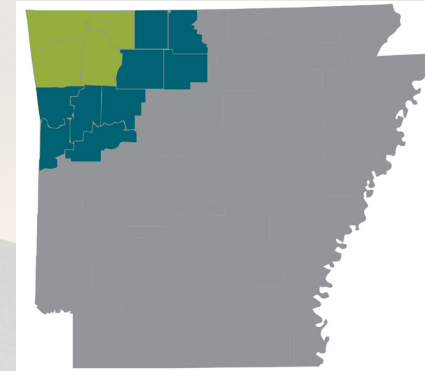
We envision a region committed to conserving land as essential to our vibrant communities and our future.

OUR ACCREDITATION

The Northwest Arkansas Land Trust is the first Accredited Land Trust in the state and in the region. Accreditation is a mark of distinction earned by meeting national standards set by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission for excellence, including sound finances, ethical conduct, responsible governance and lasting stewardship.



WHERE WE WORK



HOW WE WORK

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between the landowner and the land trust that limits certain mutually agreed upon uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values. An easement may apply to all or a portion of the property and need not require public access. The landowner continues to own and use their land and they can sell it or pass it on to their heirs. The terms of the conservation easement stay with the deed and are upheld by the land trust in perpetuity. The land trust is responsible for enforcing the terms of every easement it holds. Therefore, the land trust coordinates with current landowners and monitors the property on a regular basis (typically once a year or more) to determine that the terms of the conservation easement are being upheld.

FEE-SIMPLE

Fee-simple is the outright purchase or donation of the land. The landowner sells or donates all rights, title and interest in the property to the land trust, and the land trust takes responsibility for the management of the property and the protection of its conservation values in perpetuity. Landowners who live on

the property may choose to exclude their home and surrounding property as a “residential envelope” from the donation. Another option is to establish a “reserved life estate” when the landowner will continue living on and using their donated land for their lifetime. A landowner may also choose to donate their land through their will or a trust agreement with the land trust named as beneficiary.

LAND MANAGEMENT AND STEWARDSHIP

The land trust works to develop and implement land management plans to care for each property we own. Biomonitoring is a critical component of our land stewardship program for our preserves. Biomonitoring involves documenting the local ecology of the property, including habitat types, plant species and wildlife. The knowledge obtained in an ecological assessment informs smart land use decisions. The documentation of rare habitat or threatened species on a property can help guide decision-makers in selecting suitable locations for trail development while also informing areas in need of land stewardship efforts. The land trust works to restore native habitat, control invasive species, and provide sustainable public access where appropriate.



Landowner John Rule walks through Frog Bayou Preserve, a 151-acre property he donated to the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust in 2013.



OZARK HIGHLANDS

The Ozark Highlands tell an ancient story. Millions of years of erosion have created the rock cliffs and steep bluffs that offer sanctuary for a number of species that are only found here, and nowhere else on Earth. Forested valleys are dominated by oak-hickory woodlands. Many of our rolling hills were once grassland prairies, now rare in our developing area. The biological diversity of the Ozarks is not only found Above ground. Due to our karst topography, underground caves create unseen habitat for many of our region's endangered species. As water flows underground through these pathways, limestone bedrock helps filter pollutants before the water emerges in the form of springs that flow into our rivers. This diversity of life in the Ozarks is fostered by the unique geography of the region. The landscape serves as a transition zone between the Eastern Temperate Forests and the Great Plains, making it a critical connection for species migrating to other parts of the continental United States.

WHY SAVING LAND MATTERS



CLEAN DRINKING WATER

How and where we develop land in our region directly impacts our water quality. The loss of protective natural buffers, the filling of wetlands, the disturbance of streambanks and the development of floodplains all have an immediate, negative, and lasting impact on water quality. Research shows that when a watershed has more than 10% of land surfaces paved, there is a decline in water quality. Land protection is one of the most cost-effective ways to keep our water clean as our region continues to grow.



FARMLAND

Agriculture is an important economic driver in Northwest Arkansas and an important part of our cultural heritage. Total farmland in our region declined by 50% from 1997-2012 and the trend continues. The loss of agricultural lands and family farms increases regional dependence on an outsourced food supply. In addition to permanently protecting farmland, the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust launched a Farmland Initiative to connect farm seekers with landowners to keep working lands in working hands and support local food production.





Overlooking Rotten Bluff Hollow, a 725-acre property protected through a conservation easement with the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust in 2019.

