

Friday March 3, 15, 2023

TO: Kumar Barve, Chair of House Environment and Transportation Committee; and Committee Members
FROM: Michelle Dietz, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Government Relations; and Caitlin Kerr, The Nature Conservancy, Conservation & Climate Policy Analyst
POSITION: Support HB 983 Hunting, Wildlife Conservation, and Outdoor Recreation - Funding, Promotion, Management, Licenses, Permits, and Stamps

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) supports HB 983 offered by Delegate Allen. TNC is a global conservation organization working to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Maryland, our work focuses on delivering science-based, on-the-ground solutions that secure clean water and healthy living environments for our communities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing resilience in the face of a changing climate. We are dedicated to a future where people and nature thrive together.

HB 983 would allow the Heritage Conservation Fund to be used for land acquisition for hunting and establishes a Wildlife Conservation, Education and Outreach Program within the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Investments like these will continue to foster an interest in outdoor recreation in Maryland as well as build stewardship and wildlife conservation interest and access in communities across our state. DNR currently uses several factors to determine what lands qualify for acquisition through the Heritage Conservation Fund. These lands are important natural areas that have ecological and conservation value, providing habitat for rare, threatened or endangered species or unique natural communities. HB 983 would enable the fund to acquire lands that the general public can use for hunting. Conservation organizations like TNC use the Heritage Conservation Fund land acquisition recommendations, which can expand access to hunting on public and private lands across the state.

Maryland's outdoor recreation economy generates 109,000 direct jobs, \$14 billion in consumer spending, \$4.4 billion in wages and salaries, and \$951 million in state and local tax revenue. State hunting and fishing licenses and permits as well as federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing gear are the backbone for funding state wildlife agencies. Accessing this funding is key in wildlife management and curbing biodiversity loss. Outdoor recreation opportunities such as hunting are important access points to nature for many residents, in addition to providing substantial economic benefits.

HB 983 would also establish the Wildlife Conservation, Education, and Outreach Program within DNR. Environmental education helps to foster a deeper understanding of the critical role that nature plays in our everyday lives and can create future natural resource conservation advocates. This program would play a key role in building interest in outdoor recreation, wildlife conservation, and environmental stewardship by expanding outreach to communities across Maryland. The program would engage with elementary and middle school students, community leaders, organizations and universities across the state, as well as with groups who have historically been denied access to outdoor recreation and environmental stewardship opportunities. By expanding access to natural places for recreation and conservation, and by investing in educational programs, we can expand Marylander's awareness and appreciation of nature and continue to protect these important places.

The Nature Conservancy commends Delegate Allen for introducing this legislation to invest in outdoor recreation, wildlife conservation, and environmental stewardship across the state for current and future generations.

Therefore, we urge a favorable report on HB 983.