

Photos courtesy of Matt Berger, Alex Seglias, Elizabeth Makings, and Fernando Rodriguez

January 20, 2026, 12 p.m. ET, 11 a.m. CT, 10 a.m. MT, 9 a.m. PT

The Science of Saving Plants: Advancing Conservation Through Research and Collaboration

Wesley Knapp, Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer, Center for Plant Conservation

Shannon Fowler, M.A., Director of Communications and Public Programs, Center for Plant Conservation

natural
areas
ASSOCIATION

January 20, 2026, 12 p.m. ET, 11 a.m. CT, 10 a.m. MT, 9 a.m. PT

The Science of Saving Plants: Advancing Conservation Through Research and Collaboration

For over 40 years, the Center for Plant Conservation (CPC) has served as a leading authority on science-based best practices to conserve rare and endangered native plants—with particular expertise in the collection, storage, and utilization of wild rare plant seeds for conservation purposes. CPC is the hub of an 82-partner network of botanical institutions found on three continents. The CPC National Collection safeguards the 4,400 most imperiled native plants found in North America north of Mexico. This living conservation resource ensures the long-term survival of rare species through strategic ex situ stewardship.

CPC's work is grounded in its *Best Plant Conservation Practices to Support Species Survival in the Wild*, an evolving set of science-based guidelines that inform ex situ and in situ conservation strategies. Continually refined through research and fieldwork, these guidelines are integrated into CPC's Rare Plant Academy (RPA), a digital hub providing conservationists with educational training materials, a video library, a knowledge-sharing forum, and the online Applied Plant Conservation Course. Through key initiatives such as regional seed collection in biodiversity hotspots across the U.S., pioneering scientific research studies, and cutting-edge database tools, CPC is expanding practitioners' collective knowledge while building capacity and streamlining conservation efforts. Looking ahead, CPC will continue to lead initiatives and best practices to prevent plant extinction while providing leadership and assistance to plant conservation practitioners in new but essential ways, such as plant taxonomy, data synchronization, and prioritization efforts.

By integrating best practices with cutting-edge research and training, CPC and its partners are shaping the future of rare plant conservation and ensuring a legacy of stewardship for generations to come.

This talk serves to introduce CPC to Natural Areas Association members and the broader conservation community, while providing an overview of resources and collaboration opportunities that can help advance rare and native plant conservation efforts.



Wesley Knapp, Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer, Center for Plant Conservation

Dr. Wesley Knapp is a leading voice in plant conservation with a career spanning over two decades. Born in Lawrence, MA and raised in Claremont, NH, Wes's journey into the world of conservation began during his childhood in New England where time spent outdoors sparked a lifelong passion for nature. He holds a B.S. in Environmental Sciences from Catawba College, an M.S. in Plant Science from Delaware State University, and a Ph.D. in Ecology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Wes began his career as Eastern Region Ecologist & Botanist for the Maryland Natural Heritage Program (2001–2016), followed by five years in the role of Mountains Botanist & Ecologist for North Carolina's Natural Heritage Program. In 2021, he became Chief Botanist at NatureServe, and in 2025, was appointed Chief Executive Officer of the Center for Plant Conservation, a conservation nonprofit working with over 80 partnering institutions on three continents on the front lines to prevent plant extinction. With extensive field experience across the U.S. and abroad, Wes has led efforts to describe new plant species, prevent extinction events, and assess conservation priorities. His work is singularly focused on advancing conservation strategies that combat biodiversity loss driven by the sixth mass extinction.



Shannon Fowler, M.A., Director of Communications and Public Programs, Center for Plant Conservation

Shannon Fowler is the Director of Communications & Public Programs for the Center for Plant Conservation (CPC), where she leads strategic marketing and communications efforts to advance CPC's mission of saving rare and endangered plants. In this role, she manages branding, digital and print communications, and public engagement initiatives while also supporting fundraising activities and partner stewardship. She serves as the managing editor of CPC's bi-monthly newsletter and oversees CPC's Applied Plant Conservation Course, an online training resource for plant conservation professionals. Additionally, she develops and enhances web-based educational content through the Rare Plant Academy, ensuring conservation practitioners have access to best practices and scientific resources. Shannon has more than a decade of experience in nonprofit marketing and communications experience in the arts and culture and conservation sectors. Prior to joining CPC, she served as Director of Marketing for the San Diego Children's Discovery Museum and Director of Marketing & Communications for the Museum of Us. Passionate about storytelling and mission-driven communications, Shannon is dedicated to connecting people with the importance of plant conservation and biodiversity through compelling content and strategic outreach.