



HEARTLAND
CONSERVATION
ALLIANCE

ANNUAL REPORT

2023-2024



Heartland
CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

+816-945-8505

info@heartlandconservationalliance.org

www.heartlandconservationalliance.org

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As we reflect on the past two years, it's easy to be reminded of the natural beauty that surrounds us in Kansas City and the critical importance of preserving it. The bi-state Blue River Watershed, which provides vital water drainage for two-thirds of our metropolitan area, also offers many natural amenities for outdoor enthusiasts. Hiking, biking, fishing, kayaking—these are just a few of the ways our community connects with nature here.

Protecting these spaces is about more than recreation; it's about providing a place for all of us to escape the city's bustle and reconnect with the natural world. The quiet rustle of leaves, the gentle flow of the river, the vibrant songs of birds—these moments ground us and remind us of what's truly important. But these natural areas need us as much as we need them. We share a responsibility to be their stewards.

These past two years, we've made significant strides in expanding our urban greenspace holdings and stewardship through three key initiatives:

- **New Conservation Land Acquisition:** Thanks to the generous support of the Missouri Department of Conservation and private donors, we acquired 98 acres in the floodplain along the Blue River to protect and restore. This acquisition protects vital wildlife habitat and water quality. In the coming years, we will restore the preserve, connect it to the Blue River Greenway, and offer public and engagement opportunities.
- **Municipal Farm Conservation Easement:** We secured our first Conservation Easement from the City of Kansas City, MO, at the 28.4-acre Municipal Farm Conservation Site. This easement restricts property use to activities that conserve natural resources, ensuring its protection for generations to come.
- **Heartland Overlook Preserve Restoration:** Woodland restoration efforts at our 40-acre Heartland Overlook Preserve continue to advance, thanks to the dedication of our Conservation Land Steward, volunteers, contractors, and funding from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources and the Missouri Department of Conservation. Additionally, Urban Trail Co. completed a new 2.2-mile trail for hiking and mountain biking, enhancing public accessibility.

Our Blue River Nature Guide program has also flourished. In its first year, we served over 220 community members in 2024 with a variety of free guided experiences along the river (i.e. hiking, kayaking, yoga, etc.). We also trained 11 Green Guard environmental stewards to help protect the watershed.

In 2023 and 2024, we welcomed over 100 participants each year at our inaugural and 2nd annual, free family-friendly nature-based Blue River Discovery Days Festivals at Minor Park along the Blue River Parkway, in collaboration with our valued partners.

2024 marked my third year as Executive Director of HCA, and I'm incredibly proud of what we've accomplished together. We've also been fortunate to welcome new talent to our team and celebrate well-deserved promotions:

- Dr. Jess Hartel, who joined us in March 2023, was promoted to Senior Director of Conservation & Education in June 2024.
- Hannah Vander Meulen joined as our Outdoor Education Coordinator & Blue River Nature Guide in February 2024.
- Christian Holderby joined as our Conservation Land Steward in March 2024.
- Rebecca Thacker joined as Director of Development & Partnerships in September 2024.

We are truly fortunate to have such a dedicated and talented staff supporting our conservation alliance.

Looking ahead to 2025, we are excited to engage with communities and together expand our conservation efforts, alliance services, and outdoor recreation programming. Thank you for your unwavering support and commitment to our mission!

Logan Heley, Executive Director



LETTER FROM BOARD PRESIDENT

As I reflect on this past year, I am filled with immense pride for what we have accomplished together. Through the dedication of our staff and volunteers, Heartland Conservation Alliance has reached significant milestones that will shape our work throughout the Kansas City region for years to come.

One of my personal favorites of our many achievements this year was hosting our second annual Blue River Discovery Days (BRDD). This year, we connected more Kansas Citians to the Blue River through both our Discovery Days event and year-round Blue River Nature Guide programming. Through guided hikes, water quality demonstrations, invasive species and trash removal work days, and family-friendly activities, we've inspired new advocates for our urban waterways and green spaces. Witnessing families discover the hidden treasures of the Blue River—many for the first time—has been among my most rewarding experiences as board president.

A major milestone in 2024 was quadrupling our land holdings as years of hard work all came together at the right time. This year, Heartland Conservation Alliance had the opportunity to work with funding partners and a generous private donor to purchase a 98-acre property, named the Blue River Nature Preserve, in South Kansas City next to our friends at Cornerstones of Care. We also had the opportunity to sign a 28.4 acre conservation easement at Municipal Farm with the City of Kansas City, bringing to head an effort that has been underway for several years. This remarkable expansion of conserved area within the Blue River watershed represents not just an increase in acreage, but a significant commitment to preserving critical urban habitats, improving water quality, and creating green spaces accessible to all Kansas City communities.

