



2020 Annual Impact Report

United by **Nature**

Letter from the Executive Director



Dear Friends,

What a year. I think it's safe to say that this was not the 2020 anyone expected. A year defined by a pandemic and political posturing has also demonstrated how much we rely on science and need nature. I see that every time I visit the park in my neighborhood or when I visit the national forest in north Georgia... people are turning to nature for comfort in these trying times. With record wildfires and shocking new science on the world's biodiversity loss, The Nature Conservancy's mandate is more urgent than ever.

In these uncertain times, I find hope in our work to help nature and people thrive. I am inspired by the pressure and enthusiasm we are seeing from young people to address climate change, biodiversity loss and the connections between the environment and racial injustice.

Just as nature adapts to change, so must we. TNC in Georgia's board of trustees has been beside us every step of the way as we've responded to COVID-19, adapted to the economic downturn and determined our strategic path forward. Though our staff have been working from home since March, I am so proud of our team's ability to find new ways to achieve conservation wins.

In this report, we'll share some of what we accomplished this year—from finalizing the protection of the 11,000-acre Cabin Bluff near Cumberland Island, to accelerating the removal of outdated dams and culverts to improve fish passage.

Throughout the year, our supporters have proven time and again that they are here for The Nature Conservancy. Without you, the organization does not have the fuel it needs to protect the lands and waters on which all life depends.

Perhaps seeing what you've helped accomplish in Georgia will help you find hope of your own for the future.

In unity,

Deron Davis
Executive Director

The Nature Conservancy in Georgia

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

- Mary Beth Jordan,
Board Chair
- Bryan Batson
- Nina Butler
- Marsha Certain
- Revonda Cosby
- John D'Andrea
- Dane Dickie
- Linda DiSantis
- Bailey Izard
- Ben Jordan
- Mason Lampton
- Nancy Clair McInaney
- Scott Satterwhite
- Raymond Singletary
- Chris Weber
- Jeannie Wright

COVER TNC staff and volunteers at Constitution Lakes in the South River watershed. © John Amis

THIS PAGE Deron Davis © Eliot VanOtteren; Pitcher Plants at Cabin Bluff adjacent to Cumberland Island © Sheila Barrie

VOLUNTEER POWERHOUSE

The close of TNC's fiscal year in June also marked the successful completion of our three-year \$36-million campaign, Georgia 2020: Nature Unites Us. Funds raised through the comprehensive campaign supported the conservation achievements of the past three years, including several highlighted in this report.

We are deeply grateful to the 38-member campaign committee, co-chaired by Russell Currey and by Jennifer and Marty Flanagan, for their energy, enthusiasm, and tireless efforts to support critical conservation work across the state. As honorary co-chairs, Wendy and Hank Paulson continued their longstanding support of TNC in Georgia and beyond.

Committee members are a cross-section of Georgia's business, conservation and philanthropic communities, including several

TNC trustees who added campaign responsibilities to their existing roles as volunteer leaders.

"The campaign committee embodied the 'Nature Unites Us' theme in everything they did," says Stacey Sinkiewicz, interim director of development. "From opening their homes and introducing friends to TNC's work, to their generous gift of time and their personal financial commitments, committee members united around their passion for nature and their love of Georgia to make the campaign a success."

The campaign's success is a testament to TNC's reputation for skillful collaboration, its commitment to science, and its practical approach, none of which would be possible without the extraordinary work of our volunteer leaders.



Georgia 2020: Nature Unites Us Campaign Committee

Honorary Co-Chairs

Wendy and
Hank Paulson

Campaign Chairs

Russell Currey, Jennifer
and Marty Flanagan

Chairman's Council

Tricia Allen, Mimi Cay,
Brad Currey, Cody Laird,
Charley Tarver

Campaign Committee

Yolanda Adrean

Marsha Certain

John Frazer

Carolyn Gibbs

Newell and Tom Harbin

John Hardman

Lucie Ide and Humberto
Garcia-Sjogrim

Cara Isdell and Zak Lee

Pamela Isdell

Kerry and Bailey Izard

Bill Jones III

Mary Beth and
Ben Jordan

Barry and Jim Kaminer

Todd Knutson

Nancy Clair

Laird McInaney

John Pruitt

John R. Seydel

Virginia and
Raymond Singletary

Stephanie Stuckey

Steve Voorhees

Jeannie Wright



LAND





Cabin Bluff: A Big Conservation Win for Georgia

Partnerships were key in one of the biggest conservation wins for The Nature Conservancy in Georgia: the permanent preservation of Cabin Bluff. This 11,000-acre property along the Intracoastal Waterway in Camden County is the last large, undeveloped portion of Georgia's coast that was not protected and is one of its most scenic areas.

The landscape is a highly diverse mix of salt marshes, tidal creeks, maritime forests, and longleaf pine woodlands. It supports many threatened and endangered species, including gopher tortoise, wood stork, and eastern indigo snake. Cabin Bluff also buffers coastal communities from storm surges and flooding.

“Cabin Bluff is a perfect example of TNC's approach to conservation,” says TNC Georgia executive director, Deron Davis. “We identified it as an ecological priority,

took a big risk in buying it and have worked alongside a wide variety of partners to care for the land and establish a new public greenspace.”

