







Dear Friends,

I write my last annual report letter with a tremendous sense of gratitude to you—supporters of the Hudson Highlands Land Trust. Your support over the last five years transformed the way we protect the Highlands, and I am so grateful to all our donors, volunteers and public officials.

Thank you to the HHLT Board of Directors for the opportunity to serve in this seat, and for your guidance along the way. Thank you to our intrepid volunteers who have helped with critical needs ranging from trail maintenance to computer maintenance. Bravo to our elected officials, agency partners and fellow land trusts, through which we secured millions of dollars for conservation and protected thousands of acres.

Finally, thank you to our dedicated staff at HHLT. Through their efforts we created our first HHLT-owned preserve—Granite Mountain Preserve. We also greatly expanded our conservation efforts across the region by forming the New York Highlands Network, a 16-member collaboration of government agencies and land trusts. Most recently, recognizing the urgent need to make our work more inclusive and remedy inequities in land access, we dedicated resources to telling the hidden history of diverse people on the lands we protect.

I am confident this great work will continue and reach new heights under Katrina's leadership.

With gratitude,

**Michelle Smith**, *Executive Director (2016-2021)*



Dear Friends and Supporters,

During this past year, as many of us have been home for long stretches of time, we have been fortunate to live in the Hudson Highlands—a place of great beauty and calm, with extensive open space conserved by earlier and current generations, a place where the natural world can console us on the dark days and inspire us on the best days. Although it will be many years before we are able to fully understand the effect of the pandemic on our community, we feel certain that the unprecedented activity and interest in the natural world are here to stay. Along with that realization is the awareness of our responsibility to help ensure this landscape we love can be welcoming in a sustainable and equitable way.

Your support this year—of friends, neighbors, community and nature itself—has greatly inspired us. Together we have expanded parkland, protected drinking water, and safeguarded wildlife habitat for all to enjoy. More people than ever have access to the Hudson Highlands’ healthy, robust, and resilient green spaces.

In 2020, with your support and partnership, we:

- Engaged with the local community on how conservation organizations can better manage the record-breaking number of visitors to the area;
- Protected more parkland and trails during a time of increasing appetite for outdoor recreation;
- Opened newly renovated and blazed trails at Granite Mountain Preserve;
- Invested in technological innovations for our stewardship program so we can better care for the land that’s already protected;
- Launched the *Relearning Highlands History* series, which highlights stories of and from People of Color throughout the history of the Hudson Highlands; and
- Partnered with the Village of Cold Spring and The Chazen Companies to complete a water study that looked at the impact of future development, alternative water supplies, and conservation efforts necessary to ensure robust supply of water into the future.

Thank you for helping to keep the Hudson Highlands a place of beauty and wonder that can nourish the soul. We hope you will stay safe and healthy, and that you are able to be outside as much as possible in the coming year to enjoy our remarkable Hudson Highlands.

Wishing you the best for 2021,

**Nancy Berner**, Board Chair  
**Katrina Shindledecker**, Executive Director



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HHLT is Proud to Welcome our Next Executive Director:  
**KATRINA SHINDELECKER**

Many of you know Katrina Shindledecker through her work as HHLT’s Director of Conservation. We now have the pleasure of welcoming Katrina as our next Executive Director succeeding Michelle Smith, who completed her tenure with the organization in May of 2021.

Since joining the land trust staff in 2007, Katrina has led HHLT’s acquisition projects, overseen its stewardship portfolio and national accreditation, as well as fostered fruitful partnerships throughout the region. Before joining HHLT, she worked in several roles at New York State Parks, including implementing environmental recommendations and projects at parks/historic sites across the Taconic region. Katrina holds an MS in Environmental Science from Pace University and an MS in Environmental Policy from Bard College.