PHOTO COURTESY PAUL GREEN

SCENIC AREAS

The Ozark Highlands are one of the last great wild mountainous landscapes in the central United States. Our natural areas are the backdrop to our lives. They bring a cultural and ecological connection to our communities. The mountains, valleys, rolling hills, streams, and bluffs that frame our region are the gateways to our communities. These landscapes remind us that we are home and help drive tourism, providing jobs and bringing revenue into our local economy.

WILDLIFE HABITAT

Connectivity of natural habitat areas is vital to the future of local wildlife populations. Habitat loss and fragmentation are among the leading causes of species decline. From rare salamander species to the black bear, wildlife need space for feeding, breeding, nesting, resting and seasonal migration. Core habitat blocks must be large enough to provide sufficient food, water, and cover, and offer few barriers to movement such as human development and intrusive activities. The protection of connected habitat areas is critical to preserving biodiversity, particularly as wildlife ranges shift in response to a changing climate.



OUTDOOR RECREATION

In Arkansas, outdoor recreation generates \$97 billion in spending annually. Our region has become a recreational hub for biking, fishing, hiking, boating, and bird watching. These activities reduce stress and keep us healthy. Protecting access to nature through land conservation ensures future generations will know, love and benefit from the natural beauty of Northwest Arkansas.

OUR IMPACT

Our impact outcomes are the results of the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust's work over time. These are the goals for the organization that describe the future character and condition of our region as a result of our work through several key focus areas. Our annual work plans support these long-term outcomes.



SIGNATURE LANDSCAPES

The scenic beauty that surrounds Northwest Arkansas is forever protected, preserving our region's identity.



WATER QUALITY

The region continues to supply clean, high-quality water for generations to come. We prioritize protecting lands throughout our watersheds and work with partners to enhance important aquatic and riparian habitats.



HEALTHY HABITATS & BIODIVERSITY

The natural heritage of our region and lands are preserved with less invasive species taking root. Wildlife habitat is protected, and native species thrive.



CLIMATE RESILIENCY

Land conservation makes Northwest Arkansas a more climate resilient region; a region that can better withstand and mitigate the current and future impacts of a changing climate.



CONNECTED LANDSCAPES

Strategic land protection ensures landscapes are kept whole, allowing movement of wildlife to meet their seasonal needs and leaving scenic views intact.



LOCAL FOOD & FARMS

Our farm heritage is preserved and our growing population is sustained by a healthy and robust regional food supply.



QUALITY OF LIFE

Residents and visitors regularly enjoy the many recreational and health benefits that access to that nature provides. Local communities are enhanced through smart growth and collaborations for conservation.



ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

The region continues to support job growth, attract talent and service a diverse and sustainable economy. Northwest Arkansas maintains a robust tourism and outdoor recreation industry.



