



Annual Report 2024

A letter from the interim executive director

The Natural Areas Conservancy broke new ground in 2024, growing our successful programs to put nature at the center of urban life. We launched new research to determine how the health and extent of our forests and wetlands have changed over the last decade, started a new initiative to prepare the next generation of environmental leaders to enter into and thrive in urban ecology careers, and partnered extensively with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation (NYC Parks) to keep our natural areas healthy, safe, and accessible. We are working with leading nonprofits and the City to create NYC's very first Urban Forest Plan, which has the potential to be the largest initiative dedicated to our trees and forests since the Million Trees Initiative in the last two decades.

We also saw tremendous challenges in 2024. The time to invest in nature as a climate change solution and a fundamental right for urban residents has never been more apparent or urgent. Our oak forests in Queens, salt marshes in Brooklyn, nature preserves in Staten Island, freshwater wetlands in the Bronx, and walking trails in Manhattan deserve protection, investment, and stewardship. The next few years will be pivotal as we shape the role of urban nature in New York and across the country. Our natural areas require active management and our decisions today will shape our communities and ecosystems now and into the future.

The NAC is leading with a solution: healthy and resilient natural areas for all. We're deepening the connection between people and nature by



increasing access, providing education, and building the environmental workforce. Through research, partnerships, and advocacy, we ensure that urban natural areas are healthy and thriving and that their benefits reach all New Yorkers.

On behalf of the NAC, I want to thank our funders, our board members, our staff, volunteers, and NYC Parks for their efforts to advance this mission. I look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you to advance this essential work.

My sincere gratitude,
Andrew M. Wallach

Thank you, Sarah!

As we reflect on 2024 and look ahead to the remainder of 2025, we would be remiss not to acknowledge former Executive Director and Co-Founder Sarah Charlop-Powers. Since the founding of the NAC in 2012, the organization has grown from a team of two to a staff of 21, developed a passionate and supportive board of directors, forged meaningful citywide partnerships, and established an ever-growing national network of practitioners. We are grateful for Sarah's vision, dedication, and tireless support for nature in New York City and cities across the country.



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Investing in New York City's forests

New York City's trees keep our neighborhoods cool, absorb stormwater, capture carbon, and make our city a more beautiful and better place to live. In 2023, the City Council passed Local Law 148 requiring NYC to create a citywide Urban Forest Plan to expand canopy coverage from 23% to 30%.

The urban forest includes more than seven million trees that span New York City's streets, yards, parks, campuses, businesses, and natural areas. Since nearly five million of these trees are located in forested natural areas, the Natural Areas Conservancy is playing a major role in the development of this plan along with the Mayor's Office of Climate & Environmental

Justice, the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, the City Parks Foundation, the Nature Conservancy, and more.

We kicked off the project in late 2024, announcing our plans to lead community engagement efforts in neighborhoods next to forested natural areas and ensure that the unique needs of these spaces are included in this plan.

The Urban Forest Plan represents a pivotal moment for NYC to build on the successes of the Million Tree Initiative, establishing the city as a leader in urban forestry and creating a unified vision to care for our trees and forests.

Goals of the Urban Forest Plan

Outline strategies

to protect, care for, and equitably expand tree canopy to cover 30% of New York City.

Build partnerships

among a diverse set of stakeholders.

Set a vision

for the care, management, and expansion of the urban forest.



Training future environmental leaders

In 2024, the Natural Areas Conservancy launched year-long, paid fellowship positions for students at the City University of New York. These fellowships complement our summer internships for college and high school students, creating a complete pathway for New Yorkers interested in pursuing education and careers in environmental sciences.

Eight fellows participated in the pilot year of programming. Working hand-in-hand with NAC staff and partners, students conducted rigorous field-based research, completed coursework on urban ecology and environmental policy, and received comprehensive professional development support.

We recently grew our high school programming from Queens into Staten Island. Our high school students spent six weeks conducting field research, identifying plants, and receiving mentorship in their local natural areas – Forest Park, Queens, and the Greenbelt park network in Staten Island. We will continue to grow the program and the number of students we serve in 2025.



The NAC's internship program recently relaunched as the Urban Nature, Ecology and Stewardship Training (Urban NEST) program.