*“After serving as HHLT’s Director of Conservation for almost fifteen years, I am excited by the opportunity to lead the organization as Executive Director,” said Katrina. “I have worked closely with landowners, donors, municipal officials, and residents of the Hudson Highlands for more than a decade, and I look forward to broadening and strengthening those relationships in my new role.”*

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# Sharing & Protecting the Highlands



## We Are (Re)Learning History



As the COVID-19 pandemic raged on in 2020, people flocked outdoors, including to the Hudson Highlands. This trend has continued into 2021, and demand for our green spaces has never been greater. But the threats to our undeveloped lands continue to mount. Scores of new visitors to our area's popular parks and trails are stressing our natural resources. Plus, we need to ensure our parks are inclusive and accessible to everyone. HHLT took a lead role in addressing these unprecedented challenges in 2020.

The need to make a more concerted effort around visitor management to protect our natural resources became clear. For inspiration, we can look to other regions with a strong visitor culture, like the Adirondacks. There, a broad coalition of stakeholders from several towns and government agencies developed a long-term master plan to address this regional challenge and ensure the sustainable use of their parks and trails. In Philipstown, we took the



fellow conservation groups and state agencies.

To meet the growing demand for parkland, and ease pressure on what is already protected, we are working with partners, neighbors and landowners through our **New York Highlands Network** to expand existing parks, trails, and parking areas across the entire Highlands region faster than any one of us can do alone (see page 8).

To keep our existing parks and trails healthy, we continued our partnership with the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference (NYNJTC) to educate visitors to our popular parks, like Breakneck Ridge, on visitor etiquette. Through this partnership, NYNJTC created a new Volunteer

first steps toward developing a similar plan by facilitating discussions around visitor management strategies with

Trail Stewards program, tapping into a pool of local volunteers who know our trails, to show visitors how to minimize their impact and how to stay safe while hiking.

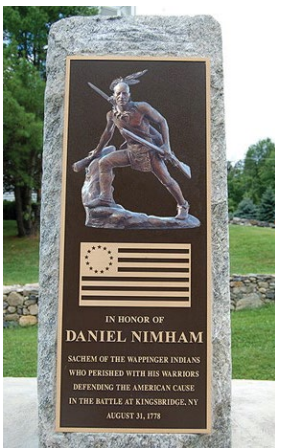
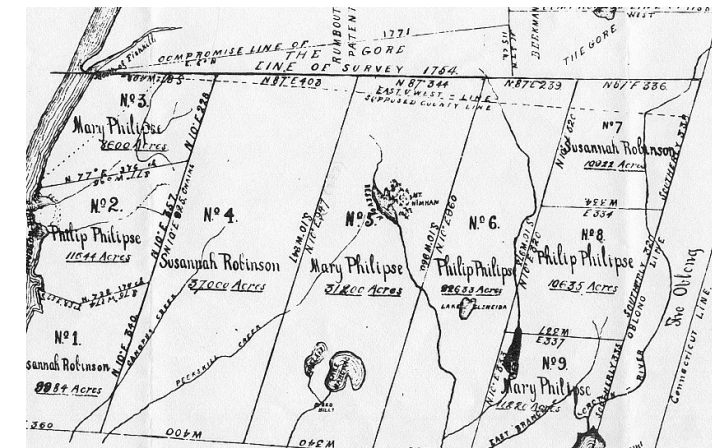
In an effort to ensure the Hudson Highlands feels welcoming to people of all backgrounds, we are working with New York State Parks, local municipal leaders, and organizations representing diverse user groups to collectively take steps that will make recreation in the area more inclusive. We are also making a concerted effort to better understand the full history of the Hudson Highlands, focusing on the stories of people that were previously excluded, and we are integrating this history into our conservation planning going forward (see page 5).

Our work in visitor management and inclusivity will continue to be a focus in 2021 and beyond, both through the **New York Highlands Network** and our partnerships with NYNJTC, state agencies and local municipalities.

The last year provided a wake-up call on the racial inequities that persist across our country—and the conservation community is not immune. Recognizing the significant inequities in past conservation work, we joined the conservation community across the country in stepping up to acknowledge historic influences on land access, use and ownership.

At HHLT, we've taken a hard look at our work and recognized our own deficiency in acknowledging the history of diverse groups that lived and worked on the land we protect today. In the past, narratives about settlement, land use, and social history in the Hudson Highlands have typically excluded stories about People of Color. We wanted to change that.

