



Annual Report 2023

A letter from the Executive Director



The Natural Areas Conservancy's work in 2023 was defined by growth—both in our local communities and our national network. Likewise, we had momentous change within our organization, blooming to over 20 experienced and

dedicated professionals focused on everything from research and conservation science to communications and advocacy.

Our internship program had a particularly eventful year. In addition to hosting 18 students from eight City University of New York (CUNY) schools, we added a paid high school intern initiative: the Student Urban Nature (SUN) program. The SUN program empowered STEM students in Queens, offering hands-on experience in Forest Park and culminating in individual research projects. We also kicked off our CUNY alumni network, designed to foster community among our former interns through skill-building, stewardship, and networking.

Two new cities—Portland, Oregon, and Boston, Massachusetts—joined our Forests in Cities network. That makes us 19 cities strong, with 59 organizations represented in this consortium of land managers and urban forestry experts from across the country.

Research continues to flourish at the NAC, both within the FiC network and NYC's community of natural areas researchers and practitioners.

We were proud to share a groundbreaking report on the cooling effect of natural areas. Our Research & Conservation team began collaborating with our partners at NYC Parks, laying the groundwork for a crucial reevaluation of environmental changes to NYC's forests and wetlands over the next year.

We also deeply engaged our network of Trail Maintainers. These advanced volunteers stepped up in 2023 to not only steward natural areas, but also advocate for them. We worked to prepare and nurture this important group to testify at City Council hearings, contact their local elected officials, and write op-eds in support of our city's greenspaces.

In 2023, we focused our community engagement efforts in the Bronx and upper Manhattan. Our completion of two multi-year projects in Seton Falls Park and Highbridge Park allowed us to reach hundreds of New Yorkers and over 20 community groups through forest care training and popular community events, including *Celebrate Salamanders!*.

I'm proud and optimistic as we move further into 2024 and expand our efforts to manage, study, and advocate for natural areas as well as grow the environmental workforce that ultimately will steward them. We will continue to serve as the leading advocate for natural areas in NYC and work closely with NYC Parks and our many coalition partners. I look forward to another year of growth and success in support of our city's 20,000 acres of valuable forests, wetlands and grasslands.

Sarah Charlop-Powers
Executive Director and Co-Founder

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Engaging communities in the Bronx and Manhattan

The Natural Areas Conservancy's community forestry program completed two multi-year, engagement programs in the Bronx and northern Manhattan in 2023, resulting in actionable management plans for 134 acres of forest. Through programming designed to increase meaningful, long-term community involvement in the stewardship of natural areas, we reached 368 people and more than 20 community organizations. Local volunteers contributed over 878 hours to learning about their natural areas, planting trees, and stewarding trails. The

underserved communities surrounding these parks were reactivated, and people of all ages and abilities grew an appreciation for caring and learning about NYC's natural spaces. Community and individual networks became fortified, new connections were built, and local individuals gained a sense of belonging and pride for their local forests. We are especially grateful to the community leaders and individuals who welcomed the NAC into their backyards and partnered with us to create long-term impact.

Highbridge Park

In Washington Heights, Manhattan, we worked with community stakeholders to offer forest care training and develop a forest management plan for Highbridge Park's 102 acres of forest. Community stewards needed a guide to the common invasive plants they encountered while caring for their forest, so we worked with the NYC Parks Stewardship Team to produce a printed guide: *Invasive Plants and Biodiversity: A Targeted Management Guide for New York City Stewards*.

Seton Falls Park

In the Bronx, the NAC worked alongside the Seton Falls Park Preservation Coalition (SFPPC) to develop a forest management training and education series for park stewards and community leaders. With input and feedback from community leaders and neighbors, we created a program of training and education events covering topics in forest health, plant identification, invasive species management, trail maintenance, and leader training. This training series was a springboard to further activate the Seton Falls Park community. One leader from SFPPC expanded on these efforts to develop an educational summer program for youth in Seton Falls Park.

Our most popular event, *Celebrate Salamanders!*, brought out over 40 community members to learn about one of NYC's last habitats for a locally rare salamander species and to conduct invasive plant management.



