


Openlands' work is centered on ensuring that **all people have access to nature near to home**. Parks and preserves that are welcoming, healthy, and healing and that are built around values that are inspired by and of the community.

The history of land ownership in the United States has been a central piece to the system of oppression and racism our country was founded on. From European settlers violently stealing Indigenous land to disgraceful legal maneuvers used to seize Black-owned land since the Civil War, land-based trauma and theft are cornerstones of the oppression of Indigenous people and African Americans.



The murders of
George Floyd,
Breonna Taylor,
Tony McDade,
Ahmaud Arbery,
and too many others
demonstrate
the structural racism
that puts
Black lives in danger
every day.

Openlands stands with the Black members
of our staff, board, and community
against racism and oppression of any kind, and
unequivocally condemns acts of bigotry,
racism, and violence against people of color.

BLACK LIVES MATTER.

As a predominately white organization working in a predominately white profession, we have more work we must do to end systemic racism. **Social equity and inclusion are intrinsically linked to our fight for climate resilience and environmental protections. It is a fact that communities of color will suffer and die at disproportionately higher rates if we continue to see rollbacks and business as usual.**

Openlands reaffirms its commitment to addressing systemic racism, advancing environmental equity and justice on local, state, and federal levels, and engaging diverse communities across the region in support of a more just future. At this unprecedented time, people are turning back to nature. Our mission plays a vital role in the health, healing, and community-building that is needed to enhance the quality of life for everyone in our region.

Openlands commits to doing all we can to care for each other and our world.

LANDSCAPE PRESERVATION IS A CONTINUUM. It ranges from creating the small community park in an urban neighborhood to reviving vast landscapes of Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge and Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. At the center of this continuum is people, and their ever-constant relationship to the land we inhabit.

Our work in land and water conservation reflects the essential connection between nature and people. In Northeastern Illinois, our work includes large landscapes spanning thousands of acres, suburban ravines and oak groves, and small urban lots that increase green space in densely populated neighborhoods of Chicago. These places are linked together with trails of land and water and well cared for private property and agricultural lands.

Openlands has a comprehensive team in restoration, planning, advocacy, and law to ensure open lands are protected and cared for long after we acquire them. Together with partners like the forest preserve and conservation districts, we create models of conservation and restoration that contribute to an interconnected system of land and water that allow wildlife and people to thrive.

We collaborate with policy makers, property owners, community leaders, farmers, and businesses toward equitable development that sustains globally significant natural areas and farmland and creates a sense of place for communities.

Openlands founding Board President, Jeff Short, observed that “You’ve got to save the land at least twice from all the threats that come later, after you preserve it.” The open spaces we enjoy and rely on today are further protected by our advocacy. We support laws and policies that protect these places on the local, state, and national level. We give people an outlet to be heard by decisionmakers. And when necessary, we use our expertise in law in the courtroom to guarantee protection of parks and preserves for generations to come.

Of People and Place: Conservation and Scale

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE REGION is as varied, interlaced, and dynamic as the people who call it home. With multiple models in practice, Openlands drives land conservation by employing the best strategies—whether to create a new neighborhood park or to weave a linear system of connected lands along a pristine

stream. This work is only successful through building strategic partnerships, supporting community planning efforts, engaging agencies and elected officials, offering technical assistance, and empowering local advocates to have a part in protecting natural spaces.

At Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge between Woodstock and Richmond (1), Openlands and its partners have acquired over 1,300 acres of land and counting, wrapped around Nippersink Creek. The collaboration to acquire and restore Hackmatack’s ecologically significant landscapes will provide open space and recreational opportunities for over 10 million people in Illinois and Wisconsin.

On the other side of the spectrum, Openlands works with cities and park districts to develop strategic plans and acquire hundreds of vacant lots for neighborhood green space in park deserts. From pocket parks, to river shorelines to remnant wetlands and prairies, Openlands acquires land for equitable accesses of all people to enjoy nature where they live.

