

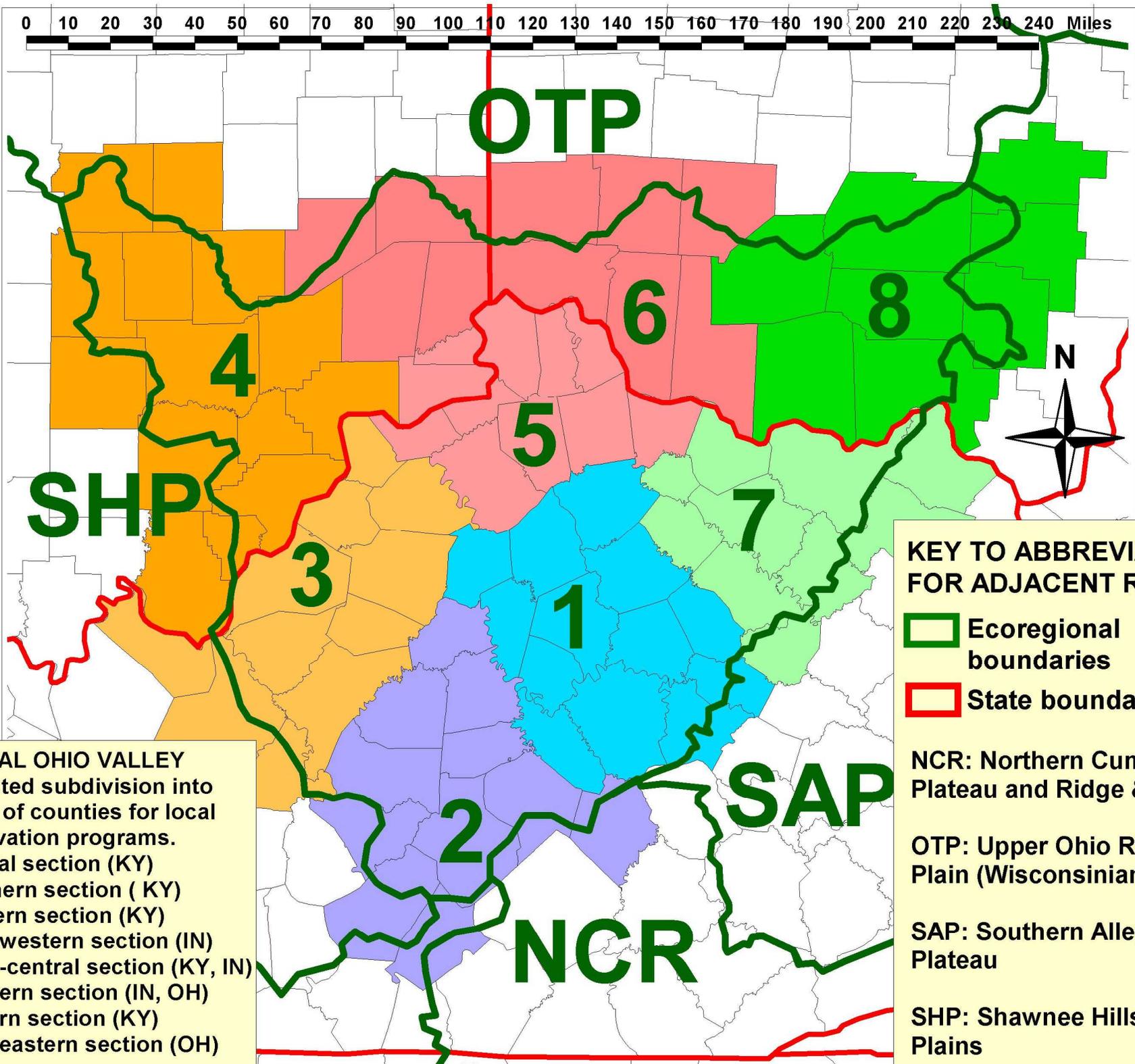
## **Concept for Building a Community of Conservationists across the Central Ohio Valley**

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Modern conservation (broadly defined) seeks to be ‘science-based’ and ‘community-based’. There is some scientific basis for most current programs in conservation across this region. But we conservationists have generally failed to build communities of interested people who regularly interact within regions of reasonably moderate size—large enough to exert good cooperative influence, and small enough to focus on common understanding of each region’s features. Even within organizations focused on conservation, there is often a wide range of views and experiences concerning actual goals and methods. And there is often insufficient interaction between organizations with different approaches to conservation. We still do not have consensus on some technical aspects in prioritization of landscapes and watersheds to ‘target’; in restoration of degraded habitats (especially old fields and grassland remnants); in selection of imperiled species for recovery; and in methods for reduction of invasive aliens.

Having been involved in conservation across Kentucky for 30 years, I know the value of regular interaction among people with common interests. While there have been past efforts to coordinate across the state or within regions, such efforts have dwindled during the past decade or so. The ‘Central Ohio Valley’ (see map) is a reasonably sized region for regular review and planning, ideally with an annual meeting and objective report on progress. Within this region, there are some 4-8 sections (with flexible boundaries) that could become more intense ‘ecological neighborhoods’—essentially groups of counties that share features and natural relationships (including watersheds or river-frontage). I am currently experimenting with the ‘central’ section (1 on map), as a focus for regular monthly field trips to interesting sites. Such trips should enable us to become knowledgeable about the range of conditions, and to build relationships. I am seeking a few partners to organize an annual meeting for this section, and then connect with similar interest in other sections, perhaps leading to a rotated annual event.