On June 5, 2020, we issued a statement about racial inequity and made a commitment to use our platforms to share stories of and from People of Color throughout the history of the Hudson Highlands, among other initiatives. One way we are delivering on this promise is through a new series: **Relearning Highlands History**, for which we are partnering with area historians and people of diverse backgrounds to highlight the holistic history of the Hudson Highlands. These are important stories about the Black and Native American people who have shaped the landscape and history



of the land we work to protect. Our conservation work will benefit if we share and learn from this history.

With this series and other new diversity initiatives, we join our peers at fellow land trusts in taking responsibility for making land

conservation more inclusive. We are committed to promoting more conservation projects that are relevant to people of all backgrounds, especially those who have been historically excluded.

The **Relearning Highlands History** series, which launched in the fall of 2020, shares and amplifies stories of and from People of Color throughout the history of the Hudson Highlands.

Property ownership is one of the areas where racial inequities are most evident in the history of the Hudson Highlands. So, to kick off the series, we told the story of Chief Daniel Nimham and the Wappinger Tribe's challenge to the Philipse Patent, covering what is now Putnam County, written by Peter Cutul of New York State Parks.

*"Sachem Daniel Nimham is one of my heroes. [He needed] a chance to become more than the sadly obscured figure that he is. Thank you for shining the spotlight on him. Racial inequality is nothing new, but he stood up against it, and died fighting for his people."*

– **Relearning Highlands History** reader, Renée Fleury

Read this story and more from **Relearning Highlands History** on our website: [hhl.org/relearning-highlands-history](https://hhl.org/relearning-highlands-history).







# Protecting More Land, When We Need It Most

The pandemic, and the drastic ways it has changed our society, have made the need to expand our parks and trails even more urgent. With your support, and in partnership with our conservation peers, HHLT was able to respond to this unprecedented need by ramping up our conservation efforts across the region.

Working with our **New York Highlands Network** partners (see page 8), we played a lead role in permanently protecting approximately 850 acres that form critical connectors and buffers to existing parkland. HHLT helped facilitate these conservation transactions in a number of ways, including by helping to secure federal funding, providing bridge financing, and/or directly negotiating sales with landowners.

Highlights include working with the Westchester Land Trust (WLT) to help them purchase a 42-acre property adjacent to Wonder Lake State Park in the Town of Kent. WLT is now in the process of conveying the property to New York State as an addition to the State Park. The state used funds we helped to secure from the federal Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) for the acquisition. We also facilitated the Open Space Institute’s acquisition of a 33-acre property that abuts the Appalachian Trail in Putnam Valley. This land will also ultimately be conveyed to New York State Parks, again using HCA funding we helped secure.

More broadly, we worked with large landowners, partner land trusts and New York State Parks to identify high priority conservation projects and secure associated HCA funding to conserve nearly 750 acres along the Putnam/Dutchess County line, adjacent to the northern edge of Fahnestock State Park. All these projects are contiguous parcels to existing conserved lands that are key recreation and wildlife corridors, as well as important for safeguarding drinking water resources.

In addition to projects with our **New York Highlands Network** partners, we protected another 158 acres of priority Legacy Landscapes (see sidebar) through a combination of fee acquisitions and conservation easements. These projects included 70 acres of high priority land in southern Philipstown that is slated to become HHLT’s second public nature preserve in the near future. We also



negotiated conservation easements on 31 acres in Philipstown, 23 acres in Putnam Valley, and 16 acres just north of our mission area in Fishkill.

Notably, the conservation easement in Fishkill is our first that recognizes the cultural significance of the property. Like much of the land in our mission area, the property is part of the ancestral lands of the Lenape and Delaware Nations. The current property owner had a longstanding connection with the land and the family that used to own it, and he wanted to recognize its historical significance, in addition to permanently protecting it from development. So we worked with the landowner to add language to the easement that recognizes and honors the Native American heritage of the site. We hope to incorporate similar cultural terms into more easements going forward.