Behind the scenes, we have been working diligently to build a stronger foundation for the future. We strengthened our organizational structure by expanding our staff and secured funding, including a \$5 million American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) stormwater grant from the state of Missouri to restore over 100 acres of land in the Lower Blue River watershed. We have also spent the year focused on updating the Blue River Report Card to continue measuring progress on the Blue River from several critical perspectives - keep an eye out for the final report soon!

None of this work would be possible without you—our members, donors, volunteers, and partners. Your belief in our mission to protect and conserve the Blue River continues to inspire us and drive our work forward to creating a healthier, more connected and accessible Blue River Watershed.

With sincere gratitude,
Regan Tokos



ABOUT HEARTLAND CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

We envision a sustainable environment that supports the health of all human and natural communities in the Kansas City region.

OUR MISSION

The Heartland Conservation Alliance works with partners to protect, connect, and restore the Blue River watershed and its urban greenspaces for the benefit and enjoyment of all.

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THE BLUE RIVER

With over 800,000 residents living in its watershed, the Blue River is Kansas City's river. It begins in Kansas and flows 42 miles across Kansas and Missouri into the heart of the Metro before it meets the Missouri River. The Blue River has many tributaries that have their own local importance including Brush, Indian, Tomahawk, Coffee, Wolf and Camp Branch Creeks. The Blue River runs through suburban and urban neighborhoods, industrial areas, brownfields, wetlands and forest.

The Blue River is a regional asset with great potential, but it is currently underused and under appreciated.

Heartland Conservation Alliance is dedicated to restoring and protecting this vital natural resource while expanding equitable access to connect and engage communities throughout the Blue River Watershed.

CONSERVATION & POLICY



Created, with partners, the well received [Blue River Greenway Vision and Case Statement](#) describes how a connected multiuse trail could promote watershed conservation by improving public awareness and access. Collaboration meetings were held with Kansas and Missouri partners, including joint work on a funding matrix.

With support from the Missouri Department of Conservation and private donors, we acquired 98 acres in the floodplain adjacent to the Blue River, Jackson County Parks land, and the Cornerstones of Care Ozanam campus for reforestation of former agricultural fields. This strategic acquisition will permanently protect critical wildlife habitat, improve water quality, and provide future opportunities for public access via the Blue River Greenway and education.

Our Conservation & Policy Work Group meetings transitioned into six teams grading 14 watershed health indicators for the 2024 Blue River Report Card update, which will be published in 2025. Over 1,000 volunteer hours went into making updates and improvements to analytical metrics, maps and GIS data.

In a significant step for conservation, HCA signed a conservation easement with the City of Kansas City, MO in September 2024 to be the conservation easement monitor for 28.4 acres at the Municipal Farm that's adjacent to the Blue River. The easement is nestled within the 440-acre Municipal Farm, which is one of the largest contiguous spaces in KCMO south of the MO River. Since 2018, HCA has partnered with the City of KCMO on a MDNR-funded project to restore this acreage, with Habitat Architects as the primary contractor and Vireo providing the [Baseline Documentation Report](#).

Conducted [Green Guard Environmental Stewardship Program](#) (funded by KC Water) and Exploring Roots Summer Adventure Challenge (funded by KC Neighborhood Tourism Development Fund) programs. Conducted recurring Green Guard Environmental Stewardship Program and Exploring Roots Summer Adventure Challenge programs. These engaged 110 species removal (8.2 acres), planted 708 trees, and supported 50 similar partner outdoor activities.



CONSERVATION & POLICY



Advanced the ecological restoration of the 40-acre Heartland Overlook Preserve through numerous volunteer workdays and strategic contractor-led initiatives, rigorously testing diverse restoration techniques such as manual cutting and sheep browsing to optimize results and directly inform our lead role in a \$5 million ARPA riparian restoration grant for broader impact.

In the final stages of securing \$2.7 million as a lead contractor under the MDNR ARPA Stormwater grant awarded to the City of KCMO, which will enable the restoration of 140 acres of the Blue River riparian zone (23rd-53rd St.), while also delivering crucial public education, community engagement programs, and comprehensive research and monitoring services to ensure long-term sustainability.

Advocated for conservation-friendly public policies both in general, such as in the [Comprehensive Plan - City of Overland Park, Kansas](#) planning process, and on specific issues, such as a potential Johnson County parks development project in which a [Federal grant could pay for trails on an old JoCo industrial site](#).



Made significant progress on our MDNR 319 watershed management plan in collaboration with Missouri State University as they are providing the modeling data and also contracted Native Lands Restoration Collaborative to restore 2.5 acres at the Heartland Overlook Preserve as part of a demonstration site.

