



The True Keystone of Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition

Strategic Plan 2014-2020

Acknowledgements

The Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition is coordinated by the Appalachian Mountain Club and is a committee of the Highlands Coalition, a four-state alliance working to protect important natural resources in the Highlands of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut.

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About the Mid-Atlantic Highlands

The Mid-Atlantic Highlands are the rugged foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Forming a 3.5 million-acre forested greenbelt around Harrisburg, Reading, Allentown, New York City, and Hartford, this region stretches from northwestern Connecticut across the Hudson Valley of New York, through northern New Jersey and southeastern Pennsylvania, ending in the Mischeaux State Forest of southcentral Pennsylvania. The Mid-Atlantic Highlands region is known for its large forests and parks, pristine streams and lakes, rich farmland, and cultural treasures. Congress designated the region “nationally significant” when it passed the Highlands Conservation Act in 2004. The Pennsylvania portion of the Mid-Atlantic Highlands covers roughly 1.9 million acres across 13 counties and is a state-designated Mega-Greenway.

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Introduction

Our Vision

The Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition is a diverse and effective public-private partnership conserving critical working and natural lands as well as natural resources and promoting the development and enjoyment of recreational trails in the Pennsylvania Highlands.

Our Mission

Our mission is to conserve and connect critical lands and natural resources across the Pennsylvania Highlands and to promote the recreational enjoyment of these resources.

Coalition History & Achievements

The Highlands Coalition was formed in 1988, growing out of work in New Jersey and New York by the New Jersey Conservation Foundation and others concerned about the future of New York's Sterling Forest and other lands in the region. The Coalition grew to four states with the inclusion of Pennsylvania and Connecticut and came to represent the entire Mid-Atlantic Highlands Region. Pennsylvania joined the effort in 2000 and was initially represented by Tom Kerr with Wildlands Conservancy. During this time, the PA Highlands were defined as the geologic extent of the Reading Prong. With the appointment of Tom Gilbert as executive director in 2002, the Highlands Coalition expanded its reach, sought more board members in Pennsylvania, and the Highlands Coalition - Pennsylvania Committee (PA Committee, now the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition) was born. In 2004, following the completion of a regional greenway analysis, the Pennsylvania Highlands region was extended to the Maryland border and received a Mega-Greenway designation from Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR).

Since 2002, the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition has made meaningful progress towards our mission of conserving and connecting the critical lands and natural resources in the Pennsylvania Highlands, and promoting their enjoyment through outdoor recreation. These achievements, outlined in further detail in Appendix A, illustrate the many ways we have begun to reach, meet, and exceed our initial goals outlined in the 2008-2010 Strategic Plan. We have been growing and diversifying as a coalition, and now include over 30 member organizations. Through a successful marketing and branding exercise, as well as numerous press events and earned media coverage, we have improved recognition for our coalition's efforts. Through our efforts to solicit and advance federally-funded land conservation projects in the Pennsylvania Highlands region, we have now put 2.19 million dollars of Highlands Conservation Act money to work in Pennsylvania, leading to the protection of over 900 acres. We have also made significant progress towards a statewide designation of the Highlands that would include incentives for regional conservation tools. We have promoted open space conservation in mega-greenway "hubs" (sub-landscapes identified in the Pennsylvania Highlands Conservation Atlas) by providing access to the online Pennsylvania Highlands Information Center as well as to Conservation Assessments for the Sand Hills,

Furnace Hills, and Conewago Mountains regions of the Pennsylvania Highlands. Overall, the protected acreage has risen from 149,808 or less than 8 % of the total 1.98 million acres of land in the region, in (2007) to 326,237 in 2013, or slightly more than 16% of the total land in the region in 2013.

Core project areas

During the planning process, the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition has identified common natural, recreational, and cultural themes that define the Highlands region and shape our efforts. These include a unique industrial past, a complex network of multi-use trails for recreational use, fertile agricultural lands, outstanding bio-diversity, wooded uplands, and clean drinking water. In order to preserve and enhance these qualities, the coalition focuses our efforts on these four areas of work:

Land conservation - The Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition's private land trusts, conservation organizations, and public agencies work cooperatively to advance a shared conservation vision. The coalition serves as a think-tank where ideas about conservation can be discussed and developed collaboratively. Additionally, the coalition works to secure land conservation funding, including nominating projects through the federal Highlands Conservation Act, which funds the highest priority land conservation projects in the region.

