

A photograph of a forest path with two people walking away, framed by a white square border. The path is covered in fallen leaves, and the trees are tall and slender, with sunlight filtering through the canopy.

# Natural Areas Conservancy

**ANNUAL REPORT 2022**



# A Letter from the Board Chair



Welcome to the Natural Areas Conservancy's 2022 Annual Report. It comes at an important time in our history, as we wrap up our first ten years of work and prepare for critical opportunities and challenges to come.

Our mission during the past decade has been to preserve and sustain the sizable natural areas—forests, trails, and wetlands—that exist in New York City and other major U.S. cities.

With less than 1% of New York City's budget allocated to the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (and a tiny fraction of that amount devoted to natural areas care), the NAC plays a critical role in preserving these priceless natural resources and improving them for future generations.

Last year, we developed our first strategic plan to guide our work over the next three years and to ensure that we realize our vision for the future. In that vision, urban natural areas are embraced as a solution to many of the pressing issues of our time, rather than being considered an afterthought. We identified the following programs to advance our mission: 1) conduct applied research; 2) advocate for forests and wetlands; 3) host high-impact internships; 4) develop a citywide trail network; and 5) convene a 17-city national network of practitioners. Together, we believe these efforts will have a strong positive impact on our local communities, New York City, and urban areas across the country.

As Chairman, I work closely with our Board of Directors and the NAC's staff to ensure organizational excellence. That means a strong and committed board, rigorous management practices, a healthy and diverse funding base, and a clear sense of purpose. It means measuring our success and taking responsibility for results. And it means asking tough questions of ourselves to ensure that we effectively leverage the funding support we receive.

On behalf of the NAC, I thank our funders, our board members, our staff, and NYC Parks for their efforts on behalf of our environment. I look forward to an exciting period of growth and success in 2023 and the coming years.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Wallach". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Andrew Wallach**  
*Board Chair*



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# A Letter from the Executive Director



Eleven years ago, we launched the Natural Areas Conservancy with the conviction that New York City’s forests, grasslands, and wetlands are critical resources and that every New Yorker deserves to enjoy them. The mission of the NAC has always been deeply personal for me. Growing up in the Bronx during a period of historic disinvestment in our City’s park system, I experienced first hand the negative impacts that communities are subject to when they are cut off from parks and local nature. After spending my twenties living and working in rural areas, I returned to New York energized by the work of elevating the visibility of our natural areas, investing in their management, and making them accessible to all New Yorkers.

New York City’s greenspaces have stood as our natural bulwark—particularly during the tumultuous past decade—sheltering us from the impacts of the climate crisis or lending quiet comfort when we are alone. Our parks, holding thousands of acres of forests and wetlands, have proven their worth time and again in keeping our city whole.

Since its founding, the NAC has dedicated itself to preserving these natural areas. Born in the midst of the MillionTreesNYC initiative, the NAC grew to be a leading advocate for our city’s forests and wetlands. In its first years, the NAC turned breakthrough research into transformational policies and plans meant to incorporate natural areas into the city’s operational fold and connect residents to nature. Looking ahead, we saw New York City’s youth as crucial to building the next generation of environmental leaders, and created a student internship program in partnership with the City University of New York. Knowing we can only go so far together, we formed the Forests in Cities Program with teams from 17 urban areas across the country to share knowledge on bolstering urban natural areas and adapting for the future. And always, we are pushing for New York City leadership to confront a legacy of environmental neglect, and are working to prove this great urban resource is worthy of care and investment.

We have made it this far only because New Yorkers believe this is the right way forward. We have many to thank, including our partners at the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, New Yorkers for Parks, and fellow park conservancies, as well as our donors, volunteers, and lovers of nature and the city.

**Sarah Charlop-Powers**  
*Executive Director*

# A Letter from the Commissioner



New York City is home to nearly 20,000 acres of natural areas, with over 12,000 acres under the jurisdiction of NYC Parks. They can be found in every borough—towering forests and vibrant salt marshes that are as quintessentially New York as the Chrysler Building or Yankee Stadium. Every day they are there for us—cleaning the air, protecting our homes from storms, providing spaces for us to interact with nature. During the early days of COVID quarantine, our parks and their natural areas stood strong for us in a time of uncertainty. I am proud to live in a city with such majesty.

