

Maryland Protected Nearly a Third of Its Land, and It's Reaching for More

Nine states have set goals to conserve 30 percent of their land by 2030. Maryland got there first.

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Clockwise from top left: Eagles nesting in the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge; Green Ridge State Forest; the Unicorn Fishing Lake Park and Hatchery; and King's Ridge, a conservation farm in Kent County, Md.

By [Cara Buckley](#) Photographs and Video by [Andrew Mangum](#)

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The protected land includes a one-acre fish hatchery at Unicorn Lake in eastern Maryland and the sprawling Green Ridge State Forest in the west. It includes shorelines, farms and woods around Naval Air Station Patuxent River, and the Chesapeake Forest

lands, some 15,000 wooded acres that are home to species like bald eagles and the once-endangered Delmarva fox squirrel.

None of it can be developed, and all of it has helped Maryland reach a landmark conservation goal six years ahead of schedule, before any other state that's joined an effort known as "30 by 30."

The program is part of a global initiative to protect 30 percent of the Earth's land and waters by 2030. In 2023, Maryland joined the effort and a year later, Gov. Wes Moore, a Democrat, announced that the goal had already been met. Nearly 1.9 million acres of land has been permanently protected from development, and the state has set a new target, to conserve 40 percent of its land by 2040.



Source: Maryland Department of Natural Resources - By Mira Rojanasakul/The New York Times

Two years ago, Albert Nickerson and his wife, Kristen, a sixth generation farmer, conserved about 350 acres of farmland known as King's Ridge. That land is among roughly 1,600 acres that the Nickersons own and that are permanently off-limits to development. Along with producing food, conserved farmland can support wildlife, store carbon, reduce erosion and improve water quality through soil conservation practices.

50 States, 50 Fixes is a [series about local solutions](#) to environmental problems. More to come this year.

"We just feel as though it's important," said Mr. Nickerson, whose family grows corn, soy, barley and wheat, and raises livestock. "Everybody I know that has property, to be quite honest with you, thinks the same way. We all want to leave it better than we found it."

Officials, land trustees and environmentalists said a unique set of factors led to Maryland's success.

Since 1969, Maryland has levied a 0.5 percent transfer tax on real

estate sales and used it for Program Open Space, which enables the state to acquire green spaces from voluntary sellers and purchase conservation easements from private landowners.



Albert Nickerson and his wife Kristen, a sixth-generation farmer. "We all want to leave it better than we found it," Mr. Nickerson said.

Owners like farmers and forest managers can still work the land, but agree that it can never be developed, even if the land changes hands.

Crucially, conservation has bipartisan support at the state level, said Elizabeth Carter, a land protection director at The Nature Conservancy. She said federal and state agencies, nonprofit groups and land trusts have worked together with shared goals, which helped the state meet its target sooner than many expected.

"That's something we celebrate, and it's exciting," she said.

One example of shared goals is the land around the Naval Air Station Patuxent River, which juts into the Chesapeake Bay. Because of military vehicle and aircraft tests, open land is needed around the base. The base also needs to be resilient against sea level rise, and having thriving natural spaces is a benefit, Ms. Carter said.

There are now more than 63,000 acres of protected land around the base. While the conservation area stretches into Delaware and Virginia, most of it is in Maryland, including the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.

Josh Kurtz, Maryland's secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, said that while the state had to balance conservation needs with development pressures and housing demand, natural

spaces were crucial to offsetting planet-heating greenhouse gas emissions and to protecting the Chesapeake Bay.

“Being able to sequester carbon and mitigate climate impacts makes us more resilient in the face of climate change,” Mr. Kurtz said. “It’s also one of our key water quality strategies.”



An overlook in the Green Ridge State Forest, 49,000 acres of protected land in Flintstone, Md.



Marshland in the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge.



An Osprey at Unicorn Lake, which includes a hatchery that raises trout, largemouth bass, bluegill and yellow perch.

According to Mr. Kurtz's office, land conservation measures have prevented about 85,000 pounds of nitrogen and 6,000 pounds of phosphorus, which fuel algae blooms and starve water of oxygen, from flowing into the bay each year. The University of Maryland calculated that the state's trees and forests absorbed and locked away 6.5 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 2023.

Kate Burgess, who tracks state legislation to protect land for the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, said that while Maryland was the first state to reach the 30 percent goal, Vermont has passed legislation to protect half of its land by 2050, the most ambitious target of any state.