Creating Healthy Lands and Waters

THROUGH ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION, Openlands brings health to our region’s celebrated wildlife and rich natural areas, and provides residents cleaner water, cleaner air, and spaces that ensure our collective well-being and climate resilience. Well cared for and healthy lands are central to conservation.

At Deer Grove East and Bobolink Meadows Forest Preserves in Cook County (2), Openlands recently completed a major wetland restoration project that transformed a drained and over-planted site back to a thriving wetlands complex. Now, they have become home for Sandhill Cranes, and a recreational resource for thousands of human visitors. Deer Grove was awarded the Excellence in Ecological Restoration at the Platinum Level by Chicago Wilderness in 2019, and just this month



the interpretive trail along the forest preserve’s 2.8-mile paved trail won an Honorable Mention from the Society for Experiential Graphic Design global competition. The interpretive trail includes signage and spots to sit, relax, and reflect.

Restoring these sites has not only increased the natural beauty of the area but allowed them to absorb 110 million more gallons of water per year. This provides significant benefits to water resources by keeping more stormwater on-site, reducing runoff and pollution from entering streams, sewers, and basements.

Advocating for Smart Growth and Planning

FROM THE LAKE MICHIGAN SHORELINE to the sea of wildflowers at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie and beyond, Openlands is committed to defending our region’s waters and open spaces. In many cases, that means advocating for smarter investment in road, rail, freight, and energy that preserves our region’s natural heritage, prime farmland, and sense of place. It also means advocating against recent rollbacks to historic legislation that came from Earth Day fifty years ago.

Openlands is fighting to protect Midewin (3) and the people who live and work near it from a massive distribution center, potentially being constructed adjacent to this globally significant landscape and causing pollution, traffic, and water quality issues in the community. Working with residents, nearby farmers, and distribution unions, we hope to create land use solutions that ensure the protection of Midewin, clean water for Will County residents, and a more equitable approach to economic development that leads to vibrant and healthy communities.

In Chicago, Openlands is advocating for creative solutions to an Army Corps of Engineers proposal along the shores of Lake Michigan. Seeking a 25-year extension to dump polluted Calumet River sediments on a Chicago Park District site next to Calumet Park, the Army Corps’ proposal would perpetuate the dumping of polluted material in this community. With partners, Openlands is advocating for a proposal that will mitigate pollution in the river in the first place, ensuring cleaner water and a healthier community.

Ensuring Preservation through Engagement

LAND PRESERVATION is successful when people are engaged in it. In coordination with the municipalities, community organizations, and preserves we partner with, Openlands encourages and facilitates participation in open space preservation on all scales.

In Lake County, our work extends to the action individuals can take to restore our land and water, and has a special focus on the remaining cores of our Oak ecosystem. Through our new virtual Lands in Harmony service, we consult with people on their properties, listen to their needs, and show them how to protect the ecological treasures frequently found in their yards, campuses, and larger landscapes. While protecting aesthetics, they remove invasive species, add native species, and improve the quality and quantity of water leaving their properties. The stewardship of their land knits together the isolated fragments of our natural heritage into a connected system of functioning and resilient landscapes and communities.

Along the Little Calumet River, our work in community engagement has intersected with the history and heritage of the area. This summer we debut a new water trail on PaddleIllinoisWaterTrails.org with the African American Heritage Water Trail (4). The trail along the river traces nearly two centuries worth of stories about African Americans who fought for freedom and equality.

PHOTO CREDITS: Left (2) Brandon Hayes; (3) John Kieken; (4) Diane Banta. Right (above) Patrick Williams; (below). DJ Glisson.



Land can Lead for Climate Resilience

LAND CAN OFFER TREMENDOUS BENEFITS towards influencing the climate by mitigating air temperatures and pulling carbon from the atmosphere. But unhealthy and poorly managed land contributes little to climate resilience. Our landscapes and ecosystems in the region have been reshaped to support our production of food, timber, clothing, and energy. On a global scale, those combined land-uses contribute about 22% of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions.