Regional and local trail planning - The Pennsylvania Highlands features several local and regional trails such as the Appalachian Trail, the Horse-Shoe Trail, Schuylkill River Trail, the Delaware & Lehigh Trail, and numerous, popular trail networks in places like the Hopewell Big Woods and in the many state parks within the region. The PA Highlands Trail Network (PHTN) is a 300-mile trail network that will connect several trail systems across the entire Pennsylvania Highlands region.

Conservation Landscapes - Overlapping four state-identified Conservation Landscapes, the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition collaborates within the Highlands region to advance the goals of these Conservation Landscapes by connecting communities and trails and furthering shared regional conservation and recreation goals (see Appendix C).

Advocacy and Education- The coalition is actively engaged in educating the public and decision makers about the Pennsylvania Highlands, its history, and its ecological significance. This includes working towards a state-wide recognition for the Pennsylvania Highlands region that may include incentives for regionally-based land conservation tools. We also produce educational materials and digital tools to promote and advance regional conservation.

Organizational Profile

The Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition is a public-private partnership focusing on landscape-level conservation and recreational trails. Participating organizations include land

conservancies, environmental non-profits, watershed associations, four Conservation Landscapes, recreation groups, and public entities like county planning commissions and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). These groups share a strong commitment to the protection of the Pennsylvania Highlands region and to its promotion through education and advocacy. The Pennsylvania Highlands is recognized by DCNR as a Mega-Greenway and is also part of the federally-recognized four-state Highlands Region designated by the 2004 Highlands Conservation Act. This area is notable for its rich history, its wealth of agricultural and ecological resources, and for outstanding recreational opportunities. It is also a source of clean drinking water for millions of residents in urban areas of the Mid-Atlantic region. The Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition focuses on regional and resource-based conservation strategies that preserve land through a combination of methods including fee-simple acquisitions, easements, transfer of development rights programs, and trail planning and development.

Many of the participating groups represent distinct geographical areas within the Pennsylvania Highlands, such as the Schuylkill Highlands and South Mountain. It is important to note that there is also some geographical overlap between groups. For example a number of organizations represent landscapes included within larger Conservation Landscapes, and all of the member groups are united by an overarching DCNR Mega Greenway designation and the larger four state Highlands. Some participants, like the Lancaster County Conservancy, have been active members since the founding of the PA Highlands Coalition in 2008, while others, like the Lancaster Farm Trust, are relatively new to the group and provide valuable insight about how to increase our efficiency. The diversity represented by our members provides the coalition with a wealth of experiences and perspectives.

The Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition also serves as a think-tank where participants can discuss, develop and refine conservation policies and tools for use across a broad landscape. Several learning themes, such as a consideration of transfer of development rights programs (TDR), trails, water trails, and resource-based planning, have emerged from these discussions and informed our outreach to legislators and municipalities. In addition, we provide educational and advocacy tools that include factsheets, maps, hats, pins, stickers, and folders that are used in outreach across the landscape.

The success of the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition depends largely on the open exchange of ideas, innovations, and challenges in land conservation through member participation in conference calls, online communications, and in-person meetings. Participation benefits the individual organizations that comprise the coalition by providing new opportunities for networking, learning, and mentoring. The coalition also provides support and technical resources internally by helping members to be efficient land conservators and stewards.

In addition, a sub-committee of the Coalition works to nominate a project each year to be considered for Highlands Conservation Act funding. This has ensured the success of critical projects, including the conservation of over 600 acres in the Oley Hills, an area near Reading, by the Berks County Conservancy.

The 2008 Strategic Plan

In 2006, the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition (then referred to as the “PA Committee”) undertook the creation of a Strategic Plan to “assist ... in the advancement of strategies and policies to protect additional lands and watersheds ... as well as to create a cohesive infrastructure for the PA Committee.” Using funding provided by the William Penn Foundation, the AMC employed a consultant from the Institute for Conservation Leadership who worked closely with a subgroup of the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition to identify coalition needs. The resulting plan, which guided coalition efforts from 2008-2010, outlined three major themes: recognition, outreach and collaboration, and structure. As the coalition has evolved, making considerable advancements in these three areas while becoming capable of addressing larger challenges and broader work themes, it became apparent that we needed to update our strategic plan to better reflect our current goals.