The NAC's impact on young environmentalists in 2024

90%

of interns believe they have a future in the profession of natural areas management

52

parks where interns have made an impact

107

interns served through the NAC alumni network

How our interns are protecting NYC's coastline

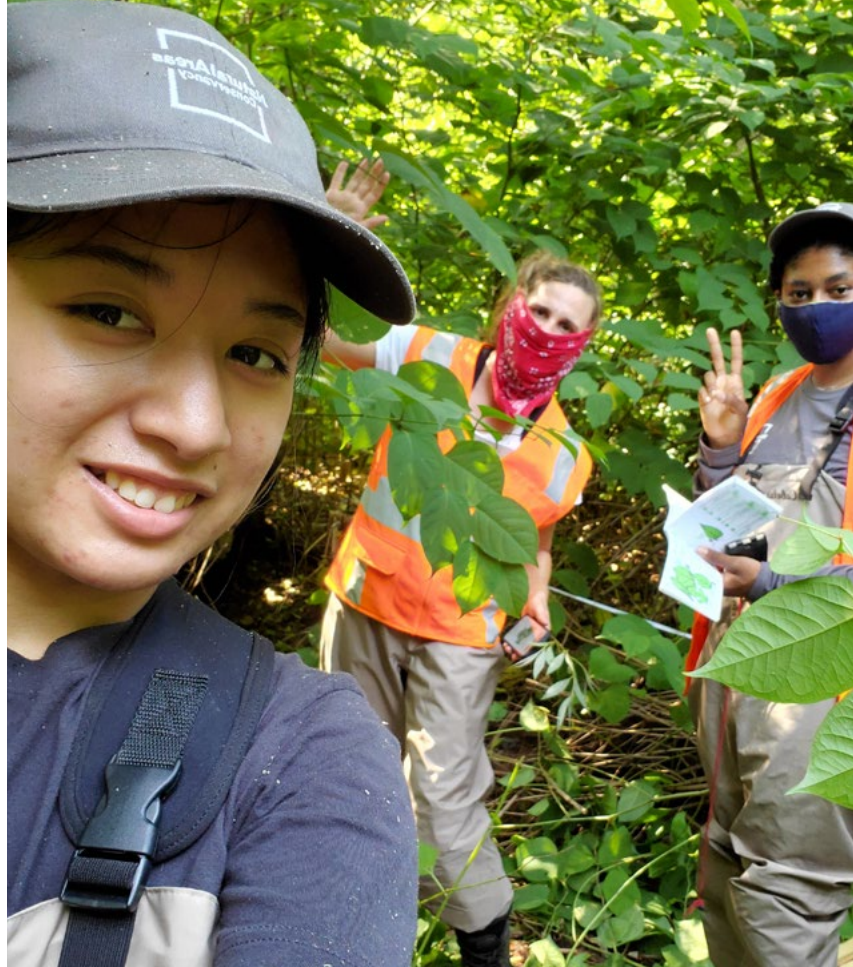
Angela N. and Gretchen B. started their fellowship in Floyd Bennett Field, working with New York City Department of Parks & Recreation staff to establish, cultivate, and harvest native beach grass.

This beach grass will stabilize dunes in Brooklyn and Queens that buffer our coastline from storms and sea level rise.



Spotlight on Sing Yi Torres-Chan

Sing Yi Torres-Chan participated in the NAC's summer internship program in 2021 and 2022 while pursuing an environmental science degree at Queens College. Sing Yi joined a high school program at Wave Hill Conservatory that was a formative experience, opening her eyes to the field of environmental science in New York City. Now, Sing Yi is creating similar experiences for students in Queens and Staten Island as a mentor.



"I've really enjoyed working with my interns and seeing their enthusiasm when we're teaching them about plants and animals. I think this project with the high school interns is really important because it's their first step into the environmental world, and it shows them all the different opportunities that they can have."

Reassessing NYC's natural areas

A lot can happen in 10 years. Just as the New York City skyline and neighborhoods have changed over the past decade, so have our natural areas. But just how much have things shifted?

In 2014, the Natural Areas Conservancy conducted its first Ecological Assessment on the health and extent of New York City's forests and wetlands. In partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation (NYC Parks), we collected extensive data that informed detailed frameworks and tools that guide the day-to-day management of our forests, salt marshes, and freshwater wetlands. Now, 10 years later, we are conducting a second Ecological Assessment to determine how the health and condition of these areas have changed.

To assess our forests, the NAC and NYC Parks hired four teams of research staff, including field biologists, field technicians, and NAC fellows. Over four months, these 12 individuals visited 327 forest plots: 250 that were measured in 2014 and an additional 77 plots in high-priority parks. The groups looked at what species are growing in the overstory, midstory, and understory; fallen trees; and conditions on the forest floor.

