



NATURAL AREAS PROGRAM STRATEGIC PLAN 2026

# A VISION FOR OHIO'S NATURAL DIVERSITY



Explore, engage, and empower for a better tomorrow.

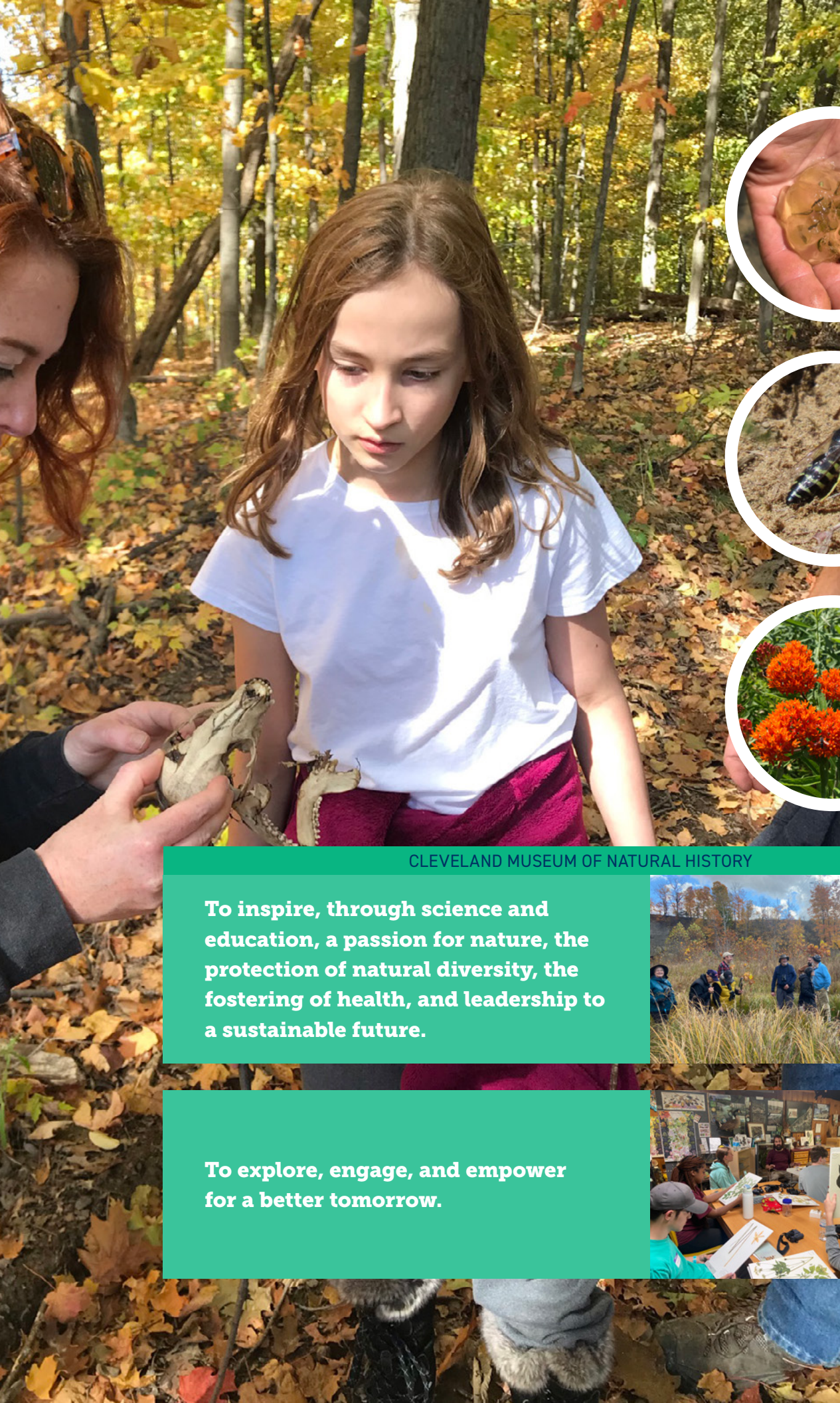
# INTRODUCTION



The **Cleveland Museum of Natural History's Natural Areas Program** is a vital expression of the Museum's mission. By protecting our region's rare and at-risk plants, wildlife, and habitats, we will safeguard the natural diversity that is essential to our well-being and makes Ohio "home." Through conservation, stewardship, scientific research, and public engagement, the Program transforms the Museum's mission into meaningful action while advancing its vision.