Strategic Plan Methodology

Prior to the drafting of the strategic plan for 2014-2020, the AMC spent several months gathering input from coalition members about coalition accomplishments (Appendix A) as well as input on the following questions:

- Where have we met or exceeded our goals?
- Where have we struggled to meet our original goals?
- What role does the coalition play within a broader landscape of other conservation initiatives in Pennsylvania?
- How does participation within the coalition benefit your organization, and how could it benefit more in the future?
- Which original goals no longer serve our mission, and which new goals should we add to the plan?

At an October 11th, 2013 meeting of the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition at the Clarence Schock Memorial Park at Governor Dick in Mount Gretna, Pennsylvania, participants voiced a commitment to a greater focus on measurable, numeric goals, specifically around land conservation, that we could work towards in the upcoming years. To establish goals that were both realistic and challenging, AMC looked at the acres preserved from 2007 to 2013. The number of acres preserved in a 2007 snapshot of the PA Highlands was 149,808, or slightly less than 8% of the total land in the region,¹ and the same number in 2013 was 326,237, or slightly more than 16% of the total region.² After comparing this with the numbers of acres preserved

¹Appalachian Mountain Club, *The Pennsylvania Highlands Greenway Planning Project: A Tool for Land Protection in the Pennsylvania Highlands* (2007) page 3.

²The Pennsylvania Highlands Conservation Information Center, accessed January 10, 2014, <http://henri.newark.rutgers.edu/phcic/index.html>

by our individual members,³ we decided in February 2014 that an additional 100,000 acres was a robust, attainable goal for our coalition to reach by the year 2020.

AMC used those numbers and the narrative responses to other questions as a framework to review the original strategic plan and to develop a new plan that would support our coalition's mission as we work to conserve and connect critical lands and natural resources across the Pennsylvania Highlands and to promote the recreational enjoyment of these resources during the years 2014-2020.

³ This number was based on individual annual reports as well as data found on ConservationTools.org. Annual report numbers show total acreage protected since each organization was founded, generally much longer than the existence of the PA Highlands Coalition. For that reason, the resulting number – 142,013 – represents a much longer period of time than the six years that our strategic plan covers.

Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition Strategic Plan - 2014-2020

Project area	Goal	Strategy
Land conservation	Ensure that state and local land-use decision-makers are protecting the Pennsylvania Highlands.	<p>Work on achieving a state-wide designation of the Pennsylvania Highlands region paired with innovative conservation tools and incentives.</p> <p>Reach out to local municipalities for support.</p> <p>Confirm support from the 200 municipalities in the Pennsylvania Highlands region.</p>
	Protect an additional 1,800 acres of Pennsylvania Highlands land using federal funding.	Obtain federal Highlands Conservation Act funding and work with partners to secure two significant conservation projects, totaling 300 acres or more, annually, resulting in 1,800 newly-protected acres of land by the year 2020.
	Collectively, protect an additional 100,000 acres from development to bring the total protected acreage to 426,237, and to foster stewardship of those lands and waters.	<p>Support innovative conservation approaches like transfer of development rights programs, municipal zoning, and regional planning to help conserve land.</p> <p>Support coalition members in their work to protect an additional 100,000 acres.</p>
	Provide accurate and up-to-date data on land conservation in the region.	<p>Continue updates to the PA Highlands Information Center to include information on all newly conserved lands.</p> <p>Continue promoting Highlands conservation and recreation through the Hike the Highlands blog.</p> <p>Report data on lands newly preserved using federal funding from 2014-2020.</p>

Coalition building and support	Represent a broad and diverse coalition and lead the way for conservation in the Highlands region.	Reach out to land trusts, trail stewards, and conservation groups to invite them to participate in the Coalition. Continue to hold quarterly meetings of the Coalition. Recruit two new member groups to the coalition each year and maintain communications with current member organizations.
	Ensure members have the capacity to be effective stewards and advocates for the Highlands.	Continue developing stable and diverse funding sources for the coalition and its members.
	Work together as an effective force for conservation in the Pennsylvania Highlands	Nurture collaborative internal and external relationships to promote conservation.
	Continue to influence, support, and benefit from Highlands Coalition policy goals and to strengthen our relationship with the Highlands Coalition.	Participate in four-state Highlands Coalition meetings and maintain communications with the other committees in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.
	Lead the way in Pennsylvania for innovative conservation practices.	Continue to serve as a think-tank where member groups can explore new ideas in conservation.
Regional and local trail development and outdoor recreation	Continue to advance the creation of the Pennsylvania Highlands Trail Network as an identifying feature of the Pennsylvania Highlands and to encourage recreation along the trail network and elsewhere across the Highlands region.	Continue planning for the completion of the trail network and ensure that the trail network is well marked and signed, and encourage outdoor recreation along the trail network and elsewhere in the Highlands region.