That pride carries over to the NYC Parks staff who care for these spaces every day. I am talking about the Park administrators who know every bend of trail by heart, the landscape architects who design enduring restorations of long neglected sites, and the crews who do the hard work of managing problematic species and planting the next generation of forest canopy. I also must commend the New Yorkers who come out to our volunteer events whether they are helping for an afternoon or have committed to caring for an acre on their own.

But we would not be where we are today without the crucial support of the Natural Areas Conservancy. Their contribution in research and advocacy have brought our natural spaces into the spotlight as essential to a healthy and resilient New York City. Since 2012, we have made strides together in assessing the health of our forests and wetlands, we have jointly created foundational plans that outline management and protection for decades to come, and we are building a world-class trail network providing access to nature for communities across the City. The NAC’s work with the Forests in Cities Program has made NYC a national leader in urban forest research, bringing together urban forest professionals from across the country to share best practices and case studies. I am excited about recent research that proves Parks’ natural areas are doing the work when it comes to carbon sequestration and cooling, and the added potential if these spaces are managed and cared for in the long term.

The next decade will bring fresh challenges. We will need to confront the worsening impacts of the climate crisis—dangerous heat, sea level rise, hurricanes, biodiversity loss. I look forward to our continuing partnership with the Natural Areas Conservancy as we find our way forward together.

**Sue Donoghue**  
*Commissioner of NYC Parks, ex officio*



# 10 Years of the Natural Areas Conservancy

**2012**

## The Natural Areas Conservancy Is Created

The organization is founded as New York City's first and only park conservancy dedicated to researching, managing, and advocating for the city's natural areas.

**2014**

## Launched Groundbreaking Research Program

We conducted the first ecological assessment of 10,000 acres of forests and wetlands — collecting data that informs the care for NYC's natural areas.

**2016**

## Training the Next Generation of Conservation Leaders

We developed an innovative partnership with CUNY to equip college students with the technical training needed to advance in environmental careers through paid internships. We have impacted over 80 students with this program!

**2018**

## Released the Forest Management Framework

With NYC Parks, we released a 25-year plan to bolster and protect NYC's vital urban forests— the first citywide vision for this critical infrastructure.

**2020**

## Championed greenspace during the COVID-19 pandemic

While staying safe, our staff kept working on NYC's nature trails, produced breakthrough research about the importance of healthy natural areas for public health, and continued to advocate for public greenspace despite the hardship of the global pandemic.

**2022**

## Leveraging Research to Mitigate Climate Change

Our scientists published research connecting healthy natural areas to greater cooling during the hot summer months. This builds on the release of the first comprehensive report on carbon stored in NYC's forests. We hope this information will advance management and motivate policymakers to ensure forests survive more severe weather.

**2015**

## Expanding Access to NYC's Nature Trails

We launched a program to care for nature trails in Marine Park and Bronx Park. Its success paved the way for our current program that now operates in over 25 NYC parks!

**2017**

## Connecting New Yorkers to Nature

We expanded our work on NYC's nature trails to new parks and launched programming to connect New Yorkers to these restorative spaces. Since then, we have engaged 2,500+ volunteers and formalized 150 miles of trail.

**2019**

## Launched the Forests in Cities National Network

We created a network to promote healthy forests in cities across the United States, bringing together professionals from over 15 major cities to strengthen research, share information, and collaborate.

**2021**

## Advocating for Natural Areas

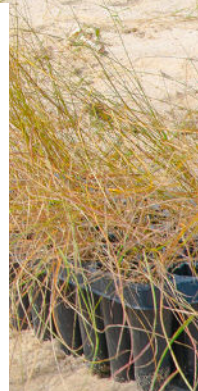
The NAC's Executive Director was appointed to Mayor Adams' transition team — and is a leading voice for nature and natural climate solutions. We also released the Wetlands Management Framework, which outlines a plan for care for the city's wetlands for the next 30 years.



