

Tennessee State Natural Areas Preservation Act 50th Anniversary



Tennessee Coneflower (Echinacea tennesseensis) at Couchville Barrens SNA. Delisted from Federal Endangered Species protection in 2011 thanks to the efforts of the Tennessee SNA Programs efforts to protect its habitat. Photo by Brian Bowen.

The [Tennessee Department of Environment & Conservation \(TDEC\)](#) has something to celebrate. May 4, 2021 is the 50th anniversary of the Natural Areas Preservation Act signed on that date in 1971. Governor Bill Lee, joined by Governor Winfield Dunn, who signed the bipartisan bill, marked the anniversary by declaring May 4, 2021 as Tennessee State Natural Areas Day at an event hosted at the Radnor Lake State Natural Area.

“We are blessed with remarkable natural resources across our state, and Tennessee State Natural Areas preserve these sites for generations to come,” Lee said. “I am especially pleased that Governor Dunn could

be with us to celebrate this outstanding work and achievement for our state.”

The [Natural Areas Program](#) seeks to include adequate representation of all natural communities that make up Tennessee's natural landscape, and provide long-term protection for Tennessee's rare, threatened and endangered plant and animal life. Prior to designation, sites are inventoried by the Natural Heritage Program and ranked using NatureServe's Biodiversity Ranking System. Designated natural areas are publicly owned or are private lands encumbered by a conservation easement. ([TDEC Website](#))

Since the legislation was enacted, nearly 130,000 acres of pristine forests, vistas, undisturbed wetlands, grasslands, barrens and glades, with some of Tennessee's rarest species, have been preserved within 84 natural areas – and the work continues through the TDEC Division of Natural Areas and Division of Archeology overseen by the director of conservation, [Roger McCoy](#), who also serves as a member of the committee that administers the State Lands Acquisition Fund, and is the president, of the Natural Areas Association (NAA) board of directors.

When asked if Tennessee would stop at 84 areas, McCoy said, “TDEC professionals continually seek natural areas in our state that require protection, so yes, this number will likely increase.”

Natural Areas Newsletter

June 2021



However, he added, “Not all natural areas require acquisition. More and more frequently, we partner with nonprofits and private landowners to create conservation easements; where a landowner encumbers the property and agrees to give up development rights.” McCoy also noted that another vital role of the Natural Areas Program (NAP) is to ensure that protected properties are secure and defensible to avoid inadvertent encroachment.

While this 50th anniversary is a landmark, there are still challenges ahead such as the threat of invasive species and climate change. McCoy noted that many of the challenges in Tennessee are shared by many other states, and that is why he finds Tennessee’s affiliation with the NAA to be an important part of their program’s progress. NAA provides a place where natural areas professionals can expand their awareness of the evolving science, identify emerging challenges, collaborate to share best practices and learn from each other.

McCoy credits NAA for supporting not just Tennessee’s conservation professionals, but land managers nationwide. “NAA gathers experts in a wide variety of disciplines who can offer a deeper dive into diverse topics in an efficient, easy to access manner via webinars, the *Natural Areas Journal*, and the annual Natural Areas Conference. There is no way you can stay in touch with all the new information or cutting-edge techniques on your own, and it is often impossible in the course of your daily responsibilities to conduct research. NAA has helped to fill that gap. It has enabled Tennessee’s land stewards to stay abreast of the latest research, trends and techniques.”

McCoy added that engaging with NAA is also a great platform to promote your state program which is why he is excited to share the 50th anniversary of the state’s natural areas program with all his colleagues affiliated with NAA. Given Tennessee’s long history of commitment to conservation, McCoy expects that the TDEC will be around to celebrate many anniversaries in the future.

Press Releases:

- May 5, 2021 - [Gov. Lee & Gov. Dunn Celebrate 50th Anniversary of Tennessee State Natural Areas \(tn.gov\)](#)
- March 30, 2021 - [State Natural Areas Gear Up for 50th Anniversary of Preservation Act, Natural Areas Week](#)