To see how our salt marshes (which are especially vulnerable to sea level rise) have changed, NYC Parks is using recent satellite imagery and land surface elevation data along with field data.



What will our new research lead to?

New recommendations.

The new data will allow us to update our goals and targets for the management and restoration of natural areas.

Expanded advocacy.

The results of this effort will help us make the case for increased protection and management of natural areas and advocate with elected officials and policy makers to invest further in these spaces.

Forests in Cities: a national network

In 2024, the NAC welcomed two new cities—Memphis, Tennessee, and Tacoma, Washington—to the Forests in Cities (FiC) network, our national coalition that promotes and advances healthy forested natural areas. Through partnership, research, and coordinated communications, we are shining a light on the critical role forests play in the sustainability and livability of our urban areas.

Forests in Cities Workshop: February 5-7, 2024

We convened the Forests in Cities network in February in Miami, Florida. Network members came together to discuss shared challenges and identify opportunities in urban forest management.



The reach of Forests in Cities in 2024:

21

cities across the U.S.

64

organizations

300k

acres of natural areas

23.8m

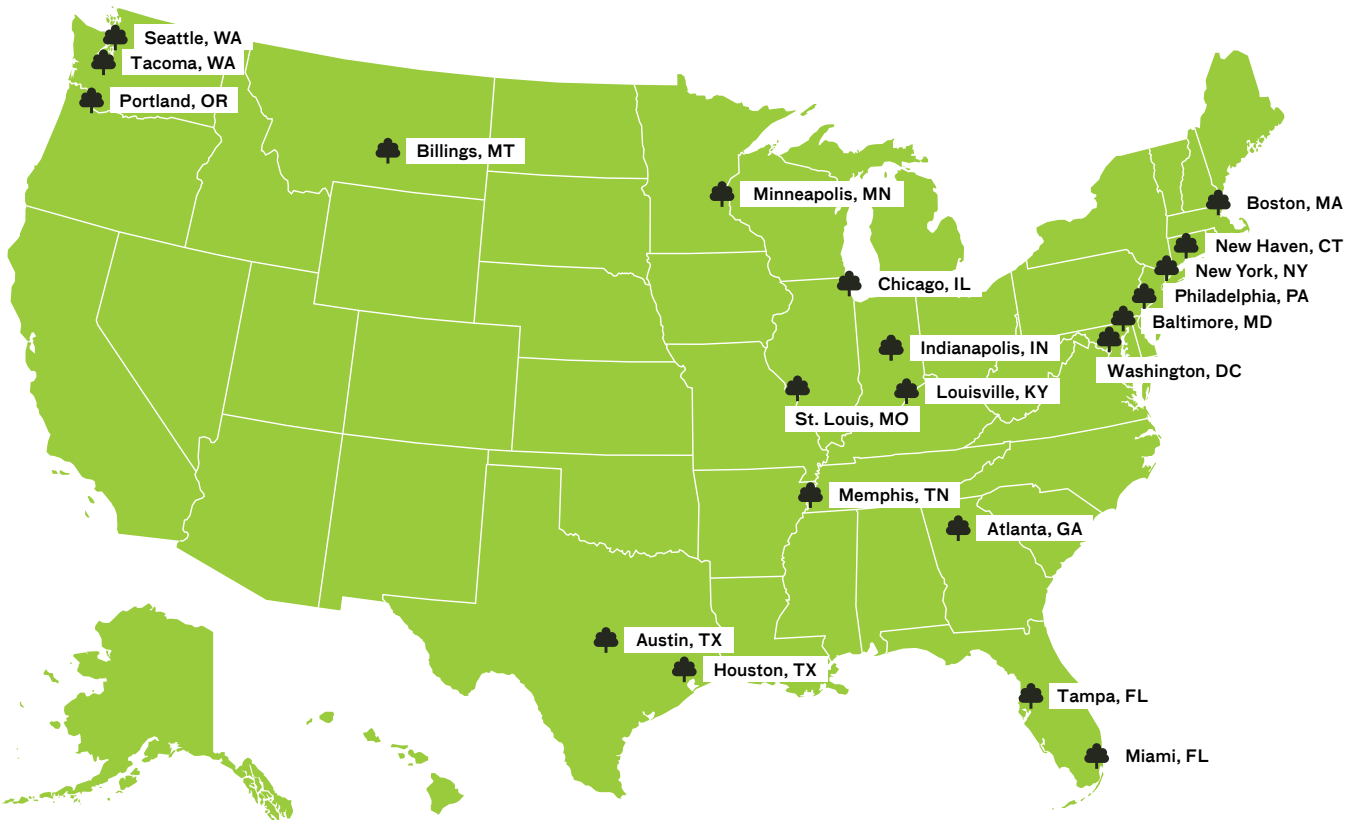
residents

42

case studies on
urban natural areas
management

10

training sessions



Spotlight on Forests in Cities member Houston, Texas

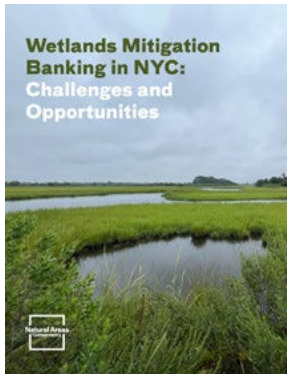
The Houston Parks and Recreation Department and the Houston-Galveston Area Council represent Houston in the Forests in Cities network. Houston has over 16,000 acres of natural areas to manage. In an effort to protect its urban green spaces, the City of Houston's Parks and Recreation Department created a first-of-its-kind Nature Preserve Ordinance to preserve, in perpetuity, city-owned natural areas. [Learn more about this groundbreaking method to protect urban nature.](#)

"The Forests in Cities network is driving national collaboration and innovation around the critical role of natural areas in our communities. The tangible benefits provided by this natural infrastructure go beyond the aesthetic and biological; they're at the juncture of many of the pressing challenges our cities face, including flooding, pollution, heat island, equity of access, and loss of natural heritage."