## Legacy Landscapes: Preserving our iconic views, cherished lands and vital natural resources

Our Legacy Landscapes Plan, updated in 2020, identifies priorities based on comprehensive analysis of unprotected land within our mission area. This initiative helps us implement appropriate solutions for those landscapes deemed critical to the natural, scenic, and cultural resources of the Hudson Highlands.

### Legacy Landscapes Plan Scorecard

Priority parcels that we have directly conserved or acquired, or that we have facilitated the permanent preservation of by another conservation entity, are shown below:

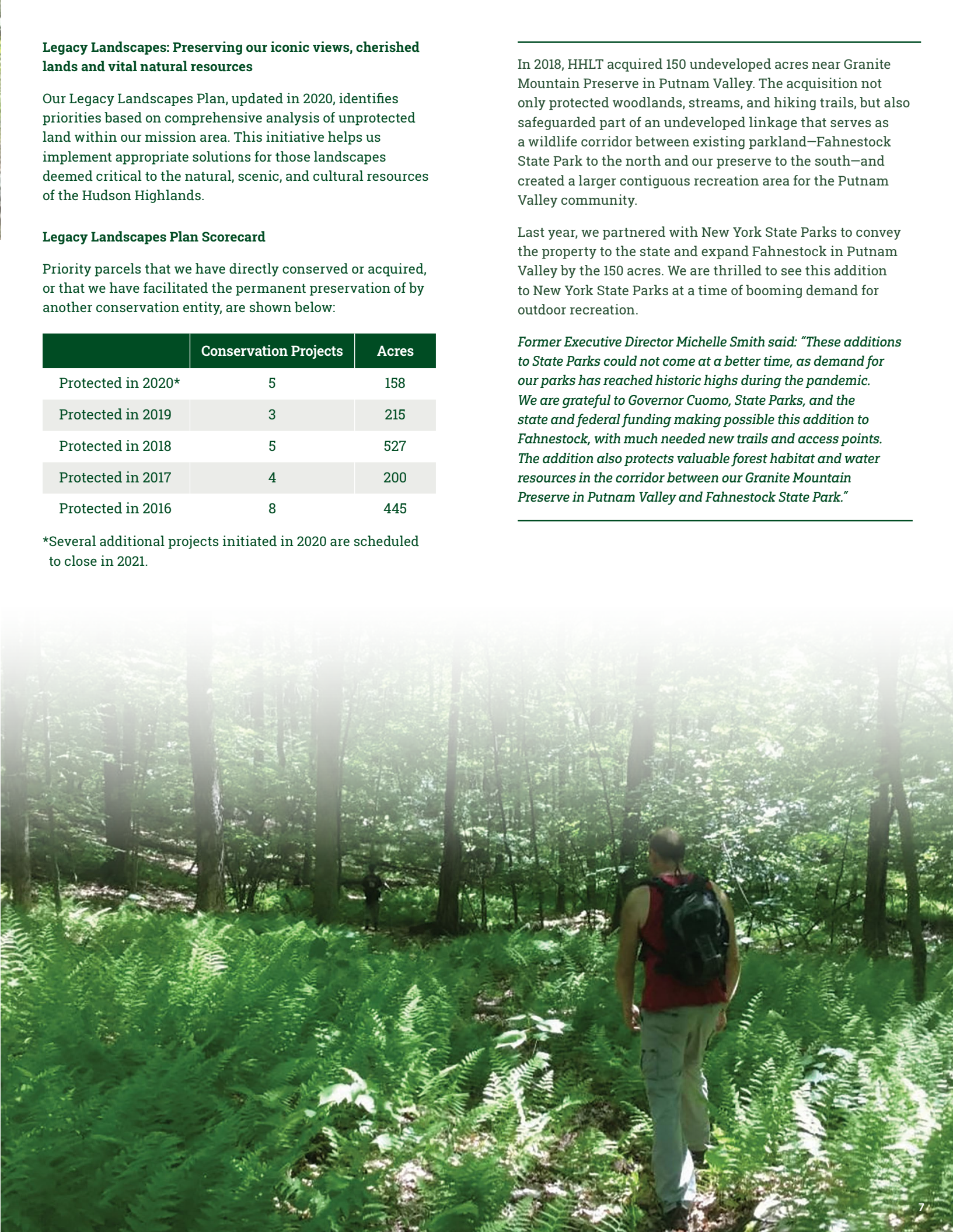
	Conservation Projects	Acres
Protected in 2020*	5	158
Protected in 2019	3	215
Protected in 2018	5	527
Protected in 2017	4	200
Protected in 2016	8	445