**2013**

## Rebuilding After Superstorm Sandy

After Superstorm Sandy, the NAC partnered with NYC Parks to lead restoration efforts and revitalize miles of coastline.





Staff and interns measuring a tree in Conference House Park as part of revisiting research plots established during the Ecological Assessment in 2013

# SCIENCE THAT'S MAKING AN IMPACT

## Research and Collaboration

The Natural Areas Conservancy is leading research initiatives to raise awareness about the value of natural areas, and explore ways to effectively manage and conserve our forests and wetlands.

In New York City, we have partnered with the Yale School of the Environment and the Central Park Conservancy to launch the Central Park Climate Lab. This new

initiative studies the on-the-ground impacts of climate change in urban parks and seeks to understand how greenspaces can be used to create more resilient futures.

*“Our research has highlighted the outsized role that natural areas can play as a natural climate solution in cities and how critical it is to maintain healthy ecosystems to maximize these benefits for all city residents.”*  
— Clara Pregitzer, Deputy Director of Conservation Science

The NAC's Forests in Cities network worked beyond New York City to foster healthy natural forests in cities across America. In 2022, the network grew from 12 to 17 cities, and shared findings on innovative land management practices and new science that point to a new frontier of urban forest stewardship.

*“When interacting in Forests in Cities Network meetings, I feel a strong sense of the community of practice. It makes me feel happy and*

**The Forests in Cities (FiC) Program holds an annual workshop every year to share new knowledge in the field and update the network on ongoing projects.** In 2022, the NAC convened with FiC partners in Seattle, WA. Workshop leaders fostered peer-to-peer learning between urban forest natural areas practitioners, and shared outcomes from a network-wide cooling study.

*more confident in my work. I'm always learning new facts and concepts to explore and apply.”*  
— James Duncan, Forests in Cities Network member from Miami, FL

In the summer of 2022, the Forests in Cities network launched a study to measure how urban natural areas keep cities cool across 12 cities. Researchers monitored differences in temperature across natural and built landscapes, and examined if healthier forest and wetland ecosystems help mitigate urban heat. ■



top photo: Lawrence Sumulong; bottom photo: Sarah Schu

## Reports & Peer Reviewed Articles

On the local level, the NAC research has evolved into consequential recommendations for New York City government. This includes our [Forest Management Framework](#) (2018), [Strategic Trails Plan for NYC](#) (2020), and [Wetlands Management Framework](#) (2021) – each providing a roadmap for park management rooted in data and science.

## PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

**[Estimating carbon storage in urban forests of New York City. Pregitzer. 2022.](#)**



Did you know that the majority of carbon stored in NYC's forests are found in natural areas? Natural areas make up to one fourth of the tree canopy but store 70% of the carbon in all trees in NYC. Natural areas store more than four times as much carbon as all of NYC's street trees.

**[Diverging conditions of current and potential future urban forest patches. Doroski et al. 2022.](#)**



In forests in New Haven, CT, the larger the forest patch, the greater the proportion of native species across all forest layers. This highlights the importance of conservation of large forest patches.

**[Native tree seedling growth and physiology responds to variable soil conditions of urban natural areas. Sonti et al. 2022.](#)**



Soil is critical to tree seedling growth and survival! We found that tree seedlings planted in New York City soil performed best in the least disturbed sites and highly disturbed,





Measuring bearing capacity of a salt marsh to assess opportunities for future restoration in 2022

nutrient-poor urban soil types led to slower growth and less healthy tree seedlings. This highlights the fact that it could take more work and care to restore disturbed sites that have degraded soils.

## REPORTS

### Urban Silviculture: Managing and Restoring Forests in Cities. Wienke et al. 2022.

**FUN FACT** While many may think of cutting trees down as harmful to forests, the practice of thinning, or selectively removing trees in a crowded forest patch, can help reset the trajectory of a forest stand. This can make natural forests better adapted to a changing climate and encourage natural regeneration.