As conservation challenges continue to evolve, so too must the strategies used to protect Ohio's natural diversity. This Strategic Plan establishes a shared direction and a practical roadmap for guiding conservation efforts over the coming decade — aligning local priorities, organizational capacity, and collaborative partnerships to strengthen the Program's long-term impact and create lasting benefits for both people and nature.





CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

**To inspire, through science and education, a passion for nature, the protection of natural diversity, the fostering of health, and leadership to a sustainable future.**



**MISSION**

**To explore, engage, and empower for a better tomorrow.**



**VISION**



## STRATEGIC PILLARS

Strategic priorities supported  
by interconnected goals,  
implementation strategies,  
and performance measures



Protect the lands that  
define Ohio's local  
and natural heritage



Restore our region's  
natural diversity,  
especially rare,  
endangered, and  
threatened species



Inspire a passion  
for nature



Leverage the  
Museum's scientific  
expertise to lead  
our region toward a  
sustainable future



**Natural heritage** - natural features or areas  
with outstanding, universal value from the point of  
view of science, conservation, or natural beauty.



**Sustainability** - meeting the needs of the  
present and local population without compromising  
the ability of future generations or populations in  
other locations to meet their needs.

# TEN-YEAR GOALS

## SNAPSHOT



### **Goal 1: Connection**

Expand and connect preserves — with a focus on conserving core forest blocks, fens, barrens, and bogs — to provide the large, uninterrupted habitats required by prioritized species.



### **Goal 3: Awareness**

Raise awareness of the biodiversity crisis and inspire action by Museum constituents, including preserve neighbors, to protect natural diversity in our region.



### **Goal 2: Stewardship**

Slow the rapid decline of regional natural diversity through stewardship efforts on behalf of prioritized rare, endangered, and threatened plants and animals.



### **Goal 4: Collaboration**

Collaborate to implement a research agenda that advances the Museum's mission and conservation priorities through our preserves and collections, and encourage partners to adopt findings to restore prioritized species.

# CONNECTION

# GOAL 1



**Connection** - refers to habitat connectivity, or the degree to which the landscape supports or hinders movement that is necessary for wildlife to reach food, water, and other resources.



**TEN-YEAR GOAL:** Expand and connect preserves — with a focus on conserving core forest blocks, fens, barrens, and bogs — to provide the large, uninterrupted habitats required by prioritized species.

## THREE-YEAR GOALS:

**GOAL 1A:** Habitat-level ecological integrity monitoring for prioritized rare species survival has been completed and informs our preserve portfolio strategy as well as regional conservation priorities.

**STRATEGY 1.** Identify habitat requirements for rare species in relationship to the overall preserve portfolio, using an optimized mix of data, technology, and human capacity.

### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- Minimum habitat size requirements for the long-term viability of the top 20% priority species was determined
- 13 preserve growth plans informed by rare species habitat needs

**STRATEGY 2.** Maximize the team's monitoring, naturalist, and stewardship capacity by formalizing and documenting roles, responsibilities, and resource requirements.

### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- Formalized roles documented & streamlined
- Resources required have been identified and progress is made on filling capacity gaps
- Existing staff is retained

**GOAL 1B:** Strategic expansions of existing preserves have been achieved by protecting available parcels according to our preserve portfolio strategy.

**STRATEGY 1.** Enable strategic acquisition of prioritized parcels by diversifying funding sources, including expanding the revolving fund.

### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- New private-sector funding sources identified
- Fee-for-service option explored
- Revolving fund is doubled
- Significant progress towards completing 10% of existing preserves
- A process is developed and implemented to maintain regular contact with targeted property owners

**STRATEGY 2.** Enable strategic acquisition of prioritized parcels by improving governance structure.

### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- Governance structure has been updated and implemented that results in land-acquisition approvals in less than 7 days' time

**Stewardship** - refers to activities that aid in the ongoing care, management, and responsible use of resources and land.



**TEN-YEAR GOAL: Slow the rapid decline of regional natural diversity through stewardship efforts on behalf of prioritized rare, endangered, and threatened plants and animals.**

### THREE-YEAR GOALS:

**GOAL 2A:** We have documented the status of the top 20% of priority plant and animal populations on our preserves, with a focus on state and federal rankings, and have surveyed and mapped invasive plant cover that threatens priority species and habitats.

**STRATEGY 1.** Collaboratively prioritize the top 20% of plant and animal populations on Natural Areas preserves and document both 1) the prioritization methodology and 2) their story of significance to Museum constituents.

#### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- Create and approve methodology that identifies the top 20%
- Develop compelling stories for at least 5 priority species

**STRATEGY 2.** Complete mapping of rare species and invasive cover in coordination with partners.

#### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- At least one new technology (e.g., remote sensing) has been integrated and applied to improve monitoring
- Scenario 1 (no monitoring biologist): 5 preserves have known rare species mapped
- Scenario 2 (with a monitoring biologist): 20% of preserves have been mapped

**GOAL 2B:** Increase stewardship investment to manage rare and invasive species, using a phased approach that considers both previously identified management plans and new data.

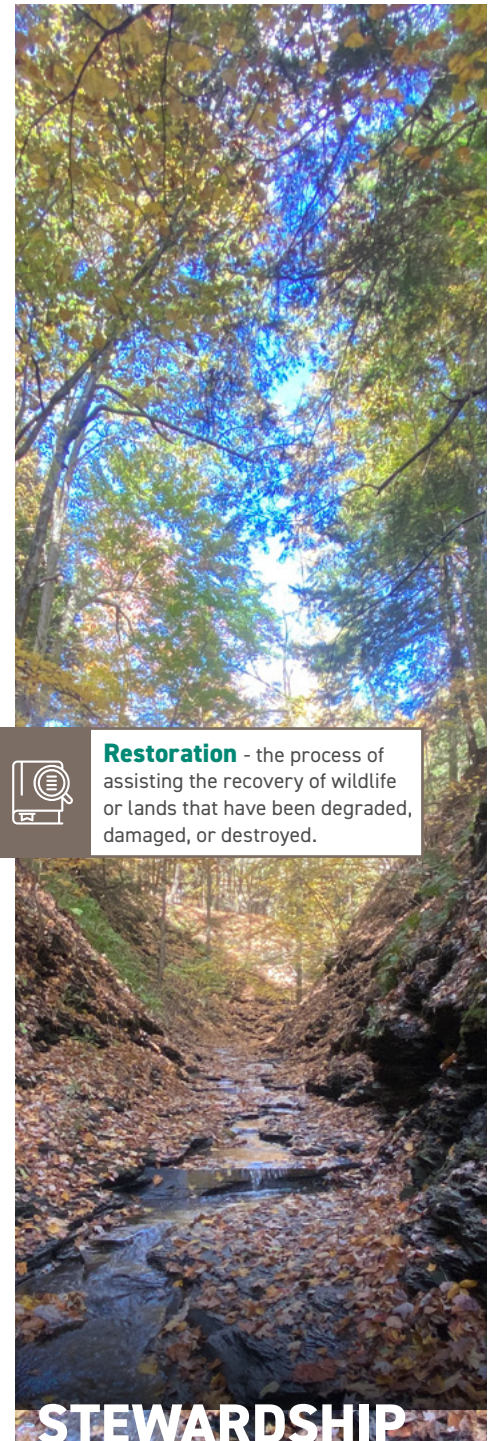
**STRATEGY 1.** We have developed management plans to guide investment in priority species stewardship and restoration and have aligned treatment plans to address severely threatening plant species.

#### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- Improve the structure and usability of preserve management plans for more flexibility and replicability
- Monitoring data informs adaptive, updated management plans for 20% of preserves
- Rare species stewardship activities implemented
- We are tracking the effectiveness of stewardship activities
- At least 7 preserves see an increase in investment (moving up a “tier” in the cost assessment)



**Restoration** - the process of assisting the recovery of wildlife or lands that have been degraded, damaged, or destroyed.



**STEWARDSHIP**

## GOAL 2



**Natural diversity** - biodiversity refers to the variety of wildlife in a given area. Natural diversity is broader and includes geological formations, natural places of historical and cultural significance, and parts of nature with unique beauty.



**TEN-YEAR GOAL: Raise awareness of the biodiversity crisis and inspire action by Museum constituents, including preserve neighbors, to protect natural diversity in our region.**

### THREE-YEAR GOALS:

**GOAL 3A:** The Natural Areas Program's purpose and value are so well-understood internally that the program's goals and operations are integrated with those of the Museum as a whole.

**STRATEGY 1.** Integrate the Natural Areas story into the Museum's internal communications, employee onboarding & engagement, and professional learning by building out new storytelling assets and engaging in regular outreach to relevant teams.

#### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- 2 high-impact storytelling assets are developed, resulting in at least one new collaborative initiative
- In coordination with Project Athena, Natural Areas coordinates and completes Museum-wide engagement at least twice a year

**GOAL 3B:** We have forged new partnerships to provide opportunities for stakeholders to connect with the natural world, to understand the importance of conservation, and to appreciate the Natural Areas Program's work.

**STRATEGY 1.** Leverage the Natural Areas communications strategy, brand story and key messaging to develop storytelling assets that can be integrated into the Museum's external communications, marketing, and public affairs strategies.

#### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- Led by the Marketing team, 2 high-impact storytelling assets focused on external audiences are developed, building on stories developed in other goals of this strategic plan
- Outreach completed to key external audiences as part of a social media campaign to achieve year-over-year growth in digital engagement by 5%
- Explore and recommend the feasibility of Land Trust Alliance Accreditation or similar to elevate the brand
- Increase number of external recognitions, scientific presentations and participation in collaborative science-based groups by 10%

**STRATEGY 2.** Through an existing or new partnership, offer additional opportunities for public access to one or more preserves.

#### METRICS FOR SUCCESS:

- Open one new preserve for the public with support from local park partners
- External partners have assisted in increasing access by new audiences at 2-3 Museum preserves
- Partner with internal Education and Programming Team to create at a minimum of 1 new program at our preserves, aimed a minimum of 50 new visitors and/or students

**AWARENESS**

## GOAL 3



## GOAL 4

**TEN-YEAR GOAL:** Collaborate to implement a research agenda that advances the Museum's mission and conservation priorities through our preserves and collections, and encourage partners to adopt findings to restore prioritized species.

**THREE-YEAR GOALS:**

**GOAL 4A:** We have convened internal and external partners to help define a Natural Areas research agenda that advances the Museum's mission and our region's conservation capacity, with the potential for global implications.

**STRATEGY 1.** Establish new and support current research collaborations and projects needed to assess the species survival needs supported in goals 1 and 2 of this plan.

**METRICS FOR SUCCESS:**

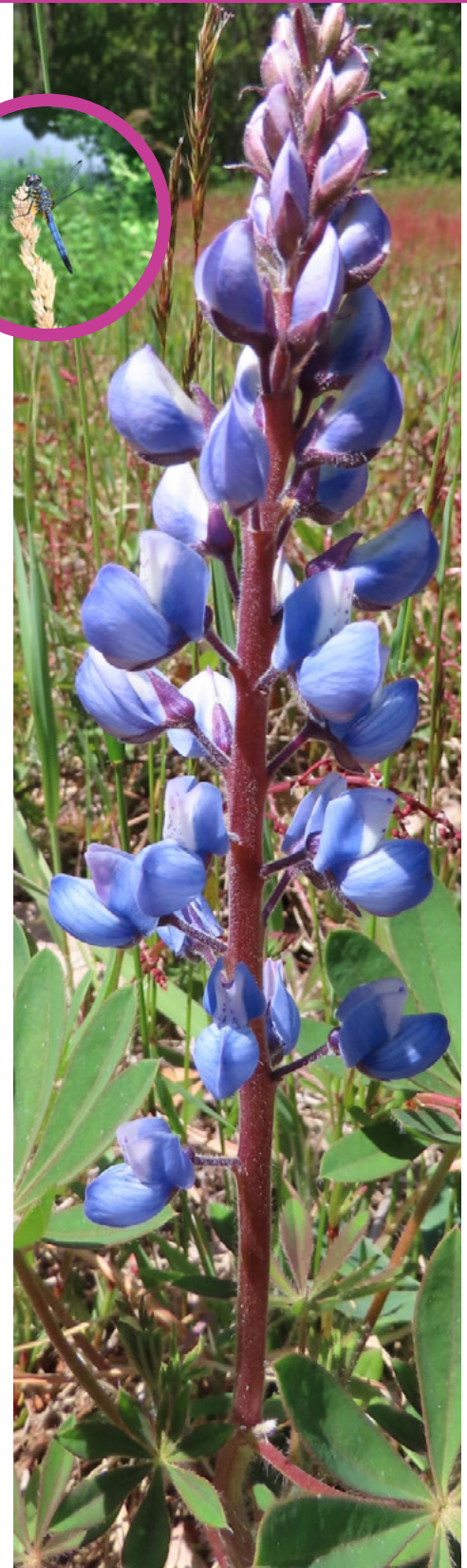
- A matrix of tiered monitoring & research (M&R) priorities and required scientific knowledge, skills, and abilities to implement was cross-referenced with both Museum and external research/researchers
- An expanded stakeholder roundtable of regional researchers was convened where the M&R priorities list for Museum preserves was shared for feedback
- Annual appeal to targeted institutions results in more research agreements signed related to internal priorities

**GOAL 4B:** We have developed the infrastructure for a thriving field research and monitoring initiative that is accessible to partners.