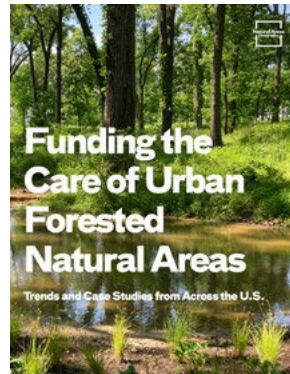
– FiC member from Houston, TX



Research reports published in 2024



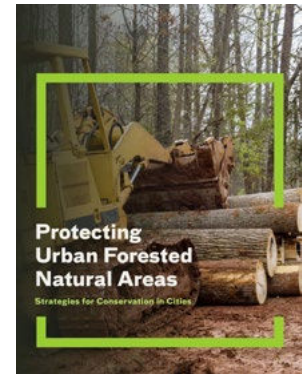
Wetlands Mitigation Banking in New York City: Challenges and Opportunities



Funding the Care of Urban Forested Natural Areas



Climate Change and Urban Nature: Opportunities, Solutions, and Risks



Protecting Urban Forested Natural Areas: Strategies for Conservation in Cities



Making nature accessible to all New Yorkers

Nature trails are where New Yorkers can take a break from the noise, crowds, and skyscrapers that dominate everyday life in New York City. They are a place to reconnect with nature, spot wildlife, walk your dog, or take a deep breath. We believe that access to nature is a fundamental right, and we want even more people to get out on their public nature trails, take a role in keeping these places clean and safe, and enjoy the respite that nature provides.

In 2025, we will have completed the formalization of New York City's network of 250 miles of nature trails and will invest further in building capacity for local communities to care for and steward nature trails.

“Being an NAC Trail Maintainer is more than just clearing a path in my local forest. As a Pathkeeper, I am preserving the health of our natural areas and making sure all New Yorkers can equitably access and experience these spaces.”



**Our impact on trails
in 2024**

452

volunteers engaged

1,664

volunteer hours logged

437

structures built
for safe and
accessible trails

28

training sessions for
NYC communities



A group of people, mostly young adults, are gathered on a dirt trail in a forest. A man with glasses and a grey t-shirt is standing on the left, leaning against a tree trunk and speaking to the group. The group consists of several people, some wearing yellow t-shirts with the text "I'm building a better working world" and "EY". One person is wearing a green baseball cap, and another is wearing a white cap with "#LiveLaCroix" on it. The background is a dense forest with many trees and green foliage. A red circular sticker with a maple leaf and the text "ORANGE TRAIL NYC Parks" is visible on the tree trunk.