2023 advocacy timeline

The Natural Areas Conservancy took action in 2023 to speak up on behalf of natural areas across the five boroughs. Building on the publication of our Funding Forested Natural Areas: Recent Trends in New York City report, the NAC helped make the case for increased public resources to be directed to the care, management, and restoration of our natural areas. Take a look at our advocacy milestones last year.

March 22

The NAC participated in the Play Fair for Parks rally at City Hall to call for an increased budget for NYC Parks.

May 24

The NAC testified in front of City Council, stressing the importance of baselining \$3.5M in funding for natural areas management.



April 22

The NAC is invited to speak during a Mayoral Earth Day press conference announcement of \$2.4M in baselined funding for the implementation of the Strategic Trails Plan.

September 14

We participated in Rally for Trees NYC, and called on the City Council to support the passage of Intros 1065 and 1066.

October 5

Intro 1065 (now Local Law 148) is passed by the NY City Council.

October 11

The NAC participated in the Play Fair rally against cuts to NYC Parks, which included the elimination of the trails formalization program. NAC also testified before the City Council during a joint hearing about NYC Parks.

November 6

Sarah Charlop-Powers published an op-ed against the budget cuts to NYC Parks in *NYN Media*.



June 6

Sarah Charlop-Powers co-authored an op-ed about the budget for NYC Parks with volunteer Trail Maintainer Bob Hay. The op-ed ran in *City Limits*.

June 13

We testified as a member of Forest for All NYC in support of Intros 1065 and 1066, which legislated the creation of NYC’s first-ever Urban Forest Plan and a target canopy goal of 30% citywide.

June 15

The NAC testified to the City Council Committee on Environmental Protection, Resiliency and Waterfronts about the need to fully fund the management and care of natural forested areas, wetlands, and trails.

June 30

The Mayor and City Council agreed on the FY24 Adopted Budget, which included a one-year \$2.5M restoration of funding from the City Council for forest management and care, as well as \$2.4M in funds for trail formalization.

December 7

The NAC staff organized a virtual training for Trail Maintainers, CUNY Intern alums, and members of the Board of Directors to help prepare testimony in advance of a City Council Committee on Finance oversight hearing.

December 11

The NAC testified to the City Council Committee on Finance against the FY24 budget cuts.

Growing the next generation of environmental leaders

In 2023, the Natural Areas Conservancy strengthened its environmental workforce pipeline, further investing in opportunities for New Yorkers to explore—and gain skills in—natural areas management. From high school students who are interested in climate science to City University of New York (CUNY) students who need field experience to pursue careers in ecology, the NAC has created an impactful and supportive program.

Engaging high schoolers in STEM

Last summer, eight high school interns joined the Student Urban Nature (SUN) program, a paid high school internship located in Forest Park, Queens. Students learned about ecology and the environmental field through hands-on fieldwork—all in their local park. Interns built their confidence and knowledge in science—and through practice and mentorship began to see themselves as scientists. Students learned how

"I saw the NAC internship program as an opportunity to truly connect to and understand the importance of natural areas while getting my first taste of field work."
— Balsamine Chen,
Summer 2023 Intern



We reached our 100th intern milestone, building an intern community that is supported and prepared to fill local green jobs.



We oversaw cross-cultural interaction & knowledge sharing between our CUNY interns and the Leon Levy Native Plant Center interns in the Bahamas.



We hosted 30 paid internship opportunities for 18 CUNY students.



to collect data in forests and wetlands, trail management techniques, and conducted their own research projects. In summer 2024, the NAC will expand the SUN program to Staten Island's Greenbelt, creating opportunities for young people to study these unique grasslands.

We hosted 30 paid internships for CUNY students from eight different schools. Interns spent time monitoring shorelines in the Bronx and Harlem Rivers, growing native plants at the Greenbelt Native Plant Center, and measuring forest health in northern Manhattan. This year marked the fourth time that we have hosted an exchange program with the Leon Levy Native Plant Center (LLNPC) in Eleuthera, Bahamas. While our ecosystems are wildly different, our programs have shared goals to invest in conservation leadership and build ecology skills. Five NYC interns learned about the floristics and plant taxonomy of the Bahamas, and three interns from LLNPC joined us in New York City to learn about urban conservation.