\*Several additional projects initiated in 2020 are scheduled to close in 2021.

In 2018, HHLT acquired 150 undeveloped acres near Granite Mountain Preserve in Putnam Valley. The acquisition not only protected woodlands, streams, and hiking trails, but also safeguarded part of an undeveloped linkage that serves as a wildlife corridor between existing parkland—Fahnestock State Park to the north and our preserve to the south—and created a larger contiguous recreation area for the Putnam Valley community.

Last year, we partnered with New York State Parks to convey the property to the state and expand Fahnestock in Putnam Valley by the 150 acres. We are thrilled to see this addition to New York State Parks at a time of booming demand for outdoor recreation.

*Former Executive Director Michelle Smith said: “These additions to State Parks could not come at a better time, as demand for our parks has reached historic highs during the pandemic. We are grateful to Governor Cuomo, State Parks, and the state and federal funding making possible this addition to Fahnestock, with much needed new trails and access points. The addition also protects valuable forest habitat and water resources in the corridor between our Granite Mountain Preserve in Putnam Valley and Fahnestock State Park.”*





# HHLT and the New York Highlands Network

HHLT and the **New York Highlands Network** (NYHN) are proving there really is strength in numbers. Working with our 15 network partners, HHLT recently helped protect hundreds of acres that will serve as critical connectors and buffers to existing parkland. We also started working on an exciting new interactive mapping tool that will help us identify and track risks to priority conservation lands, so that together we can move swiftly and efficiently to find the best conservation solutions.

*“As a network, our goal is to keep natural areas connected, healthy, and resilient,” says Nicole Wooten, HHLT’s Director of Natural Resources and the network’s coordinator. “Wildlife needs to move around to be healthy. Developments like new houses and roads can fragment our natural areas, making it harder for animals to get to where they need to go. By protecting green corridors that connect those habitats, we’re making sure that wildlife can move and thrive.”*

In 2019, HHLT convened a network of land trusts, municipalities, and state agencies to connect and protect green spaces all across the New York Highlands faster than any one of us can do alone. The New York Highlands is a 630,000-acre natural area recognized in the US Highlands Conservation Act (HCA) for its biodiversity and recreational significance for millions of residents and visitors.

The HCA also provides a framework for awarding federal grants to support permanent land protection

in the Highlands. In 2020, HHLT and our NYHN partners secured HCA funds to conserve nearly 800 acres that serve as connectors and buffers to existing parkland, including the Appalachian Trail, Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve and Fahnestock State Park. In addition to conserving key biotic and recreation corridors, these transactions also protect ground and surface water resources.

While HHLT and the NYHN enjoyed major successes, we faced plenty of challenges, too. As development pressures increase in the Hudson Highlands, the status of land parcels can change so swiftly that conservation opportunities are missed. We’ve learned that we needed faster, more efficient communication among partners. In 2020, HHLT began development of an interactive, cloud-based **Land Parcel Tracker**—a mapping, notification, and communication system about conservation priorities. Our Tracker is a living data layer, constantly edited as priority parcels are conserved or identified. The Tracker allows HHLT and our NYHN partners to easily track, communicate about, and plan for the protection of high-value lands.

Last year, we worked with NYHN partners to develop a pilot version of the Tracker. Going forward, we will test and tailor the Tracker to each NYHN member’s priorities and conduct live tests of the interactive map, notification system, and database. We also plan to share

information about our Tracker with other conservation collaboratives who could benefit from this innovative tool.