**STRATEGY 1.** Promote the Natural Areas living collections via integration with the Museum's new collections access interface.

**METRICS FOR SUCCESS:**

- Permitting and research approval on Museum preserves is improved and implemented



# WHAT IS THE BIODIVERSITY CRISIS?

According to wildlife experts, the average size of monitored wildlife populations has shrunk by 73% over the 50-year period between 1970 and 2020, and approximately one million species are now facing extinction.

Researchers describe biodiversity as essential to the “natural capital” on which our society and economy are built: clean, abundant fresh water; healthy air; and fertile soils and sufficient pollinators for food security and public health.

Sources: Planetary Health Alliance, Johns Hopkins University & Environmental Change Institute, Oxford University



ANIMALS WE'RE **PROTECTING**

**Cerulean warbler**  
*Setophaga cerulea*

A small, brilliantly-colored songbird, the cerulean warbler breeds in eastern North America, where it requires large, uninterrupted blocks of mature forest to nest and defend its young from predators. Ohio, which sits within the cerulean's core nesting range, has lost much of that mature forest — and indeed, cerulean populations have declined as much as 75% since 1960. Thanks to the Natural Areas Program's land protection and stewardship efforts, ceruleans can still be found on a number of the Museum's larger forested preserves that provide the birds the habitat they need.



## PLANTS WE'RE **PROTECTING**

### Spreading globeflower *Trollius laxus*

Spreading globeflower is a showy, yellow-flowered perennial in the buttercup family. It requires cold, alkaline groundwater, typically found in habitats called fens, few of which remain in Ohio. As a result, globeflower is found in only a handful of spots in the state, including the Museum's McCoy Fen Preserve, where it is the subject of intense stewardship to maintain its habitat requirements. Spreading globeflower is listed as Endangered in Ohio.



## CONSERVATION TERMS **DEFINED**

**Connection** - refers to habitat connectivity, or the degree to which the landscape supports or hinders movement that is necessary for wildlife to reach food, water, and other resources.

**Natural diversity** - biodiversity refers to the variety of wildlife in a given area. Natural diversity is broader and includes geological formations, natural places of historical and cultural significance, and parts of nature with unique beauty.

**Natural heritage** - natural features or areas with outstanding, universal value from the point of view of science, conservation, or natural beauty.

**Restoration** - the process of assisting the recovery of wildlife or lands that have been degraded, damaged, or destroyed.

**Stewardship** - refers to activities that aid in the ongoing care, management, and responsible use of resources and land.

**Sustainability** - meeting the needs of the present and local population without compromising the ability of future generations or populations in other locations to meet their needs.



# OUR COMMITMENTS

## TO NATURE & COMMUNITIES



### **Abundant biodiversity**

Ohio's rarest species will have protected habitats where they can recover and flourish



### **Prosperous economy**

Restoring biodiversity will support the productive farmlands, healthy lakes and rivers, and vibrant communities upon which our local economy depends



### **Healthy communities**

Stewardship efforts on behalf of native plants and wildlife will safeguard Ohioans' fresh water, air quality, and food security, while protecting against extreme weather and the spread of disease



### **Enduring local heritage**

Partnering with local landowners and governments, we will preserve the lands and rural character that have made Ohio home for generations of families



### **Life-changing science education & research**

Encounters with native plants and wildlife in their habitats will help young people find their spark and expand scientific study opportunities for all

**Help us ensure a future for Ohio's rarest wildlife and wild places.**

**Learn how to get involved at [www.cmnh.org/conservation](http://www.cmnh.org/conservation)**



The Cleveland Museum of  
Natural History's Natural Areas Program  
[naturalareas@cmnh.org](mailto:naturalareas@cmnh.org)  
216-231-4600 ext. 3505



**Sustainable  
Economies**

With questions about the planning process, contact:  
Marissa Ferrari  
[mferrari@sustainableeconomies.com](mailto:mferrari@sustainableeconomies.com)  
Elizabeth Schuster  
[eschuster@sustainableeconomies.com](mailto:eschuster@sustainableeconomies.com)