Restored 8.2 acres at the Heartland Overlook Preserve by removing invasive species and seeding/planting natives with the help of volunteers and contractors. This work was funded in part by Missouri Department of Conservation, Missouri Department of Natural Resources, and the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation using US Fish and Wildlife funds.



EDUCATION & OUTREACH



In 2024 HCA and/or our contractors hosted 28 volunteer workday events that ranged from invasive species removal to native plantings to trash cleanup to bioblitzes at the HOP and other action areas within the watershed that engaged 161 volunteers.

Eight other HCA-led events included [Blue River Discovery Days](#) (see [flyer](#) and [press release](#)), BioBlitzes at the Little Blue River Park and the Heartland Overlook Preserve (with The Nature Conservancy), a Blue River kayak trip (see [news story](#)) and the [City Nature Challenge](#). 153 people participated in our [MLK Day Nature Walks](#).



Led 1,798 people on guided nature walks and conducted six Blue River Nature Guide (BRiNG) steering committee meetings, with support from Jackson County, MO as described in the [BRiNG report](#). We also received BRiNG programmatic support from Hallmark and the Mid-America Regional Council.

2024 was BRiNG's inaugural year. HCA hosted 12 BRiNG guided nature experiences at five different Blue River Parkway locations serving 289 people. Experiences included bird hikes, plant hikes, fungi forays, plogging, ecosystem restoration, water quality demonstration and sampling and kayaking.

Transitioned away from our former Nature Action Crew while increasing support for Cornerstones of Care's [Build Trybe Conservation Landscaping job training program](#), which we co-founded in 2022. We provided 31 conservation landscaping career training sessions. This shift allows each organization to focus on their core mission and expertise.

Debuted [new HCA brochure](#) and increased HCA visibility at diverse public events. HCA social media reached over 144,734 persons.



ALLIANCE SERVICES



HCA serves as the EPA Blue River Ambassador and therefore convened six [Urban Waters Federal Partnership | US EPA](#) steering committee meetings with 102 participants. This forum provides "alliance services" as fifteen confirmed governmental and nonprofit partners coordinate conservation activities in both riparian corridor and urban areas of the Blue River watershed.

This collaboration manages the "Renew the Blue" promotional campaign which issued 27 social media posts, web newsletters attracting 30,332 readers, special event notices with another 23,591 views, and maintains the [official Renew the Blue homepage](#), increasing public appreciation of the Blue River natural area.

HCA collaborated closely with partners, including Johnson County (KS) Government and The Nature Conservancy, to develop and submit proposals for significant restoration funding.

Strategic communication and branding analysis was completed to revitalize the Blue River public outreach efforts.

To strengthen collaboration and celebrate achievements, HCA hosted our annual Partnership Summit on December 5th, 2023 with 53 partners celebrating conservation successes. We thank lead sponsors MARC, Evergy and Kansas City Water. Another Summit will be held in early 2025.

Despite Mid America Regional Council's (MARC) unsuccessful application for \$200 million in EPA Climate Pollution Reduction Funds, where only 25 grants were awarded out of nearly 300 applications nationwide, HCA demonstrated strong commitment through a letter of support, pledging to restore 95.26 acres of land along the Blue River and collaborating with MARC in planning meetings. While the MARC application was not selected, the process fostered strong regional momentum and valuable partnerships for future environmental action.



ORGANIZATIONAL HEALTH

Board, staff and partners such as The Conservation Fund completed our 2023 – 2027 HCA Strategic Plan including updates to our Vision, Mission and Value Statements. This and the Blue River Action Plan guide our prioritized activities and staffing and provide a clear roadmap for our organization's future.

Heartland Conservation Alliance continues to operate in a financially responsible and sustainable fashion, as indicated by an audit with no significant comments. As of December 31, 2024 HCA had \$861,366 in total assets including \$491,651 in conserved land, with \$1,009,734 in revenue 2024.



HCA is a member of the Land Trust Alliance with plans to seek their accreditation for ethical and effective operations.

HCA revenues are primarily federal, state and local government grants plus charitable contributions. We appreciate all our funders, the largest of which are listed here.



BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Regan Tokos (2023 - 2024) President (2024)
Bill Blessing (2023 - 2024), President (2023), Past President (2024)
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Jared Coleman (2024)
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THANK YOU TO OUR ALL OF OUR FUNDERS!



GRANTS

Missouri Department of Conservation
Missouri Department of Natural Resources
Environmental Protection Agency
National Fish & Wildlife Foundation
United States Forest Service
Wichita State University
Jackson County Parks + Recreation
Kansas City Water
Kansas City Neighborhood Tourism
Development Fund
Mid-America Regional Council
Schumaker Family Foundation
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Mark & Emily Johnson
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What on Earth

**A heartfelt thank you to
our individual donors**

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