Expanding an alumni network

We expanded the NAC Alumni Network to continue to foster community amongst program participants as they enter—and grow—in their careers. The network independently organizes regular events and outings to strengthen connections, advance professional skill building, and explore NYC’s natural areas! In 2024, this group will collaborate with more NAC teams, including the Trails team and high school intern alumni.

Looking ahead, we are excited to launch expanded programming for young people who hope to pursue careers in natural areas management. By leveraging our partnerships with NYC Parks and local park conservancies, we will create opportunities for advanced and sustained technical skill-building and fieldwork needed to enter full-time green careers.



81% of interns felt confident that they had "get the job skills"

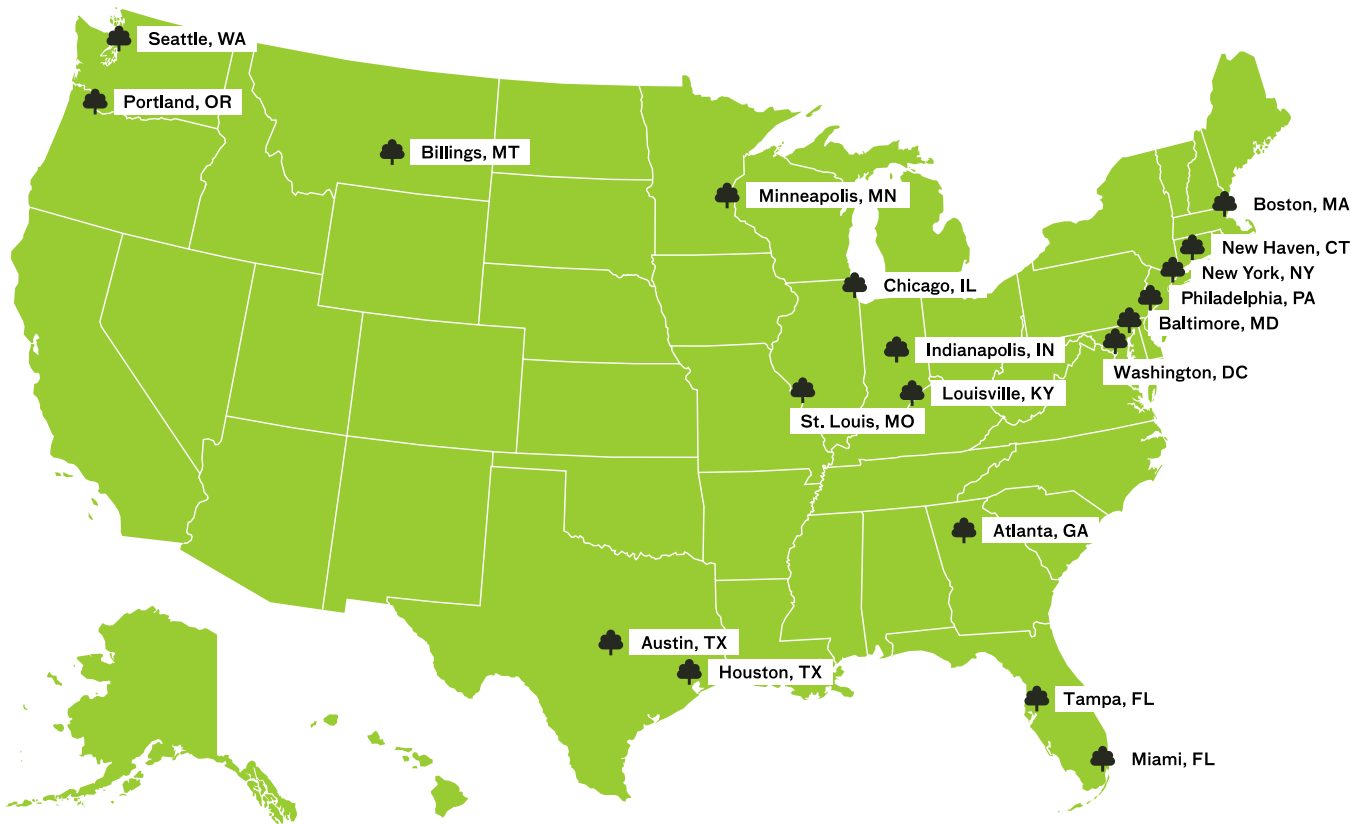


100% felt that they had a community of peers interested in similar careers



88% reported they were likely to accept a full-time environmental job after graduation