*“With our new Tracker in place, our network will be faster, more nimble, and better prepared for collaborative action whenever there are threats to top-priority parcels,” Wooten explains. “We’ll have fewer missed opportunities, and we’ll save more critical habitat.”*

### This project is generously supported by grant funding from:

- Appalachian Trail Conservancy’s Wild East Action Fund
- Cornell Douglas Foundation
- John and Frank Sparacio Charitable Foundation
- NYS Conservation Partnership Program and NY’s Environmental Protection Fund, administered by the Land Trust Alliance in coordination with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
- Network for Landscape Conservation
- NYS Environmental Protection Fund through the Hudson River Estuary Program of the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
- The Nature Conservancy-NY’s Resilient and Connected Network Grant Program

### Exceptional Volunteerism: Noah Campbell

Volunteer Noah Campbell donated his time and talents over several months to create a stunning new digital StoryMap that helps us tell the story of the **New York Highlands Network** (NYHN).

Using ArcGIS technology to layer compelling maps and images, the StoryMap that Noah built explains in detail how and why HHLT and our NYHN partners are working to keep nature connected across the New York Highlands region. Connecting and conserving wild places helps keep them healthy and vibrant—for us and for our wildlife.

A Philipstown native, Noah grew up just a few hundred feet away from the Appalachian Trail, and he has always been passionate about the natural world. A 2014 Haldane High School graduate, Noah went on to study at Colgate University, where he earned a BA in Environmental Studies and Mathematics in 2018. Noah has performed GIS and conservation research for federal agencies and nonprofits in Colorado, Montana, and the Adirondacks.

We are grateful to Noah for contributing his talents to our StoryMap project, which you can explore on our website at [hHLT.org](http://hHLT.org).





# HHLT Uses New Technology to Enhance Stewardship

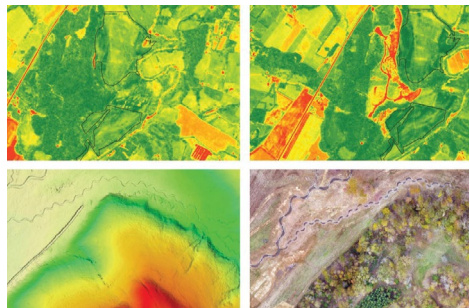


## Granite Mountain Preserve



In 2020, HHLT used high-resolution, commercially available aerial imagery to view our conserved lands. We did this partly as a response to the pandemic and our state's shelter-in-place order—but our decision was also based on exciting developments in technology, science, and industry that make aerial monitoring more affordable and effective.

*"Walking the land and talking with landowners will always be an integral part of our stewardship model," says Julia Rogers, HHLT's Conservation Manager. "But we're finding that high-resolution imagery can give us a more complete picture of our preserves and easements."*



Airplanes and satellites have collected pictures of Earth for decades. In recent years, higher resolution images have become more widely available to land trusts. By analyzing a series of images taken over time, we can detect changes on conserved lands. These include natural changes caused by water, wind, or fire; man-made changes, like construction; illegal activities, such as dumping; and threats to wildlife habitat, including deforestation.

The annual visit to conservation easement properties is a core component of our stewardship. Early in the pandemic year, not knowing if we would be able to make it out onto the land, we partnered with the Orange County Land Trust to secure readily available, high-resolution aerial images of our mission areas (think Google Maps). Staff first compared images taken one year apart, in spring 2019 and 2020, when leaves were off the trees. The spring imagery wasn't perfect, you can't see ATV tracks or trails, but it was detailed enough to know if tree clearing or construction had started. Interestingly, September images with full foliage didn't work as well for viewing changes, though they were helpful in assessing tree and forest health.