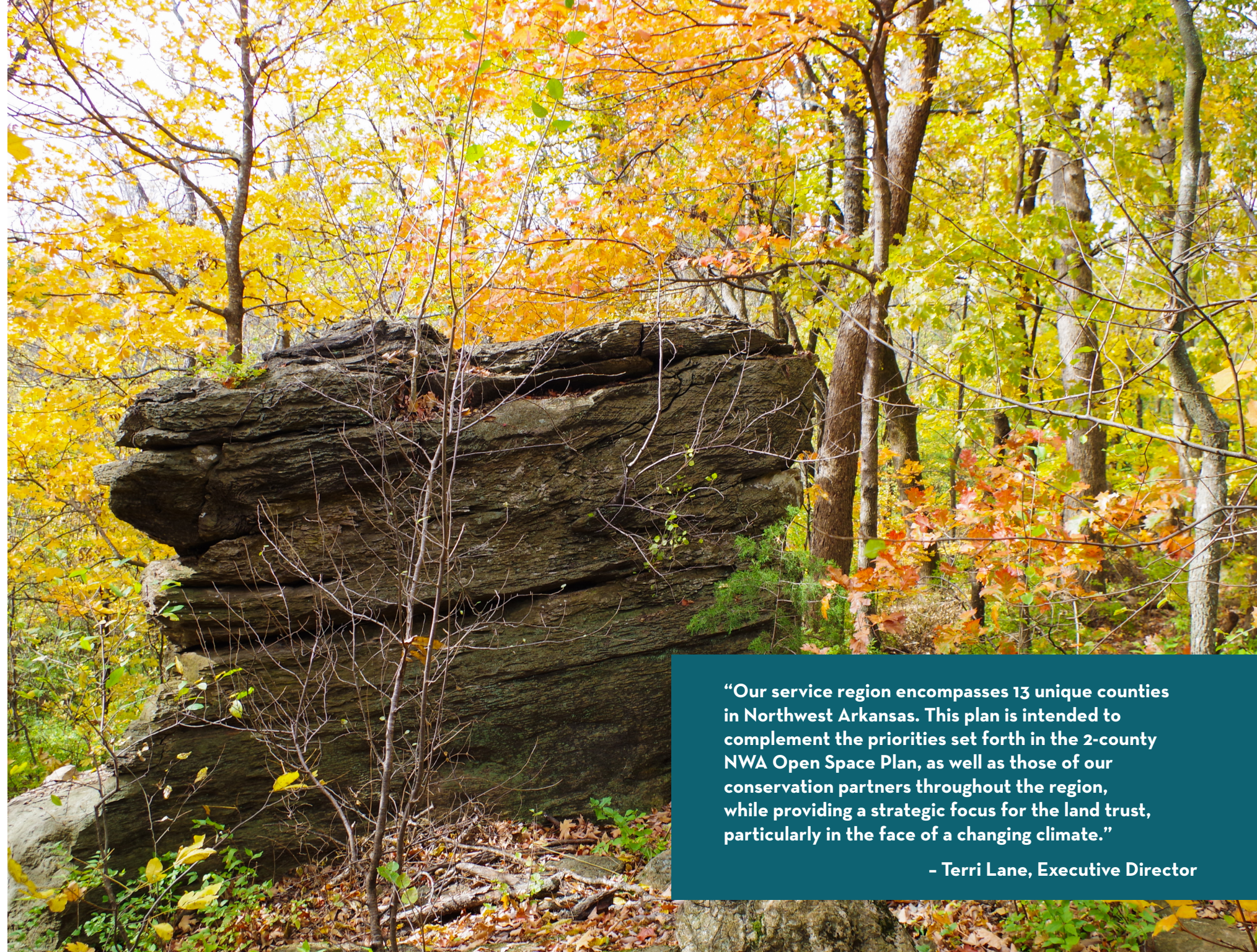
SOUND PUBLIC POLICIES

The public and economic benefits of conservation are clear and well known by elected officials and community leaders. We grow together as a region, sustaining our healthy ecosystems, natural heritage, or unique cultural identity.

SMART CONSERVATION LOOKING AHEAD

Landscape connectivity is critical in the face of climate change. Our region is expected to experience increases in flood events, drought, and temperature in the coming decades. Permanently protecting connected, diverse habitats throughout our region increases our climate resiliency - the ability of communities and ecosystems to withstand stress caused by these changing climate conditions. For example, protected natural areas slow stormwater and filter pollutants before they enter waterways, reducing negative impacts of flooding.

Science shows that not all landscapes are equal when it comes to resilience. Certain characteristics make a landscape more resilient than others. Habitats with diverse landforms create microclimates with different temperatures than the surrounding area where animals can seek relief from higher temperatures. Microclimates also create niche habitats for native plants that are less tolerant of heat. Different geologies provide the building blocks for different soils types, which also influences a site's resiliency. Our strategic plan identifies and prioritizes vital resilient landscapes in our region.



