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Land conservation: a critical component to stemming the extinction crisis | GUEST COMMENTARY

OP-ED

By Josh Hastings

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FILE - Corals on the Great Barrier Reef are visible in Gunggandji Sea Country off coast of Queensland in eastern Australia on Nov. 14, 2022. Humanity still has a chance, close to the last one, to prevent the worst of climate change's future harms, a top United Nations panel of scientists said Monday, March 20, 2023. The report mentions "tipping points" around that temperature of species extinction, including coral reefs, irreversible melting of ice sheets and sea level rise on the order of several meters (several yards). (AP Photo/Sam McNeil, File) (Sam McNeil/AP)

Every single day, **between 150 and 170 plant and animal species become permanently extinct**. Not in the last 450 million years has Earth witnessed an extinction crisis this intense, and this is the only extinction event ever to happen from something other than an asteroid or natural geological event.

Immense human development of Earth's land and natural resources has led to the current mass extinction crisis we now face. These past few decades — **across the globe** — we have observed the colony collapse of **numerous bee species**, as well as the dramatic drop in populations of **bats, birds, insects and other pollinators**. In North America alone, nearly **3 billion fewer birds** exist now, than in 1970.

Why does all this matter? Among many other reasons, this matters because humans rely on the ecosystem services and benefits provided by other species. Pollinators, for example, are essential to agriculture, making possible more than one in three bites of food we eat. The health of pollinators directly impacts our food security.

We can locally address this immense challenge through something Maryland does quite well and thoughtfully — land conservation.

Land conservation is one of the most impactful ways to save Earth's biodiversity. The Maryland the Beautiful bills (**Senate Bill 470/House Bill 631**), before the Maryland General Assembly, are the state's response to President Joe Biden's **Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful report**, which sets a new national goal of 30% of U.S. lands and waters conserved, connected and restored by 2030. The Maryland the Beautiful Act goes a step further to locally address this immense problem by setting a new goal of protecting 40% of Maryland land by

2040 and by providing a plan, and new tools and resources, to improve the stewardship of the land.

This past December, at the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP 15), governments from around the world came together to agree on a new set of goals to halt and reverse nature loss. One of the **principal global targets adopted** was to achieve effective conservation and management of at least 30% of the world's lands, inland waters, coastal areas and oceans — with emphasis on areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services. Roughly 17% of the world's lands and 10% of marine areas are currently protected. The proposed Maryland the Beautiful legislation builds upon these international and national goals, continuing Maryland's national leadership in land preservation.

Maryland has long supported a robust suite of land preservation programs, including: Program Open Space, which buys and improves state and local parkland; Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation and the Rural Legacy Programs, which purchase easements on farms and forestland; Community Parks and Playgrounds; historic preservation programs and more. Thanks to these state programs and the great work of local governments, the Maryland Environmental Trust and nonprofit land trusts, Maryland has **conserved nearly 30% of its lands and approximately 24% of its total land mass** (including waterways).

The Maryland the Beautiful bills support the state's efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay, protect our forests, and improve local economies through outdoor recreation, tourism and natural resource-based industries. Land conservation is one tool we have to implement “Natural Climate Solutions” — where the forests, grasses, and marshlands, when conserved, can fight climate change through carbon sequestration and can buffer vulnerable communities from extreme storm events.

Now is the time to build upon our past success. Now is the time to conserve more land, restore the health of the lands and waters, and to support the organizations

that are on the ground, working with landowners to improve habitat, make lands more resilient and use the tool of conservation to save our planet and the precious species that call it home.

Speaking on behalf of the more than 30 environmental and conservation organizations working to pass these bills and to increase land conservation, we appreciate the leadership of Sen. Sarah Elfreth and Del. Dana Stein in sponsoring these bills. We hope readers will do everything possible to support these bills and to continue to help improve the health of lands and waters in Maryland and beyond. The future of all other species and the future of our species, depends upon it.

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