### Forests in Cities Resource Library

**FUN FACT** Did you know that cities across the U.S. are using creative and innovative methods to keep their urban forested natural areas thriving? For example, the city of Indianapolis, IN, deploys sharp shooters to keep the local deer population in check, and create a sustainable food source.

### IPCC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Chapter 8.

The NAC contributed ground-breaking research to the 2022 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report. Chapter eight of the report features new data from the NAC detailing the capacity of New York City's 7,300 acres of forested natural areas to store and sequester carbon — a leading cause of climate change. ■

## Leveraging Research To Become Effective Advocates

In 2022, NAC supported several advocacy initiatives across New York City, New York State, and the country.

Locally, we advocated for the Freshwater Wetlands Act, which now brings an additional one million acres of at-risk wetlands under regulatory protection.

On the national level, the NAC has become a trusted expert on natural areas. In partnership with the Forests in Cities network, we summarized common challenges and opportunities to improve the resilience of natural areas broadly and communicated them to decision makers in regional, national, and international audiences. The NAC created 12 fact sheets for cities within the network, and conducted a needs assessment to directly address federal funding opportunities such as the Inflation Reduction Act.

Our Executive Director, Sarah Charlop-Powers, continues to serve as a trusted voice advocating on behalf of nature in New York City. After serving as a member of Mayor Eric Adams' transition team, this year Sarah partnered with New Yorkers For Parks' #PlayFair campaign to secure \$2.5 million in funding for the city's natural area parks. ■

The Natural Areas Conservancy rallied the crowd at the NYC Youth Climate March (1) and outlined Nature Goals at an event hosted by REI (2), both in 2019. In 2022, the NAC joined New Yorkers for Parks and other advocates at City Hall to call for 1% of the city budget to be earmarked for NYC Parks (3).





Diana during a salt marsh restoration assessment in 2022

# TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF CONSERVATION LEADERS

## An Internship Program Unlike Any Other

The Natural Areas Conservancy has provided 140 paid internships to nearly 100 students from the City University of New York (CUNY). This year-round program provides unique opportunities for students to conduct conservation research in New York City's natural areas.

This year, NAC interns collected

data in forests, salt marshes, freshwater wetlands, and living shorelines. This data is essential for monitoring the health of these spaces and informing plans for their long-term care. Interns also mapped NYC Nature Trails, engaged communities in these spaces, and analyzed the public health benefits of nature trails.

One of those projects was revisiting sites from the NAC's Ecological Assessment conducted

between 2013 and 2014. These small plots of forest are windows into the condition and rate of change of our natural areas. This year, interns trekked out to 228 plots in parks across the city, noting shifts in plant biodiversity, tree mortality, and the growth rate of our oldest generation of forest—allowing the NAC to analyze how our natural areas are faring. This will help inform a new study on how our city's natural areas have changed over the past ten years.



After a two-year hiatus, we also saw the return of our internship exchange program with the Leon Levy Native Plant Center in Eleuthera (LLNPC), The Bahamas. A group of our staff and interns spent a week learning about native ecosystems in Eleuthera. We in turn proudly hosted a cohort of LLNPC interns for a week in New York City to learn about our city's precious natural areas.

The NAC provides professional development resources for our interns. This includes training in networking, job interviews, and personal budgeting. In order to foster connections and mentorship among our 100 alumni, the NAC has also recently launched an alumni network.

In 2022, the NAC further expanded our efforts to create connections for young people to explore opportunities in the environmental field. In summer 2022, we launched a high school internship program in Forest Park, Queens. We provided paid opportunities for youth to study urban ecology in their local park. Through hands-on, immersive programming these budding professionals discovered their science identity and learned about college and career pathways. We have plans to expand the Queens program in 2023 and to launch a program on Staten Island in 2024. ■

# 80%

of job-seeking  
interns secured  
employment  
within six months  
of completing  
our program.

# 90%

of those work in  
the environmental  
field.