*"Overall, we found that using commercially available aerial images for stewardship has important benefits," Rogers notes. "It makes it easier for us to 'view' hard-to-reach places, like wetlands. It also helps us spot small and subtle changes that are hard to see when you're walking a property—like a heritage tree that's been removed, or a driveway that's been widened or extended."*

Our exploration of new technology in 2020 also included automated change detection via satellite imagery and computer modeling. We piloted tools from satellite imagery vendors with varying degrees of success. Our goal was to have an early warning system in between our annual visits, but unfortunately many

of the options were too low resolution to catch small, yet impactful changes on the land, like a neighbor cutting trees or dumping construction debris over a stone wall. This work will expand in 2021 with testing of change-detection tools from an array of vendors, to see what works best for our northeastern forest lands.

We learned valuable lessons about aerial monitoring technology last year, and we're sharing our knowledge and experiences with the land trust community. We've also enjoyed introducing landowners to this new stewardship technology.

*"People really enjoy looking at our aerial images," Rogers says. "It gives them a whole new perspective on their properties. Some even ask me for printouts."*

We are grateful to the following foundations and grant programs for generously supporting this project:

- Appalachian Trail Conservancy's Wild East Action Fund
- Cornell Douglas Foundation
- Land Trust Alliance's Remote Monitoring Grant Program
- NYS Conservation Partnership Program and NY's Environmental Protection Fund, administered by the Land Trust Alliance in coordination with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
- Network for Landscape Conservation

Parks and trails regionally experienced record-breaking visitation in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, and HHLT's Granite Mountain Preserve in Putnam Valley was no exception. The 415-acre preserve, which is HHLT's first nature preserve, has become a "hidden gem" for local hikers. We heard from many of you how essential the preserve became to your mental and physical health during the pandemic.



The preserve experienced significant storm damage during Tropical Storm Isaias last summer, which temporarily shuttered the preserve due to hazardous trail conditions. Our community of volunteers stepped up when we needed them most, spending countless hours clearing trees and debris off the trails, making the preserve safe for visitors once again. Thanks in particular to our volunteer sawyers, Lew Kingsley, John Benjamin and John Sharpe, for doing the heavy lifting (literally!) during the clean-up.

In November, we piloted a new hunting program at the preserve to help control the deer population and

safeguard the health of the forest. Overbrowsing by deer has damaged the forest understory at the preserve for many years, and hunting is one of our best management tools to ensure a vibrant forest ecosystem. Our pilot program was a success, thanks in large part to the local hunters and greater Putnam Valley community that helped shape it. We plan to continue the hunting program each fall going forward.

Our thanks to the Black Rock Forest Consortium and the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation for

offering expert guidance as we developed the pilot program.

**While the preserve is now back in good shape after experiencing storm damage in 2020, we have many ongoing volunteer needs at the preserve throughout the year, like invasive species removal in the summer, or clearing water bars in the fall. If you're interested in getting your hands dirty at the preserve, contact Director of Natural Resources, Nicole Wooten, at [nicole.wooten@hhl.org](mailto:nicole.wooten@hhl.org) for more information on current volunteer opportunities.**

Last summer, we welcomed two new Land Management interns, **Jailene Gonzalez** and **Brant Martin**, to the HHLT team. Jailene and Brant joined us as part of a joint internship with The Fresh Air Fund (FAF) and the Vassar Ecological Preserve, and they split their time between Granite Mountain Preserve and FAF's 2,000-acre Sharpe Reservation in Fishkill, while collaborating virtually with two interns stationed at Vassar.

At Granite Mountain, Jailene and Brant worked on invasive species management projects like the eradication of yellow archangel and removal of black swallowwort from the trails, keeping the preserve ecologically healthy and safe for visitors. To share the knowledge and skills they acquired throughout the summer, Jailene and Brant produced three educational videos on improving forest health through invasive species management, which can be viewed on our website ([hhl.org/2020-land-management-interns](http://hhl.org/2020-land-management-interns)).

*"Whether it was a day of pulling water chestnuts and mapping black swallowwort patches or scouting linden viburnum and making educational videos, a satisfactory and fun day was guaranteed!" — Jailene Gonzalez, 2020 Land Management Intern*

Our thanks to the Lower Hudson Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management for helping to fund this internship program through New York State's Environmental Protection Fund, as administered by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation.