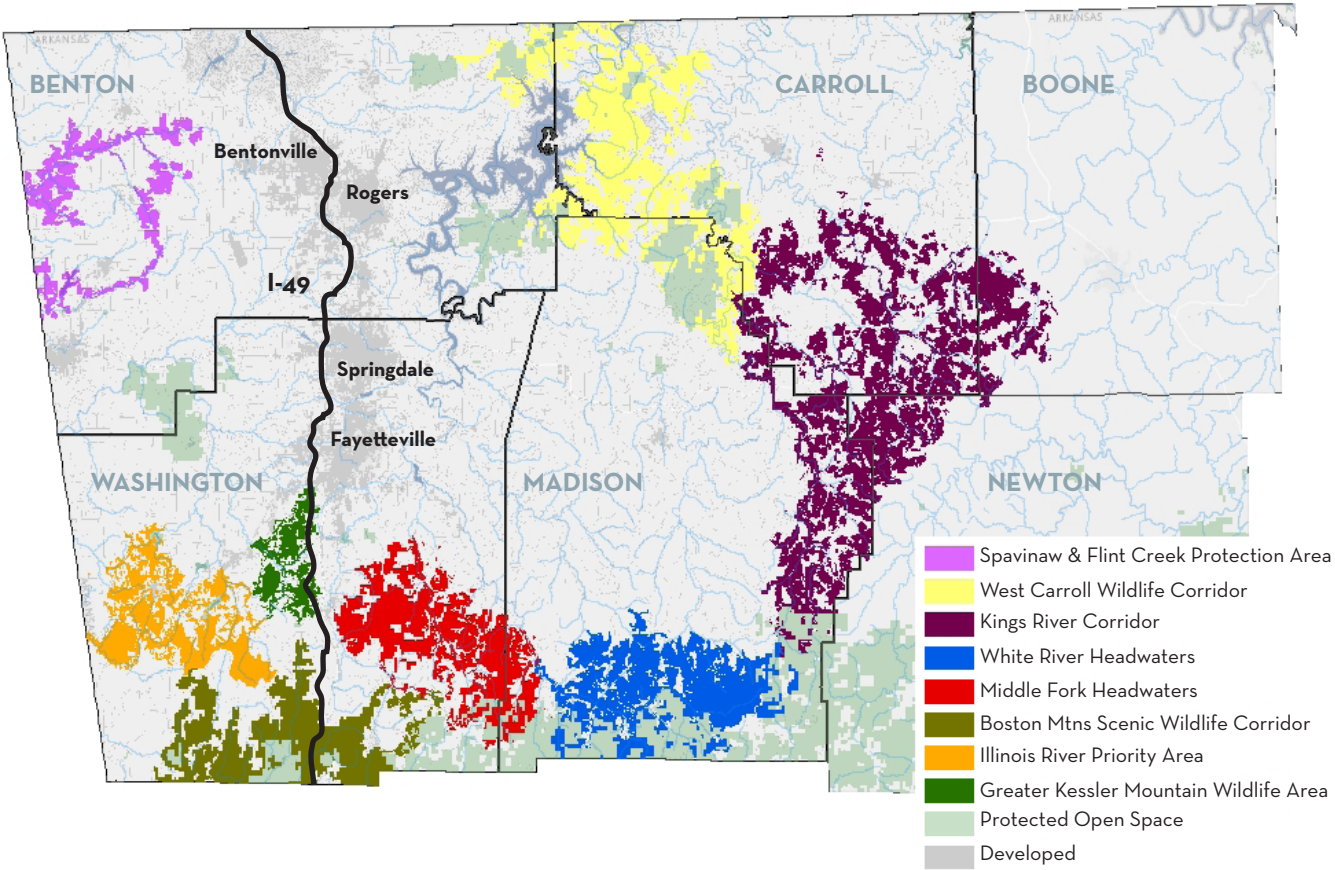
“Our service region encompasses 13 unique counties in Northwest Arkansas. This plan is intended to complement the priorities set forth in the 2-county NWA Open Space Plan, as well as those of our conservation partners throughout the region, while providing a strategic focus for the land trust, particularly in the face of a changing climate.”

– Terri Lane, Executive Director



IDENTIFYING PRIORITY LANDSCAPES

We utilized complex Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis to identify critical areas for conservation in our service region. By mapping and analyzing existing natural resources and landscape characteristics, we identified the natural areas that are the most important for maintaining long-term biodiversity and clean water while also identifying important soils for farming, scenic areas and places for recreation. The analysis included science-driven datasets for resilient landscapes, ensuring our efforts today will have a meaningful impact in the future.



Eight different priority regions have been identified in the plan. Though these areas have distinct characteristics, each of the identified landscapes serve as an important piece of the greater whole. The priority areas complement each other, expanding existing protected habitat anchors and connecting undeveloped, resilient lands in our region. They also provide vital links to important habitat areas throughout Arkansas and into surrounding states.



SPAVINAW AND FLINT CREEK PROTECTION AREA

The Spavinaw Watershed supplies drinking water for Tulsa, Oklahoma and Flint Creek is a tributary to the Illinois River. In addition to high quality forested habitat, this priority area includes large amounts of prime farmland soils. Agriculture is a strong economic driver in Benton County. Protecting our region's productive farmland ensures local food security and provides future farmers the opportunity to access land for their farm operations.