**From top to bottom:** Interns measuring elevation along the shorelines of the Harlem River at Bridge Park South. Learning about freshwater wetlands from NYC Parks staff as part of the internship orientation. The 2022 intern contingent at the end of the summer program, being honored on the Arsenal Rooftop in Central Park. Interns looking at understory plant species at one of the Rapid Site Assessment sites in 2021.





## CUNY Intern Highlight

“This internship was an incredible learning experience for me and definitely solidified my future career goals and passions. I was thrilled to find that there was work experience like this right here in NYC, where I didn't have to relocate. The internship was a hugely meaningful and intimate experience, enabling me to understand natural spaces, plants, and wildlife and their relationships with each other. I felt immediately seen and valued in a professional environment, and was able to make connections to my other work in geography and sustainability. This is a great stepping stone into the science world and one I'm glad I landed on.”

### — Grace Muset

*former 2022 intern, Hunter College.  
Current Community Forestry  
Associate for the NAC*



“I had the wonderful pleasure of interning with Natural Areas Conservancy for two summers. The first summer launched me into the field biologist work I do now. I returned in 2021, this time as a Crew Leader. To my delight, I gained new perspectives and new experiences, on leadership, community, and the importance of social science and community science. Both internships helped form my connection to natural areas and how I view those natural areas on an intersectional, environmental justice level. And both internships also gave me insight on the type of learning environment and relationships I wanted to build with my peers and newly interested environmental scientists.”

### — Naiyiri-Blu Brooker

*former 2018 and 2021  
intern, Lehman College.  
Current Wetlands Project  
Associate at NYC Parks'  
Division of Environment  
and Planning*



**Kirklan looking  
across the East River  
on Randall's Island  
during freshwater  
wetland field  
verification in 2022**





Citywide Trails team staff and volunteers building a punchon in La Tourette Park

# MAKING NATURE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

## Five Years of Trail Blazing

In collaboration with NYC Parks, the NAC formed the Citywide Trails Team in 2017 to oversee trail formalization, improve trail infrastructure, engage community partners, and train advanced volunteers to steward over 300 miles of nature trails throughout natural area parkland in New York City.

Guided by the release of the

*Strategic Trails Plan for New York City* in 2020, the team works to create a network of well-maintained, fully-supported nature trails that provide diverse experiences for all New Yorkers and inspire an appreciation of the natural world. We seek to achieve the six goals of the plan through on-the-ground trails improvements, convening and training partners on trail design and maintenance guidelines, and community

engagement through volunteerism and recreation. We also continue our data-driven approach to our work. In 2022, the Citywide Trails Team utilized a newly designed prioritization system that aggregates data such as environmental justice status, forest health, and population to help us prioritize which parks to formalize and activate. This system empowers us to work in parks in communities that will benefit most from having well managed trails and



A newly installed trail marker in Blue Heron Park



A staff member building check steps in Highbridge Park



Interns installing punchcons over a wet spot of trail near Willow Lake, Flushing Meadows Corona Park

natural areas. In 2022, we improved 45 miles of trail that are now part of the citywide trail system.

## Local Trail Receives National Recognition

On National Trails Day 2022, Secretary of Interior Deborah Haaland designated the Orange Trail in Inwood Hill Park as a National Recreational Trail for its innovative design, historical significance, and the community involvement in its upkeep. This moderate to vigorous trail takes visitors through the heart of the park's Shorakapok Preserve with dramatic views of Spuyten Duyvil Creek, the Hudson River, and the New Jersey Palisades, as well as glacial potholes, schist formations, and historic structures such as Straus Mansion and Cock Hill Fort.

## Increasing Trail Access for People of All Abilities

A key aspect of the vision laid out in the Strategic Trails Plan is to provide a diversity of experiences on nature trails for all New Yorkers. In order to realize this vision of inclusion, the NAC worked with NYC Parks to define how to make nature trails more accessible to people of all abilities by incorporating new and innovative designs to rustic trail structures. In 2022, the team built the first improved-access punchon, a wooden walkway used to cross small wetlands or streams, in La Tourette Park on Staten Island. The improved-access punchon incorporates new features to increase stability and safety for mobility devices and ramps on either side for access. We will continue to develop and deploy these new designs citywide to





Volunteers at an event  
in Van Cortlandt Park

increase access to our forests and wetlands for all New Yorkers.