Complete a feasibility plan for all segments of the Pennsylvania Highlands Trail Network, including:

- 1) Riegelsville-Quakertown Region
- 2) Unami Hills-Perkiomen Trail
- 3) Perkiomen Trail-Horse-Shoe Trail
- 4) Horse-Shoe-Lebanon Valley-Conewago Trail
- 5) Conewago Trail-Mason Dixon Trail
- 6) Mason Dixon Trail-Appalachian Trail

Install a new interpretive kiosk along the trail network annually.

Continue leading hikes on the proposed route of the trail network.

Develop and lead annual Hike the Highlands, Paddle the Highlands and Critical Treasures trips.

Distribute 5,000 Pennsylvania Highlands Recreation Maps and distribute Paddle the Highlands cards at ten regional outdoors retailers.

Support and promote the development of additional trails within the Pennsylvania Highlands.

Continue to build and strengthen relationships with trail stewards, municipalities, counties, and land conservancies along the proposed route of the Pennsylvania Highlands Trail Network.

Continue outreach to Pennsylvania Highlands Trail Network partners.

Add as members to the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition two new county, municipal, land conservancies, or trail steward organizations annually and continue to build and enhance relationships with existing partners.

<p>Conservation Landscape Initiatives</p>	<p>Work alongside Conservation Landscapes leaders to advance place-based conservation goals.</p>	<p>Continue partnering with regional Conservation Landscapes through collaborative goal-setting, joint land conservation efforts, and public outreach.</p> <p>Involve Conservation Landscapes in the planning process for the Pennsylvania Highlands Trail Network.</p> <p>Conduct an annual outdoor recreation activity in one of the Pennsylvania Highlands Conservation Landscapes.</p>
<p>Outreach and education</p>	<p>Educate the public so that they understand the value of the Pennsylvania Highlands and the efforts to protect them.</p>	<p>Work with partners to celebrate successes and to generate additional opportunities for the media to report on those successes.</p> <p>Continue to use the branding and outreach materials created through our marketing and branding project to create awareness of the Highlands and the coalition’s work.</p> <p>Continue promoting Highlands conservation and recreation through the Hike the Highlands blog.</p> <p>Work with media outlets to secure two Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition-related stories published annually.</p> <p>Reach 50,000 page views on Hike the Highlands blog.</p>
	<p>Educate regional, local, and state decision makers about the importance of the Highlands region and the need for land protection.</p>	<p>Continue connecting member groups decision makers so that they can advocate for regional land protection.</p>

Appendix A - Coalition Achievements

Since 2002, the Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition has been making meaningful progress towards our mission of conserving and connecting the critical lands and natural resources in the Pennsylvania Highlands and promoting their enjoyment through outdoor recreation. The achievements listed below illustrate the many ways we have been reaching, meeting, and exceeding the goals outlined in the 2008 Strategic Plan.