In the search for answers to mitigate the effects of climate change, land and nature can lead the way. And there are changes you can make to the land in your care or community.

37% of the solution to reducing climate change can be found in conservation and restoration of the land.

Land-use must mimic nature and provide essential functions or benefits to begin to solve our climate problems. For example, dwellings and structures should provide housing, offices, commerce, or manufacturing sites, but also include native trees and plants or vegetation-rich structures like green roofs that lower ambient air temperatures. Urban forests, likewise, shade structures and intercept rainwater, cool the air while providing myriad other benefits. And ideally, agriculture should provide food for humans while providing a symbiotic habitat for insects, birds, and pollinators, and serving as a significant carbon sink to lower greenhouse gasses.

While shelter-in-place has highlighted the importance of nature in our lives, we must act on how nature-based solutions to climate change can be central for a healthier and more sustainable future.

OPENLANDS GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGES THE FOLLOWING SUPPORT:



Welcome New Openlands Board Members

DAISY FEIDT is Executive Vice President of Access Living, Chicago’s Center for Independent Living. She is an alumna of Leadership Greater Chicago, a prestigious and competitive program that provides community awareness and networking opportunities for leaders in the Chicago community. In addition to Openlands, Daisy serves on the board as vice president at BPI, a public interest law and policy center, which strives to advance innovative solutions to issues of social justice and quality of life in the Chicago region, and the Illinois Network of Centers for Independent Living. Daisy holds a Bachelors of Arts degree in psychology from Lawrence University.



WHAT ATTRACTS YOU TO CONSERVATION?
I grew up in Minnesota, and my family vacations were almost always centered around nature. I’ve definitely continued the love in my life as an adult. Now I am a mom and have a five-year-old and it’s been interesting seeing nature from her eyes. I’m also passionate about access and equity issues. I have a disability, and coming from a disability organization, I’m interested in how nature can be accessible to everybody, as well as engaging all different types of communities in nature.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PLACE TO GET OUTSIDE IN THE REGION?
Horner Park between Montrose and Irving Park along the Chicago River is a current favorite. I love the North Branch Trail and feel so lucky we have that trail.

AKHIL RAMANADHAM is an MBA Candidate at Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Management. He received his undergraduate degree in finance and accounting from Georgetown University and has earned his CFA & CPA. Prior to returning to school, he was a management consultant at PwC where he worked with senior finance executives in the media and tech space.



WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO GET INVOLVED WITH OPENLANDS?
Growing up in California I always spent a lot of time outdoors, and today some of my favorite activities are hiking and being outside. So when I came to Kellogg, I knew that I wanted to get involved in environmental conservation. One of the things I am hoping to explore with Openlands, especially not being native to the Midwest, is outdoor spaces. I’m excited to discover all the Chicago region has to offer.

WHY IS OPENLANDS WORK IMPORTANT?
I think we are on this precipice. People have talked about environmental sustainability for decades now, but it hasn’t been a focus and it feels like we’re finally starting to change that. One indicator is the increase in businesses that are now very sustainability focused. In the past it was nice to have, now it’s what businesses do front and center. Openlands is a big part of that change advocating for nature-based solutions to climate change, and I’m proud to be a part of that.

Openlands 2020 Annual Luncheon



SAVE THE DATE
The Openlands 2020 Annual Luncheon
A Virtual Journey from The Amazon to Chicago
Tuesday, October 13 to Thursday, October 15, 2020
Co-Chairs, Michael Keiser and Connie Keller

Join us for a multimedia journey celebrating two extraordinary women in conservation and their leadership in large landscape preservation here in Chicago and around the world. Stay tuned for more details.

Conservation Leadership Award Recipient: Dr. Debra Moskovits
Keynote Speaker: Dr. Avecita Chicchón



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OPENLANDS
25 East Washington, Suite 1650
Chicago, Illinois 60602-1708
Telephone 312.863.6250
openlands.org

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