Discover Inwood Hill Park's Orange Trail

Escape from the hustle and bustle of NYC in Inwood Hill's tucked-away forest. Wander along the Orange Trail to explore Lenape caves, glacial potholes, historic ruins, and scenic Hudson River views. Don't forget to pack your binoculars!

Restoring New York City's forests

Did you know?

Forests can't always take care of themselves! They need management, protection, and monitoring – or they will decline over time. Urban stressors and climate change increase the need for action!

Forest restoration sites in NYC's public parks are prioritized by NYC Parks using tools the Natural Areas Conservancy helped create, including the Forest Management Framework, Rapid Site Assessment, and the Forest Identification and Restoration Selection Tool (FIRST).

The Greenbelt, a network of parks located in the heart of Staten Island, comprises nearly 3,000 acres of green space. Willowbrook Park is one of the many parks that make up this complex. It is home to nearly 160 acres of forests, crucial for almost 10,000 people living within a 10-minute walk of the park. However, the forests in Willowbrook Park required increased attention and management—the understory was crowded with invasive species, and the forest's ability to naturally regenerate was at risk.

One of the many ways that the Natural Areas Conservancy makes a measurable impact on New York City's natural areas is to work with New York City Department of Parks & Recreation (NYC Parks) to manage and restore forests in public parks that need support—just like the forests in Willowbrook Park. The NAC advocates for the funding and flexibility to get new trees in the ground.

In 2024, we partnered with the Forest Restoration team at NYC Parks' Natural Resources Group to restore forest patches in Willowbrook Park and plant 1,446 climate-adapted, native trees. NYC Parks began their work on this site beginning in 2021, removing invasive species and preparing the area for plantings. The next step was to get trees in the ground, especially trees that are native to NYC and that can adapt to our changing climate. Over the course of two planting events, NYC Parks staff planted over 1,000 trees, including red oak, hickory, and eastern white pine. These trees will close canopy gaps, capture stormwater, and create habitat for migrating birds and pollinators. We will continue active forest restoration in 2025, working in three parks: Highbridge Park, the Bronx; Prospect Park, Brooklyn; and Forest Park, Queens.



Thank you to our donors

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Thank you!

The Natural Areas Conservancy's mission is to increase the health and resilience of urban forests and wetlands, catalyze connections between people and nature, and strengthen the workforce through innovative research, partnerships, and advocacy. Everything that we accomplished in 2024 was made possible by the generous support of our donors and partners.