Investing in natural areas across the country



Forests in Cities, the Natural Areas Conservancy’s national network, continues to grow and thrive! In 2023, two new cities—Boston, Massachusetts, and Portland, Oregon—were added to the network. We now have 19 cities representing a combined population of 22,944,710 (2022 Census estimate).

The network convened regularly to discuss the care and protection of forested natural areas. The NAC hosted quarterly webinars that brought together network cities to share updates and collaborate. We also held four technical trainings this year, which explored topics such as federal grant writing, engaging with press and

elected officials, community engagement, and strategic urban trails planning. Network members convened in person twice this year at the Hixon Conference in New Haven, Connecticut, and the World Forum on Urban Forests in Washington, D.C., both FiC member cities.

We look forward to the continued collaboration and growth of the FiC network in 2024. In the new year, we plan to meet in person, publish timely work and foster more peer-to-peer learning to improve urban forests across the nation!

The FiC network brings value to urban forestry practitioners across the country.

What members of the FiC network say:

“The Forests in Cities network is driving national collaboration and innovation around the critical role of natural areas in our communities.”

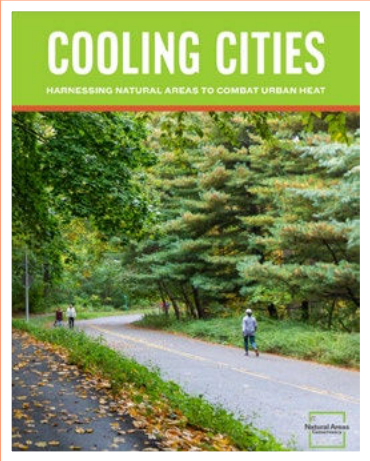
“The opportunity to meet with people around the country who are passionate about protecting urban natural areas and hear their ideas really helped to re-energize me in my work, as well as provide some new resources and knowledge.”



“The professional network that Forest in Cities has built is really incredible. Reconnecting with folks on a regular basis...and hearing about their methods, initiatives, successes, and challenges has been especially helpful. I have some upcoming projects that will really benefit from the network and everything I've learned from different participants.”

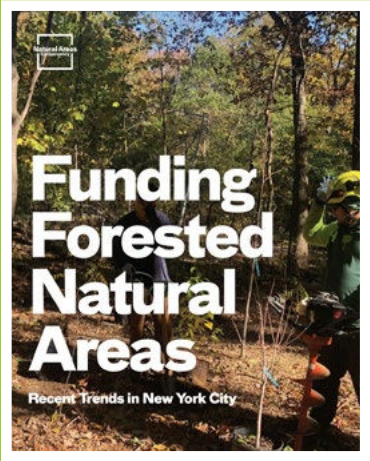
Making an impact with new natural areas knowledge and research

Last year, the Research & Conservation team advanced science and published reports to inform practice on the care and management of urban natural areas in the face of climate change.



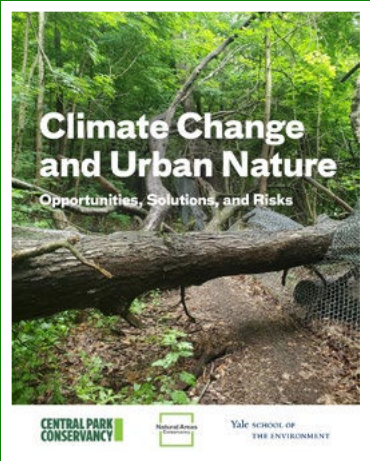
Cooling Cities

This report highlights the differences in temperature between different types of urban greenspace. Results showed that urban natural areas had cooler land surface and air temperature than landscaped greenspaces, and that urban forested natural areas had the coolest temperatures overall. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating protection and management of urban natural areas into climate resilience planning.