### Harnessing the Power of Volunteers

Super Stewards are advanced, independent volunteers trained and permitted by NYC Parks to care for the city’s green spaces. Super Stewards can choose a focus or “track” for their work including: street trees, forests and meadows, coastal wetlands, and nature trails.

The NAC is the technical expert

for the Super Steward: Trail Maintainer program, where we provide volunteers with specialized training, tools, and logistical support to work independently on NYC Parks nature trails. Hailing from all five boroughs, these New Yorkers have pledged their time, completed specialized training, and committed themselves to safeguarding and caring for nature trails in their communities.

Trail Maintainers are now some of the most knowledgeable and dedicated people caring for our natural areas. In 2022, the NAC onboarded 43 Trail Maintainers, who adopted a total of 57 miles of trail, and trained 22 current volunteers in more advanced methods trail work. In 2023, we seek to add an additional 70 volunteers to the network and will add more advanced training opportunities for current volunteers to lead projects in their communities, like building trail structures such as puncheons and turnpikes. ■

“The training and guidance I received from the Natural Areas Conservancy gave me the skills, experience, and confidence to make a career change into the horticulture field. In turn, I’ve been able to bring my professional skills back to my neighborhood as a volunteer trail maintainer.”

— **Donnie Welch**  
Trail Maintainer in Inwood Hill Park since March 2022

## Fostering Community Engagement in Forests

This year, in collaboration with NYC Parks and neighborhood partners, the NAC has developed two initiatives to engage the communities surrounding Seton Falls Park, the Bronx and Highbridge Park, Manhattan. Our ecologists are building relationships with local residents by leading hands-on workshops, sharing findings on the parks’ forest health, and facilitating opportunities for New Yorkers to collaborate in forest management planning.

So far, our team has led 13 public events and planted nearly 200 trees and shrubs with local community members and organizations. ■



Native trees and shrubs ready for planting in Pelham Bay Park in 2022

Find a trail to enjoy on the [NYC Parks website](#).



Marine Park, Brooklyn





Volunteers  
planting trees  
in Forest Park



NAC and NYC  
Parks staff tour  
Marine Park



Interns working  
at the NYC Parks  
Greenbelt Native  
Plant Center in  
Staten Island



# THANK YOU

**We are so grateful for the support of our generous donors.** You helped us sustain and grow our programs to train the next generation of environmental leaders, connect New Yorkers to nature, advance science and research on natural areas, and foster the care of natural areas. We were thrilled to recognize this support and celebrate our shared achievements with many special events.

## Night for Nature

On June 14, 2022, we celebrated ten years of the Natural Areas Conservancy and recognized the achievements of our honorees Stacy Sonnenberg, Goldman Sachs and Veronica White, Bloomberg LP. We cherished marking this major NAC milestone with all of you.



## Donor Circle events

### CUNY Intern Meet and Greet

On July 26, 2022, advocates, supporters, and friends joined the NAC staff and the newest contingent of CUNY interns on the roof of the Arsenal in Central Park.

### From the Ground Up - In Conversation with Alison Sant (pictured, lower left)

The NAC and Brooklyn Botanic Garden hosted a conversation with Alison Sant, author and designer on October 28th, 2022. The inspiring panel featured: Brooklyn Botanic Garden's President Adrian Benepe, the NAC's Executive Director Sarah Charlop-Powers, and the President of Medgar Evers College, Dr. Patricia Ramsey.



