

Testimony: HB784 Establishment of an Irreplaceable Natural Areas Program in Maryland's Department of Natural Resources
Position: Favorable
Committee: Environment and Transportation Committee
Hearing Date: February 23, 2022

I'm writing in support of HB784, a bill to establish an **Irreplaceable Natural Areas Program** in the Department of Natural Resources, for the purpose of preserving Maryland's native biodiversity on State-owned land managed by the Department.

Maryland's ecosystems and native plant communities are under siege from development-related habitat destruction, invasive species, climate change, over-abundant white-tailed deer populations, heavy and increasing human recreational use, and insufficient management and restoration. These impacts have resulted in major changes to Maryland's biodiversity over the past century, including increasing numbers of native species becoming rare, threatened and endangered.

According to *Vascular Plants of Maryland, USA: A Comprehensive Account of the State's Biodiversity*, there are 2,918 vascular plants with 2,094 native and 824 non-native species and varieties. Of the native species, **737** are tracked by the Maryland Natural Heritage Program due to concerns about existing and potential threats to their survival.

Native plants do not exist in a vacuum. They sustain native animals, are the basis of the food web, and require sufficient high quality habitat in order to thrive. Native plants and animals have coevolved over very long periods of time and are strongly dependent on one another. Some animals require particular plant species or genera in order to complete their life cycle. In addition to the many environmental services that native plants provide, they serve as essential larval food for caterpillars that feed Maryland's native birds and other wildlife. Native insects provide essential pollination services for many insect-pollinated native plant species.

Establishment of an Irreplaceable Natural Areas Program will give DNR a clear directive to better protect unique natural communities of rare or declining plant and animal species, and outstanding examples of plant communities and ecosystems in Maryland. With threats to native habitats and species increasing, establishment of an Irreplaceable Natural Areas Program will require DNR to delineate these areas and develop management plans to ensure their long-term survival.

Respectfully,

Jil Swearingen
President, In The Weeds Consulting

Irreplaceable, that's what they are.
In our state, both near and far.
Native plants sustain the fauna and
Need protection if we're gonna,
Keep Maryland's wildlife for a long, long time.