WEST CARROLL WILDLIFE CORRIDOR

The West Carroll Wildlife Corridor serves as the main hub connecting Mark Twain National Forest in Southern Missouri to natural areas in Benton and Carroll counties. Our efforts in this priority region build off anchor habitats that have been protected by our partners in conservation - The Nature Conservancy, Arkansas Game and Fish and Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. The area affords rugged steep bluffs and stunning views. The lands include Beaver Lake Tailwaters, which is famous for clean water and trout fishing. It also includes landscapes around a portion of the Kings River, connecting to our Kings River Corridor.



KINGS RIVER CORRIDOR

The lands in the Kings River Corridor create our largest and most rural priority region. This landscape serves as an important north-south connection between intact forests and protected lands within our service region. The area includes a riparian corridor along the Kings River and connects to the Buffalo River watershed in Newton County. The landscape includes forested habitat and important agricultural areas. This corridor is an important bridge for wildlife. It not only facilitates movement throughout our region, but also serves as a vital link for wildlife moving through our region to other habitats in the continental United States, maximizing the scale and impact of our conservation efforts.

PHOTO COURTESY CORY BURBIDGE



WHITE RIVER HEADWATERS

Though most of this priority region falls within the White River watershed, the lands protect headwaters for both the White River and the Kings River. Protecting forests around the source of rivers and streams is critical for protecting water quality and managing drinking water treatment costs. Research has shown that greater forest protection in upstream watersheds produces lower water treatment costs for end users. It is estimated that treating drinking water from an unprotected watershed can cost ten times more than treating water from a protected watershed. The White River flows into Beaver Lake, the drinking water source for approximately 500,000 residents. The Kings River provides drinking water to communities in Arkansas and Missouri. With population in Northwest Arkansas expected to reach 1 million residents by 2045, it is imperative that we act now to protect our drinking water before it is too late.

MIDDLE FORK WHITE RIVER HEADWATERS

The Middle Fork White River Headwaters has been identified as a high priority area for protecting water quality in Beaver Lake. This area is under development pressure as population increases and our urban areas expand. Approximately 15.5 miles of the Middle Fork White River is classified as having impaired water quality. Land protection is a best management practice that will help protect against further declines in water quality in this area.