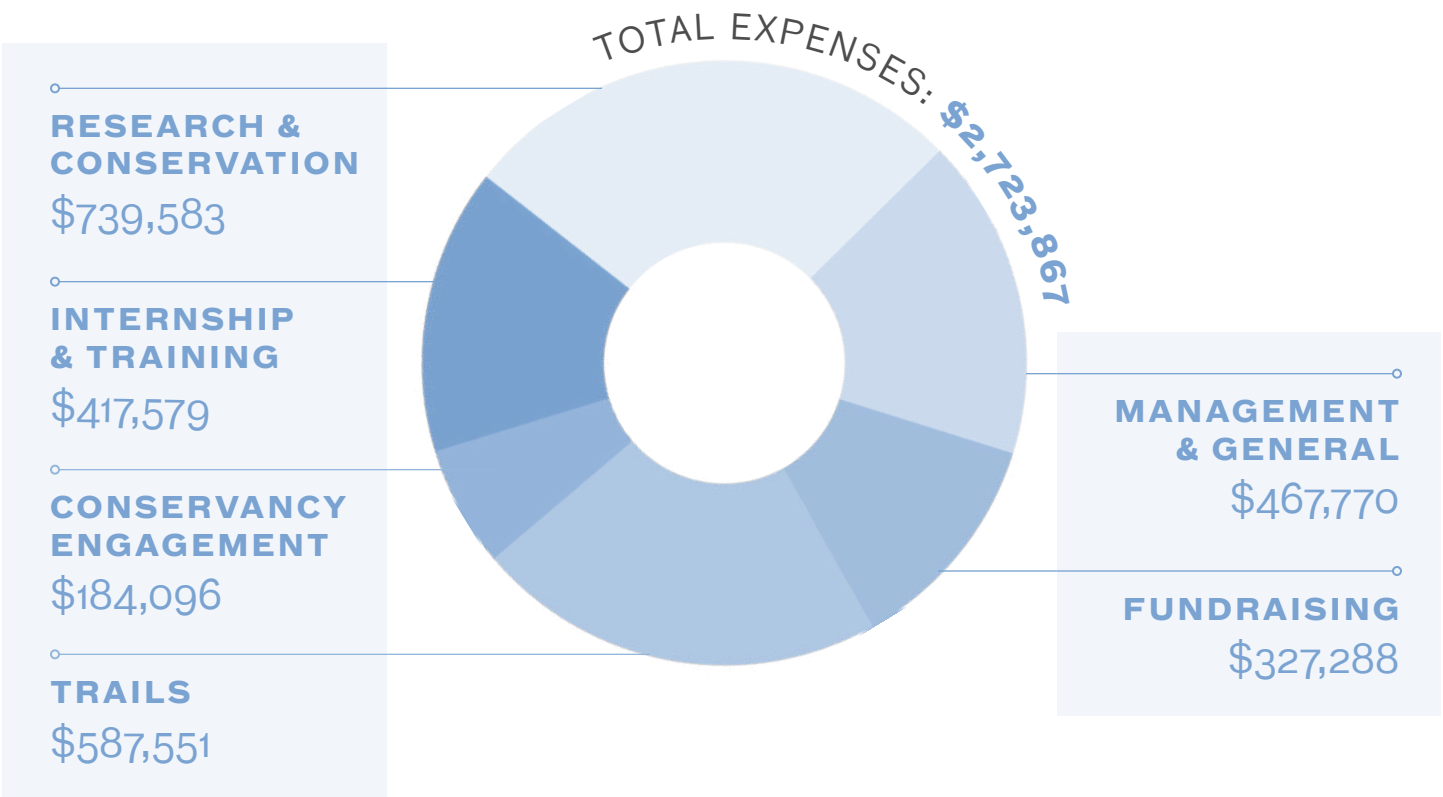
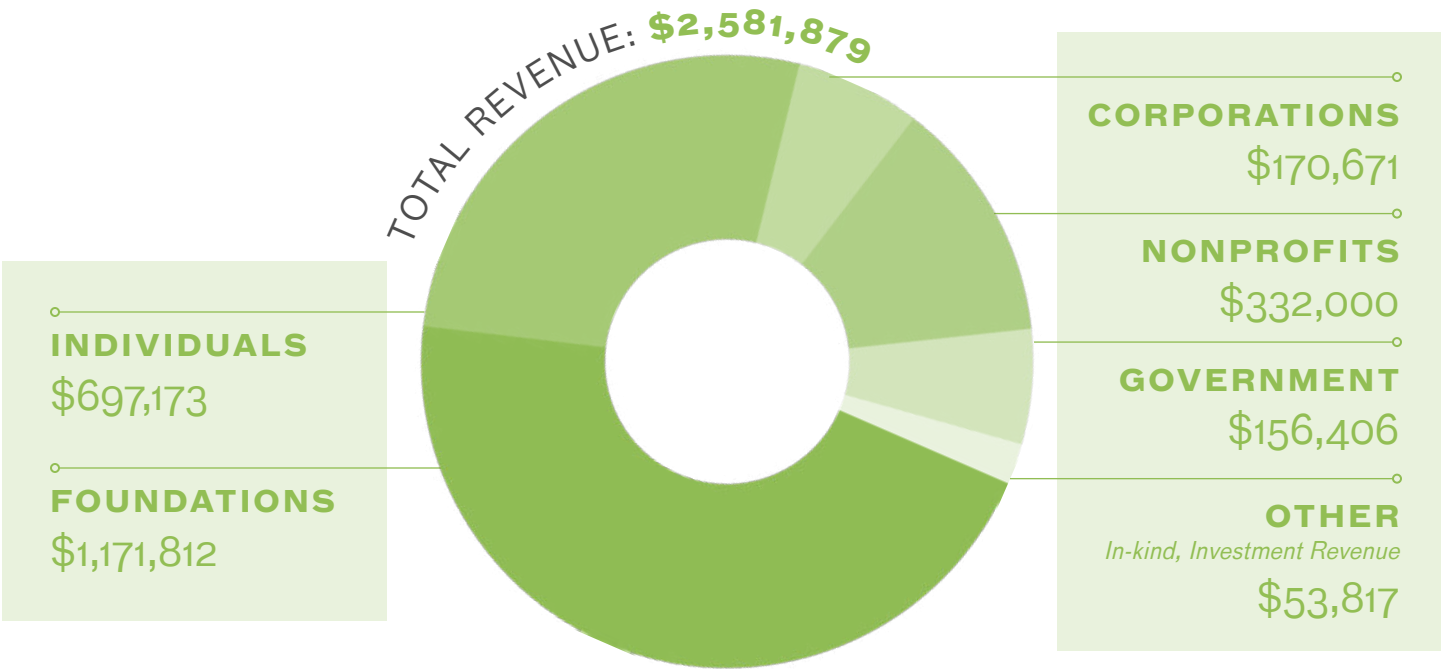