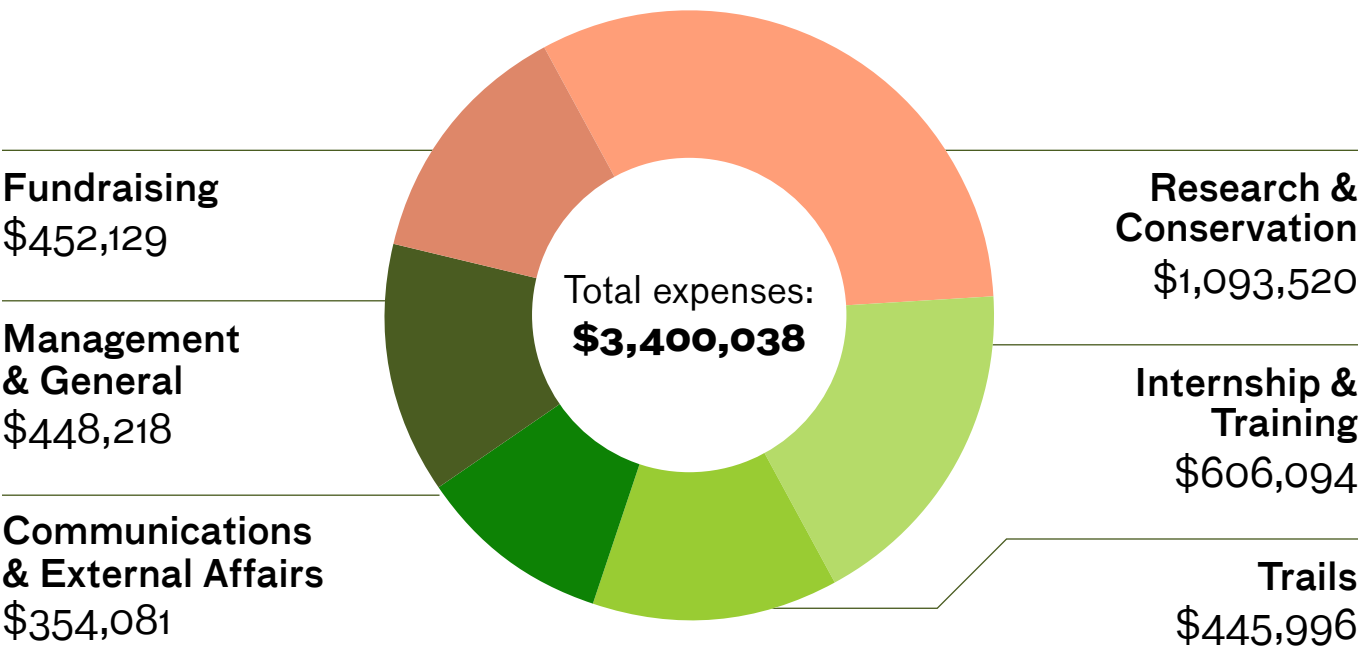
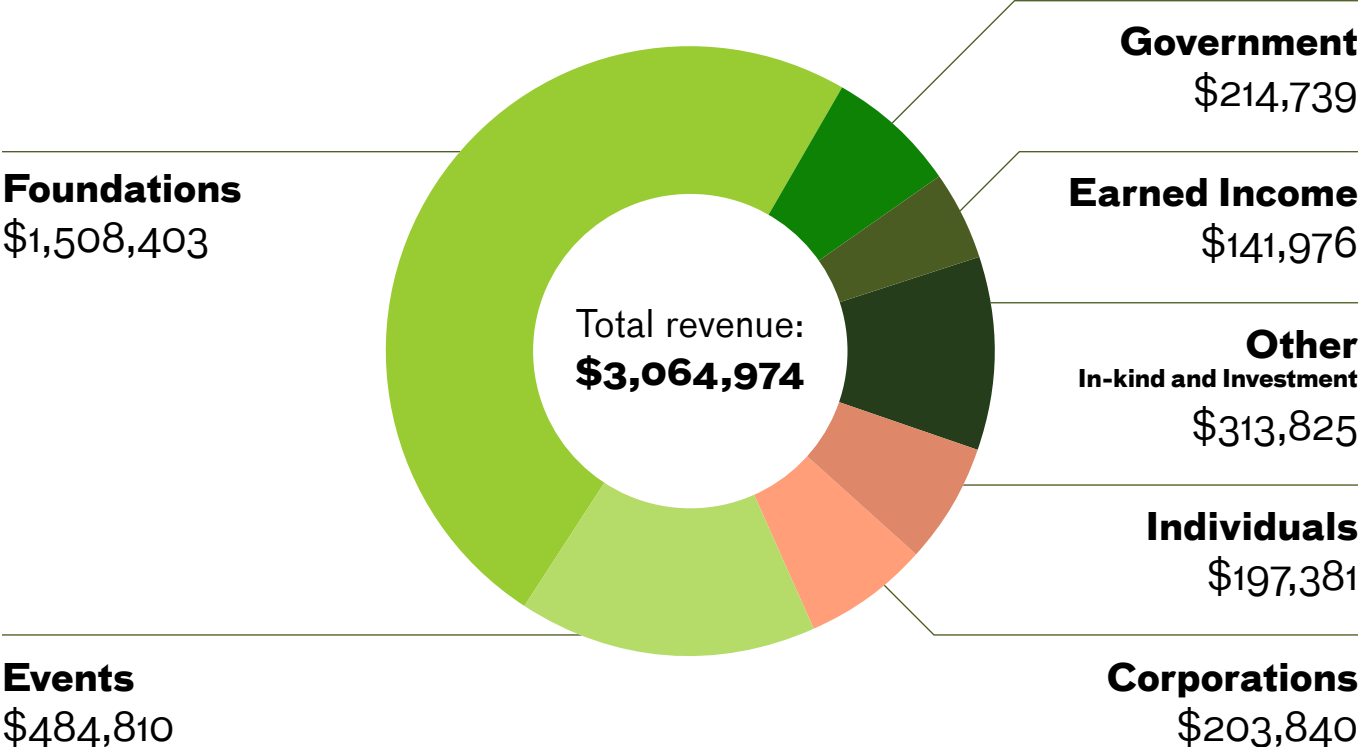
We are incredibly grateful. The NAC team includes dedicated and passionate staff, our volunteers, and our Board of Directors and Junior Board. But it also includes you.

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2024 organizational financials



74 cents of every dollar goes toward direct programming expenses.



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