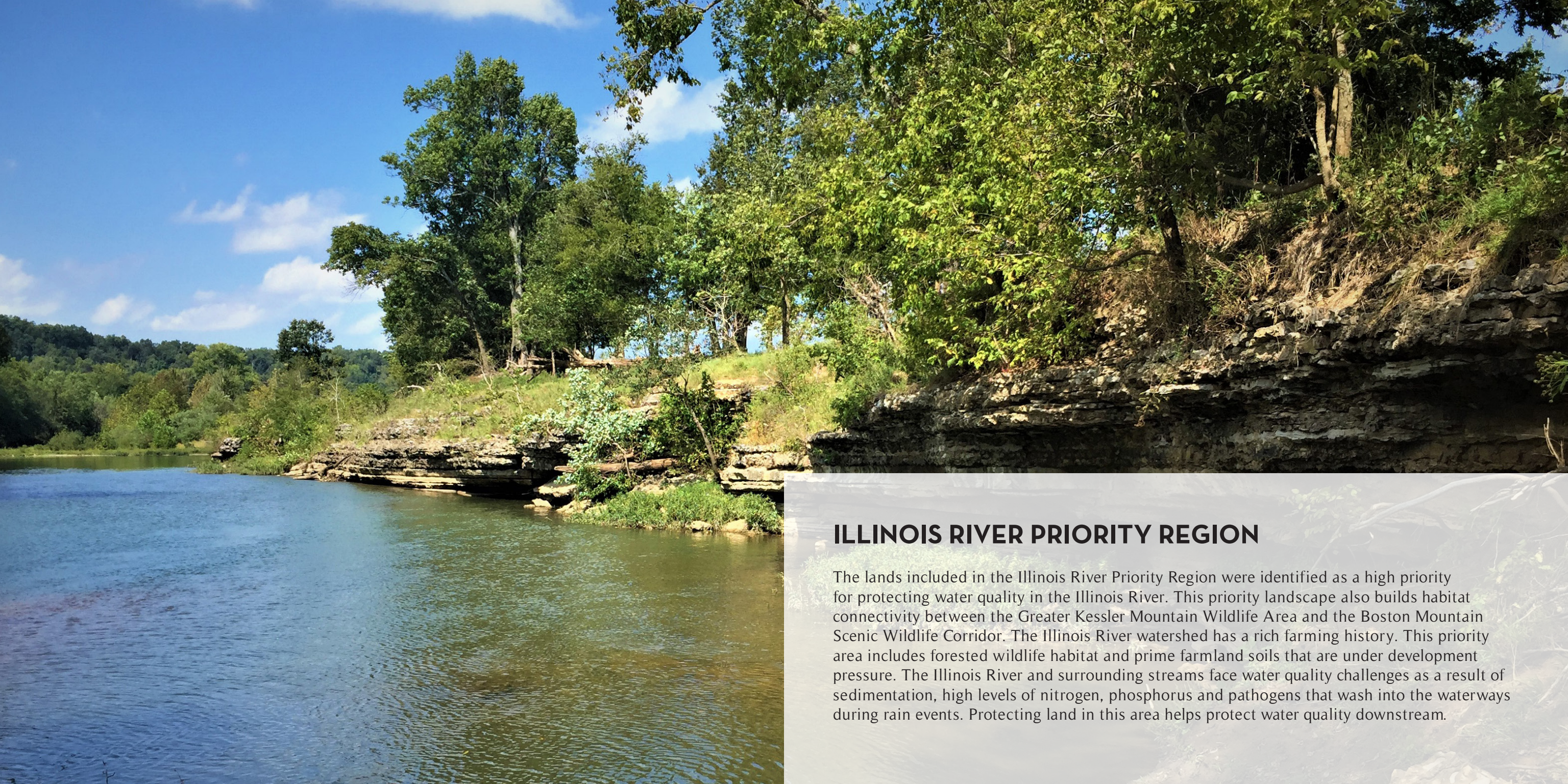
PHOTO COURTESY MELISSA BOYTE

BOSTON MOUNTAINS SCENIC WILDLIFE CORRIDOR

Nestled in southern Washington County, the Boston Mountains Scenic Wildlife Corridor encompasses the southern gateway to Northwest Arkansas. Residents and visitors are greeted by stunning scenery as they travel along I-49, one of Arkansas's designated Scenic Byways. The view of rolling hills and forests seems to go on forever. This corridor is part of a vast network of largely intact forest which connects to protected public lands in the east and west, including a 1,000-acre core habitat that has been successfully protected by the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust. This area includes a critical link for wildlife moving under the highway and through this wilderness. The lands in this corridor have a high potential for rural development and timber harvesting if not protected. According to US Fish & Wildlife Service, development and land conversion could impact rare and threatened plant and animal species, including three endangered bat species.