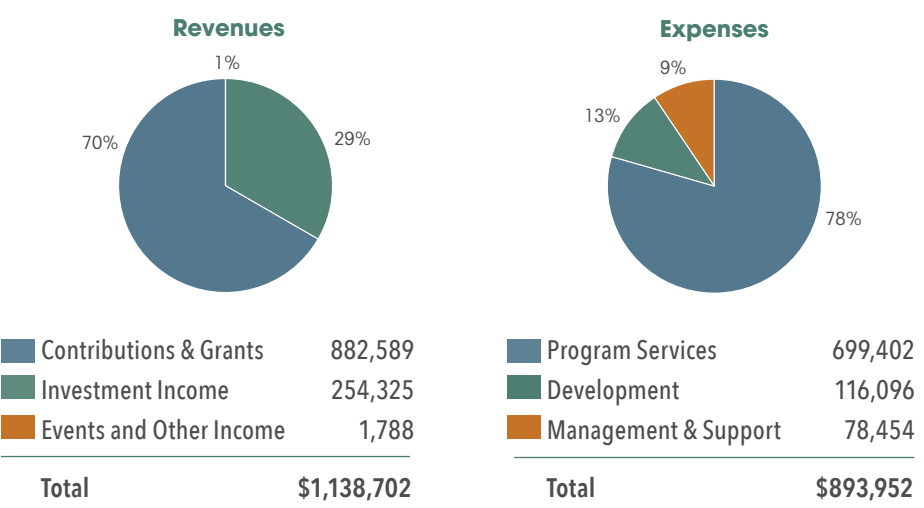


# 2020 Financial Report and Future Outlook



THANK YOU!

Though we face uncertainty in the coming year due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, we are pleased to report that, thanks to your generous support, our revenue remained strong during 2020. For a complete list of donors in 2020, please see the online version of this report on our website ([hhlt.org](https://hhlt.org)). In 2021, we’re positioning our human and financial resources to manage around remaining uncertainties. As for fiscal year 2020, with financial year end September 30, 2020, we report the results below. Full audited financial statements and the IRS Form 990 can also be found on our website ([hhlt.org](https://hhlt.org)).



Consolidated Statement of Financial Position for FY19 and FY20		
	30-Sep-19	30-Sep-20
Cash and Money Market Funds <sup>A</sup>	1,663,211	2,006,154
Public Securities <sup>B</sup>	6,114,366	6,206,313
Land and Other <sup>C</sup>	2,748,914	2,417,717
Total Assets	10,526,491	10,630,184
Total Liabilities <sup>C</sup>	(1,095,553)	(1,143,555)
Net Assets	9,430,938	9,486,629

**Footnotes:**  
A. Cash and money market funds consist of \$0.5 million in operating reserves and \$1.2 million for pending real estate acquisitions.  
B. Public securities are within our Highlands Steward Fund, dedicated to stewarding conserved lands in perpetuity and for land acquisitions.  
C. FY 20 Land assets consist of our Granite Mountain Preserve and buffers to state and national parkland (financed by \$1.1 million in debt). This amount also includes Notes Receivable of \$0.35 million for loans made to partner land trusts to finance acquisition of priority lands.

The great outdoors became an essential respite for so many of us in 2020—and you helped us protect and steward hundreds more acres of land for all of us to reap the benefits of.

Thank you for being there for us—and for nature—this past year.

Please consider making a tax-deductible contribution so we can all continue to benefit from nature—when we need it most.

You can give using the attached remittance envelope, online at [hhlt.org/support](https://hhlt.org/support), or by contacting our Operations Coordinator, Jonathan Leitner at [jonathan.leitner@hhlt.org](mailto:jonathan.leitner@hhlt.org).

Thank you!

*HHLT extends heartfelt thanks to our dedicated friends, supporters, and volunteers for generously donating your time, energy, and resources to our programs and activities. Your strong support and enthusiastic collaboration has made possible all of the work you’ve read about in the pages of this report. We are grateful for your commitment to working alongside us to protect and preserve the Hudson Highlands.*

### Individual Supporters in 2020

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