- Received resolutions of support from over 200 municipalities and all 13 counties in the Pennsylvania Highlands region.
- Grown a diverse coalition of over 30 member organizations.
- Put \$2.19 million dollars of Highlands Conservation Act money to work in Pennsylvania, leading to the protection of over 900 acres.
- Seen the number of protected acres rise from 149,808, or less than 8% of the total land in the region, in 2007, to 326,237, or slightly more than 16% of the total land in the region in 2013.
- Created and gave presentations on the PA Highlands to municipal, county and state decision-makers.
- Coordinated a successful mini-grant program and awarded \$22,000 to partner organizations to enable them to educate municipalities in the Highlands. Grant recipients participated in outreach training, and as a result of their meetings, municipalities adopted Environmental Advisory Committees, Land Protection Councils, and even inter-municipal Joint Zoning Plans.
- Published the [Pennsylvania Highlands Conservation Atlas](#) (PDF).
- Made planning information about the Highlands easier to access via [the Pennsylvania Highlands Conservation Information Center](#), including the development of a land and trails tracking systems, capturing protected lands and trail mileages at the municipal and county level for the entire region.
- Regularly shared conservation success stories from across the Highlands region.
- Developed and implemented a marketing and branding plan to improve our visibility in the region, including the development of a logo, as well as the printing of [outreach materials](#) such as folders, buttons and hats.
- Published the [Pennsylvania Highlands Greenway study](#) (PDF), identifying core hubs and corridors in the region.
- Published the Pennsylvania Highlands Greenway Map poster.
- Designed Pennsylvania Highlands experiential programming including the online [Water and You Learning Center](#).
- Developed [Hike the Highlands blog](#) to highlight stories about conservation and recreation in the Pennsylvania Highlands region, now featuring over 140 entries, reaching well over 35,000 people and averaging over 1,500 hits per month.
- Launched [Highlands Mobile](#), an online, mobile-optimized guide to over 80 parks, trails and recreation sites in the Pennsylvania Highlands.

- Put over one million dollars of [federal funding](#) from the Highlands Conservation Act to work in the Pennsylvania Highlands on projects such as the preservation of 600 acres in Oley Hills.
- Coordinated the selection and development of yearly applications for federal Highlands Conservation Act funding.
- Completed a [Feasibility Study](#) (PDF) for the easternmost portion of the Pennsylvania Highlands Trail Network and have begun working to assess feasibility for the entire 280 miles of the conceptual trail network.
- Developed and [installed](#) three [interpretive kiosks](#) along the Pennsylvania Highlands Trail.
- Printed *Hike the Highlands* and *Paddle the Highlands* cards that provide maps and information about dozens of trails and waterways in the Pennsylvania Highlands and distributed them to retailers across the region.
- Conducted dozens of hiking and paddling trips for the public as part of the [Hike the Highlands](#) and [Paddle the Highlands](#) series.
- Printed and distributed tens of thousands of [Pennsylvania Highlands Recreation Maps](#).
- Identified iconic locations in the region and led 20 [critical treasure](#) trips for the public to these locations.
- Developed policy summaries for Pennsylvania Highlands Coalition members on Federal and State conservation funding programs, including: the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Highlands Conservation Act, Keystone Fund, and Growing Greener.
- Researched conservation options for the Pennsylvania Highlands and developed a Conservation Options report and accompanying Conservation Options Technical Manual.
- Met with twelve highlands-region legislators to educate them on the importance of the Highlands region and to advance discussions on state designation of the region and for better land conservation tools.
- Published the [Critical Lands Analysis for portions of Bucks, Lancaster and Lebanon Counties in the Pennsylvania Highlands](#) (PDF) looking the relationship between land and water resources.
- Conducted Conservation Feasibility Studies for priority landscapes identified as hubs in the Conservation Atlas [the [Sand Hills](#) (PDF), [Furnace Hills](#) (PDF), and Conewago Mountains (April 2014)] to determine highest priority parcels for conservation and to identify possible conservation funding options.

Appendix B - Member Groups

Appalachian Mountain Club

Audubon Pennsylvania

Berks Conservancy

Brandywine Conservancy

Cooks Creek Watershed Association

Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor

Delaware River Greenway Partnership

Farm and Natural Lands Trust of York County

French and Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust

Green Valleys Association

Hay Creek Watershed Association

Heritage Conservancy

Horse-Shoe Trail Conservancy

Keystone Conservation Trust

Lancaster County Conservancy

Lancaster County Planning Commission

Land Conservancy of Adams County

Lebanon County Conservation District

Lebanon Valley Conservancy

Maiden Creek Watershed Association

Manada Conservancy

Montgomery County Lands Trust

Mount Gretna Bird Club

National Park Service - Recreational Trails and Conservation Assistance Program

Natural Lands Trust

Pennsylvania Environmental Council

Pennsylvania Association of Watersheds and Rivers

Pine Creek Valley Watershed Association

Schuylkill Highlands Conservation Landscape

South Mountain Conservation Partnership

Tinicum Conservancy

Wildlands Conservancy

The Garden Club of America: Pennsylvania: Wissihickon

York County Planning Commission

Appendix C – Map