PHOTO COURTESY PAUL GREEN





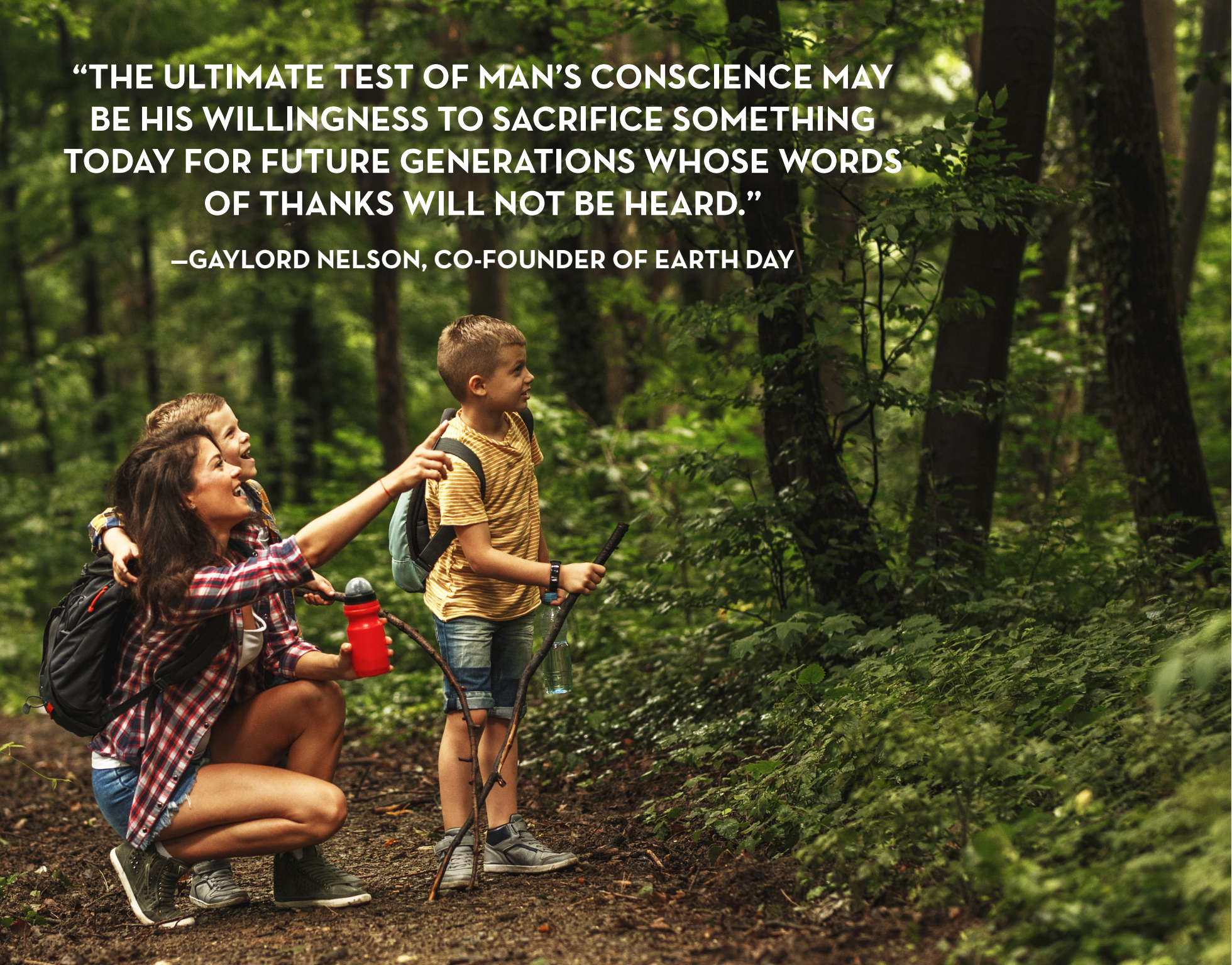
ILLINOIS RIVER PRIORITY REGION

The lands included in the Illinois River Priority Region were identified as a high priority for protecting water quality in the Illinois River. This priority landscape also builds habitat connectivity between the Greater Kessler Mountain Wildlife Area and the Boston Mountain Scenic Wildlife Corridor. The Illinois River watershed has a rich farming history. This priority area includes forested wildlife habitat and prime farmland soils that are under development pressure. The Illinois River and surrounding streams face water quality challenges as a result of sedimentation, high levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and pathogens that wash into the waterways during rain events. Protecting land in this area helps protect water quality downstream.



GREATER KESSLER MOUNTAIN WILDLIFE AREA

Named for the most well-known of the mountains in this chain, the Greater Kessler Mountain Wildlife Area stretches across Washington, Kessler, Miller and Stevenson Mountains, creating over 10,000 acres of connected habitat for wildlife. The unique geology and topography of this area provides a variety of habitat types, including old growth forest, oak woodlands, bluffs, shale barrens, and riparian forest, as well as groundwater resources evidenced by the many seeps and springs found in the area. The ridgelines in the Greater Kessler Mountain Wildlife Area are the dividing point between the Illinois River watershed and the White River watershed making it an important area for water quality in both watersheds. The Northwest Arkansas Land Trust has successfully protected over 700 acres in this corridor so far.



“THE ULTIMATE TEST OF MAN’S CONSCIENCE MAY
BE HIS WILLINGNESS TO SACRIFICE SOMETHING
TODAY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS WHOSE WORDS
OF THANKS WILL NOT BE HEARD.”

—GAYLORD NELSON, CO-FOUNDER OF EARTH DAY

HELP SAVE LAND

Thanks to the support and leadership of so many, the Northwest Arkansas Land Trust has worked continuously over the last two decades to save the places that matter most to our community. With the guidance of this updated Strategic Land Protection Plan we are prepared to increase the rate of land protection in our region, but we cannot do it without the support of people like you. **We invite you to join us in our critical mission to protect the places that sustain our high quality of life in Northwest Arkansas, before they are gone forever.**

DONATE TO SUPPORT CONSERVATION IN
NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

CONSERVE YOUR LAND WITH US

BECOME A MEMBER OF THE LAND TRUST

VOLUNTEER YOUR TIME

ADOPT A PRESERVE

PLAN A LEGACY GIFT

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LAND TRUST

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