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100 110 120 130 140 150 160 170 180 190 200 210 220 230 240 Miles



**SHP**

**OTP**

**SAP**

**NCR**

**CENTRAL OHIO VALLEY**  
Suggested subdivision into groups of counties for local conservation programs.

- 1 Central section (KY)
- 2 Southern section ( KY)
- 3 Western section (KY)
- 4 Northwestern section (IN)
- 5 North-central section (KY, IN)
- 6 Northern section (IN, OH)
- 7 Eastern section (KY)
- 8 Northeastern section (OH)

**KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS FOR ADJACENT REGIONS**

-  Ecoregional boundaries
-  State boundaries
- NCR:** Northern Cumberland Plateau and Ridge & Valley
- OTP:** Upper Ohio River Till Plain (Wisconsinian Age)
- SAP:** Southern Allegheny Plateau
- SHP:** Shawnee Hills and Plains

Within the Central Ohio Valley, especially the central Bluegrass (1 on map), priorities for lands and waters to be protected are fairly clear. These include the limited areas with relatively wild conditions (especially along Palisades of the Kentucky River) and more degraded areas that deserve active restoration (especially headwater streams and uplands with remnants of woods). Much effort has gone into purchasing land or securing easements, with the Heritage Land Conservation Fund playing a significant role in recent decades, together with varied non-profit organizations and county governments. However, the Fund has now been severely cut and there have been significant problems dealing with issues of management at the protected sites.

Griffith Woods and Jessamine Creek Gorge are among the most significant sites on uplands and along the Palisades, respectively. But it has been difficult here to build consensus on how management should proceed, especially in old fields and open woods that are prone to invasion by alien bush honeysuckle and then winter-creeper (*Euonymus fortunei*) under shade. While reforestation may be a reasonable goal in some areas, how will we reduce the alien invasion? And if we are to maintain some open areas with naturalistic browsing or burning—rather than just mowing—how can we do that? These central questions for the ecology and economy of designed natural areas are not being addressed by regular gatherings of interested people.

The situation would be improved if ‘targets’ for conservation were defined and assessed more clearly through proper meetings and continued interaction. Within protected tracts, we need clearer priorities for restoration of defined habitats. And within habitats that are at least partly restored, we need clearer priorities for promoting selected natives and reducing selected aliens. Obvious but challenging examples of such plants are the native clovers, which used to depend on browsing and trampling of the vegetation. We need long-term research into how disturbances of various types can influence the balance of native versus alien plants. This work deserves much more focus by HLCF, the Kentucky Organization of Field Stations and others. It should be possible to integrate plans for landscape protection, habitat restoration and species recovery.



Griffith Woods (Harrison County), where browsing by cattle allowed much shellbark hickory to regenerate during 1984-2004; but many saplings were top-killed by fire during early 2014.

Conservation-minded people in the Central Ohio Valley lack a general process for resolving differences, building consensus and forging collaborative synergy. I am suggesting that a three-tiered approach would be useful: (1) annual meetings across the whole region; (2) monthly workshops and field trips at different sites within each subsection; and (3) more regular action by paid staff and volunteers at particular sites. Although electronic communication is of course now essential, it is only through regular face-to-face interaction that a true community can develop. Offering suggestions and timely responses should become a more regular, transparent theme in our work, and collaborative research is needed to address critically divisive questions.

Open debate, ideally conducted in a friendly fashion, is still needed for some fundamental aspects of conservation in this region. For example, there has been considerable uncertainty about the original, pre-Virginian nature of the 'Bluegrass Woodland' that covered uplands on deeper eutrophic soils. I have assembled overwhelming evidence that the woodland was relatively shady, with 20-40% sugar maple and only 1-10% truly open brush, cane or other grassland. I have challenged anyone to provide evidence that open savanna-like conditions were prevalent ([http://www.bluegrasswoodland.com/uploads/Summary\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.bluegrasswoodland.com/uploads/Summary_Statement.pdf)). Unfortunately, the lack of friendly debate and responsiveness among organizations involved at Griffith Woods has been a significant factor hindering progress at that site.

In order to become fully integrated into society, conservation needs a method for objective mutual assessment of successes versus failures. While newsletters and websites may champion claimed progress, especially where large sums of money are expended, it is rare to find transparent assessment of projects in relation to the underlying goals—with real measures of conservation targets. In their original partnership, Nature Conservancy chapters and Natural Heritage programs across the nation did conceive of such mutual assessment, but a partial divorce has now occurred in many states. Our best chance for re-establishing such vision is to base regular assessments in regional conferences and annual reports from diverse partners.



Jennifer Kozlow explaining how research on running buffalo clover can guide management; without large animals, mowed trails like this form the only potential habitat at Griffith Woods.