Funding Forested Natural Areas

This report provided analysis of recent trends in funding of forested natural areas in New York City from 2017 through 2020. Less than half a percent (0.042%) of New York City's expense budget supported managing and protecting urban natural areas. Without sufficient funding, our natural areas may degrade and lose the benefits they provide to our cities.



Climate Report

This report explores how urban natural areas can both protect cities from the impacts of climate change as well as be negatively affected by the changing climate. The report provides a centralized resource for planners and practitioners who want summary information on the major impacts of climate change as well as case studies highlighting how cities use and manage natural areas in the face of climate change.

Engaging volunteers to care for New York City's natural spaces



The Natural Areas Conservancy's staff works tirelessly to nurture and preserve New York City nature, but we couldn't do it without the many partners who empower our work day in and day out. Nowhere is this more palpable than in our corporate volunteer program, where in the last year over 200 corporate volunteers generously contributed over a thousand hours of service to our urban natural areas.

In 2023, we were thrilled to work with new and current partners to create immersive experiences for volunteers to connect with and steward our urban green spaces. Our partnership with Blackstone, spearheaded by NAC Board Member Justin Hall, brought a group of enthusiastic volunteers to Inwood Hill Park for hands-on conservation work on a beautiful October morning.

Fostering hands-on work in nature

The volunteer day allowed for hands-on conservation work, and Blackstone employees gained an appreciation for the importance of urban green spaces and the role they play in fostering biodiversity and climate resiliency.

The NAC's corporate volunteer program aims to bring teams like Blackstone out of the office and into nature to experience firsthand the power and importance of green spaces. In 2023, the NAC partnered with a wide range of companies who made a tangible impact on New York City's natural areas. This year's projects saw the restoration and management of nature trails, as well as the completion of two tree-planting projects in Alley Pond Park and



Kissena Park in Queens. During each event, volunteers had the opportunity to take a deep dive into the work of the NAC and learn more about the natural areas we work to protect, while getting their hands dirty.

These fun days in nature showcase the transformative power of collective action and inspire new partners to join us to help steward our natural landscapes. We look forward to welcoming new and returning partners into our city's parks for more volunteering in the coming year and beyond.

In the last year over 200 volunteers generously contributed over a thousand hours of service to our urban natural areas.

Increasing access to nature for all

In 2023, we grew a cadre of trained, committed volunteers to steward New York City’s nature trails. We improved hundreds of miles of trails in public parks and invested in the capacity and skills of our partners to scale our efforts—ensuring all New Yorkers have safe access to nature.

The NAC supported the maintenance of hundreds of miles of nature trails through the construction of structures that improve accessibility and forest health. In 2023, we partnered with the Student Conservation Association (SCA) on trail projects in four parks, including Alley Pond Park. In this park, we worked together to raise 350 feet of flooded trail, improving the condition for users.

We hosted our 4th annual Trails Techniques Training to develop the knowledge and capacity of NYC Parks and conservancy partners to build

and improve trails and structures that exist in their parks. Over four days, we trained almost 40 professional parks staff on the installation of trail structures and trail design fundamentals. We hosted two trainings and productive work sessions with Urban Park Rangers to increase community engagement on public nature trails. We presented at the Professional Trail Builder Conference in Reno, Nevada on “Partnerships and Tools for Collaboration: Managing Trails Through Public-Private Partnership in NYC,” reaching a new audience of trail advocates.

The NAC has trained 100 volunteers, who have adopted over 120 miles of trails across all five boroughs—about 40% of the network! In 2023, we provided advanced training to 35 of these volunteers, allowing them to conduct more advanced work on their adopted nature trails.