# Donors Names

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# 2022 Organization Financials



The numbers above represent unaudited financials and are subject to change upon audit completion. The final audited numbers will be available later in 2022 at [naturalareasnyc.org](https://naturalareasnyc.org).  
The net loss reflected for FY2022 is the result of the spend down of previously secured multi-year advanced funding.



# ABOUT US

The Natural Areas Conservancy was created in 2012 to research, manage, and advocate for New York City’s remaining large forests, wetlands, and grasslands — also known as natural areas. We work in close partnership with NYC Parks and many local partners to increase the health, resilience, and public access to New York City’s 20,000 acres of natural area parkland. Our work is rooted in respect for nature, people, and local communities

And our core values of scientific integrity, strength in partnership, and leadership guide all the work we do.

The NAC is New York City’s first and only park conservancy dedicated exclusively to the city’s natural areas, which comprise one third of our park system. To comprehensively support these natural resources, we lead a variety of programs and initiatives in conservation, advocacy, workforce development, public events, and volunteer stewardship.

Since 2019, we have grown as a national leader in increasing awareness, resources, and financial support for urban natural areas throughout the United States by launching the Forests in Cities Network. This professional network of representatives from major cities across the country aims to strengthen collaboration, research, and information sharing to advance the field of urban natural area management. ■





**Natural Areas  
Conservancy**

[naturalareasnyc.org](http://naturalareasnyc.org)