Through an executive order and a series of attacks on environment protections, the Trump administration has effectively rescinded the national goal of 30 by 30. A White House spokeswoman called the Biden administration's climate policies "radical" and said they had harmed American families and stifled American businesses and the energy industry.

Some critics have also said the initiative amounts to a government land grab.

But Steve Kline, president and chief executive of the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy, which has protected 60,000 acres in Maryland, said he worked with willing landowners, including the Nickersons.

Mr. Kline also said that access to natural spaces was key to public support, as was revenue from tourism, recreation, hunting, fishing and agriculture. A recent report found that parks, forests and open spaces in Maryland generated billions of dollars in economic benefits, millions of dollars in property taxes and tens of thousands

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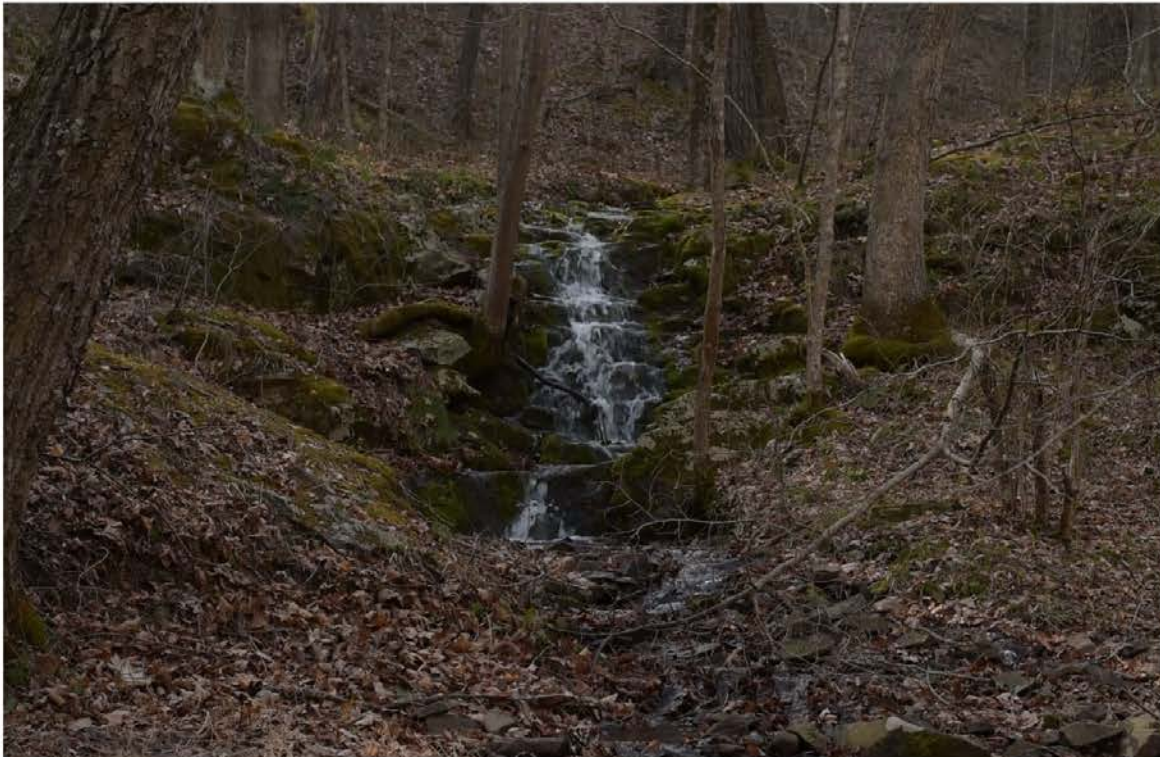
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“It’s pushing back against this narrative that some elected officials and decision makers have, that economic development and conservation are mutually exclusive,” Mr. Kline said. “That couldn’t be any further from the case.”

While the state is still pushing toward its 40 by 40 target, there’s been a setback. Facing a \$3.3 billion budget shortfall, the Maryland General Assembly recently voted to take \$100 million from Program Open Space and other state conservation programs over the next four years. But A.J. Metcalf, a spokesman for the state’s natural resources department, said the programs were projected to generate \$468 million through fiscal year 2029, enough to continue to acquire land for conservation “at a normal pace.”

Mr. Kline said he hoped that the state surpassed its next goal. “I would certainly hate to see our foot come off the pedal after 40 percent,” he said. “We feel like we’ve got something pretty special that’s worth protecting.”



Green Ridge State Forest in Little Orleans, Md.

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