Parks Stewarded by Trail Maintainers in 2023

Bronx

- 1 Pelham Bay Park
- 2 Raoul Wallenberg Forest
- 3 Riverdale Park
- 4 Seton Falls Park
- 5 Spuyten Duyvil Shorefront Park
- 6 Van Cortlandt Park

Brooklyn

- 7 Marine Park
- 8 Paerdegat Basin Park

Manhattan

- 9 Highbridge Park
- 10 Inwood Hill Park

Queens

- 11 Alley Pond Park
- 12 Forest Park
- 13 Kissena Corridor Park
- 14 Kissena Park

Staten Island

- 15 Allison Pond Park
- 16 Blue Heron Park
- 17 Bunkers Pond Park
- 18 LaTourette Park
- 19 Willowbrook Park
- 20 Wolfes Pond Park





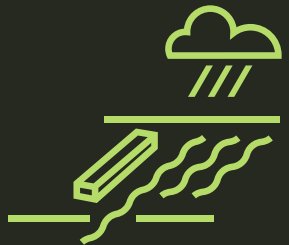
This year, our team built and managed:



Check steps



Turnpikes



Water bars



Puncheons



**Desire line
closures**



**Invasive species
removal**

Thank you to our supporters!

Individuals

Anonymous
Alexis Akre
James Baker
John and Gail Bandler
Caroline and Justin Barad
Kate Barton
Frances Beinecke
Hal R. Belodoff
and Alissa Kuznick
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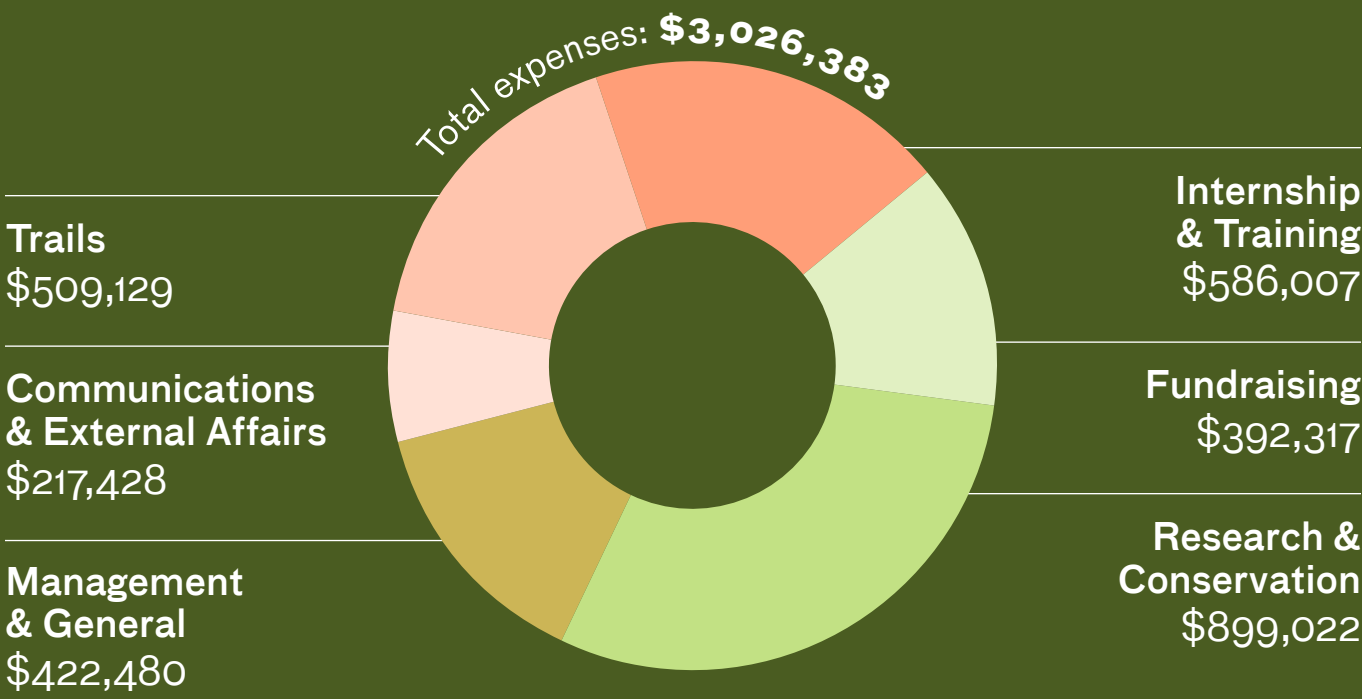
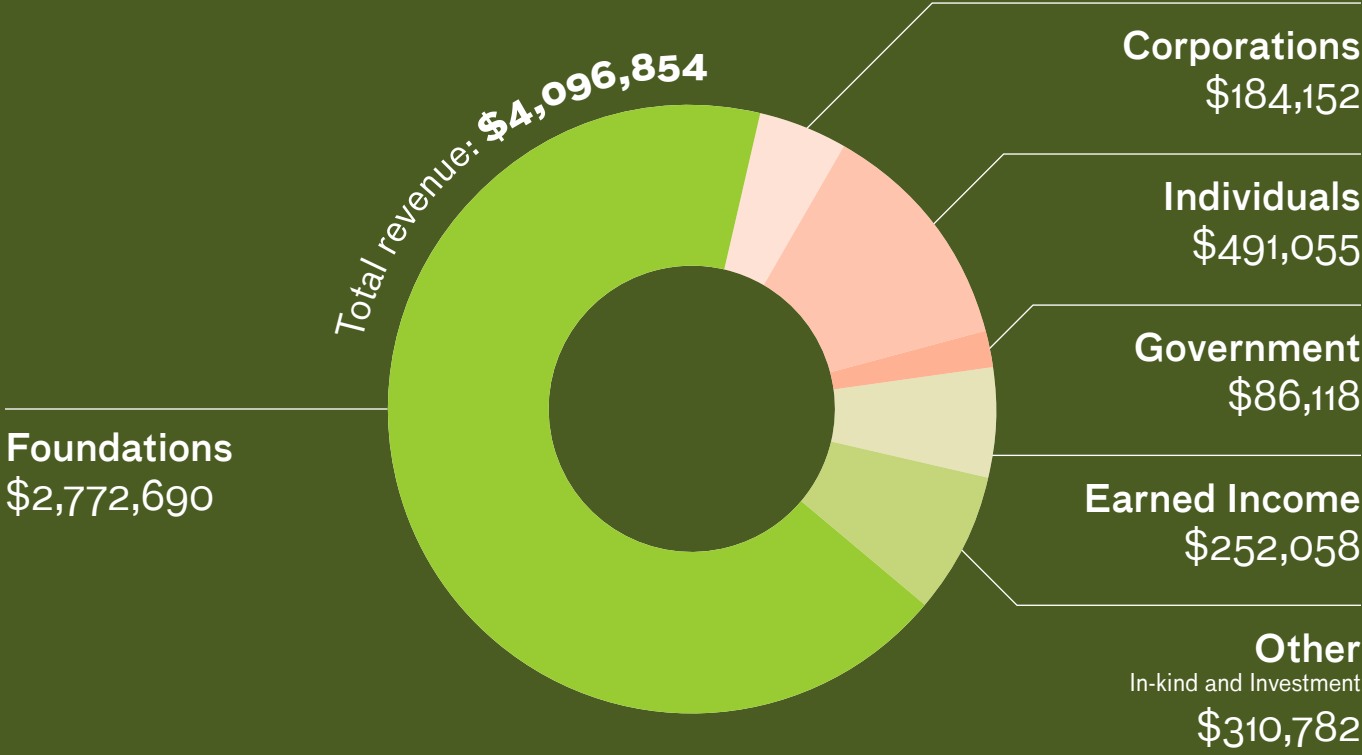
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2023 Organization Financials



Thank you!

The Natural Areas Conservancy exists to protect and champion natural areas in New York City and across the nation. We strive for a sustainable future—and that wouldn't be possible without your critical support. Thank you to our funders, partners, and supporters who have helped the NAC grow to where it is today.

Looking back on 2023, we're proud of our team and all those who rallied behind our efforts. Advancing our internship programs, expanding NYC's trail network, releasing groundbreaking research, and increasing our advocacy simply couldn't have been accomplished without you. We cherish these shared successes, which buoy us into 2024 with a renewed vitality and commitment to our invaluable natural areas.





naturalareasnyc.org