In summer 2018, the Cabin Bluff property was being aggressively marketed. To prevent it from being purchased by a developer, TNC leveraged its relationships with many partners to buy the land, using loans from the nonprofit Open Space Institute, which retains a part ownership in the property, and the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority, as well as private gifts. In January 2020, the Navy bought a conservation easement on part of the property to protect it from development, and in March, the Navy and the state purchased a second easement on another portion. About 8,000 acres of the land will be transferred to the state by the end of the year, and the remaining portion has been sold to a conservation buyer.

LEFT PAGE Cabin Bluff in Woodbine, GA. © Sheila Del Santro
TOP LEFT The dock at Cabin Bluff. © Brant Slay/TNC
TOP RIGHT Cabin Bluff is a diverse landscape of maritime forests, tidal creeks, salt marsh and woodlands. © Sheila Del Santro

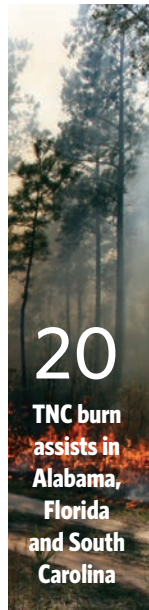
Land Management

The Georgia land management team had a productive year, managing more than 92,000 acres and planting 389,595 trees even with the operational challenges presented by the pandemic. “Crews incorporated additional safety measures brought on by the pandemic, and when they could not be on the fire line, they performed other important land management tasks such as invasive species removal,” explains Erick Brown, director of land stewardship.

By the Numbers

32,496
total acres
burned by TNC fire crews

ACRES
15,475



20

TNC burn
assists in
Alabama,
Florida
and South
Carolina

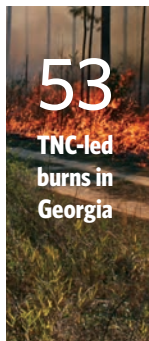
ACRES
9,042



48

TNC burn
assists in
Georgia

ACRES
7,979



53

TNC-led
burns in
Georgia

Prescribed burns in FY2020



LEFT Marsh at Cabin Bluff.
© Wade Harrison/TNC
CHART © Ashley
Demosthenes/TNC

An adjacent 16,000-acre property, Ceylon, has similar high conservation value and was purchased in 2019 by TNC’s partners The Conservation Fund and the Open Space Institute. TNC was a funding partner to protect Ceylon.

“It is amazing to have 27,000 contiguous acres protected in only two transactions and within two years,” explains Anne Flinn, director of land protection for TNC in Georgia. “That’s not the normal pace of land protection.”

Together, the two parcels form an important migration corridor that allows wildlife and plant species to move inward from the coast as sea levels rise. Cabin Bluff and Ceylon are also critical to protecting the coast from storm surges and flooding.

The state will manage Cabin Bluff and Ceylon together. All of Ceylon and the state-owned portion of Cabin Bluff will be a wildlife management area, and the Navy retains the easements that prohibit development on these properties. The state and Navy co-hold a conservation and restrictive easement over the conservation buyer-owned portion of Cabin Bluff.

There is potential to build the corridor of protected habitat inland toward the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge or north toward the Altamaha River. “It’s a lofty idea,” Flinn admits, “but there’s a concerted effort and interest in connecting these corridors within the coastal plain.”



COAST & OCEAN

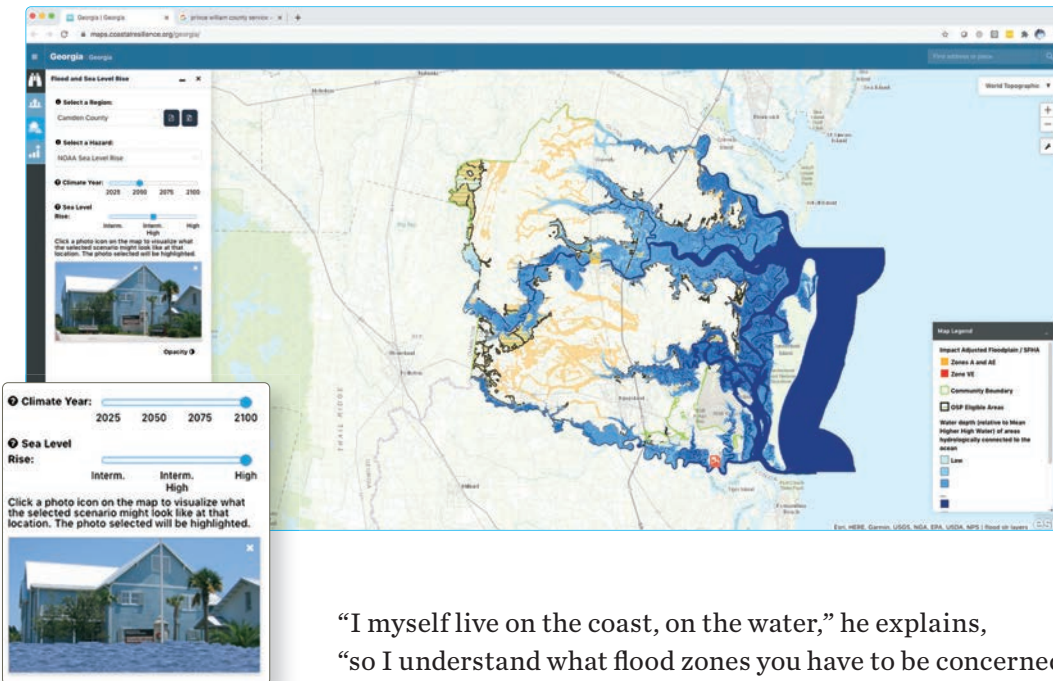
Online Resilience Tools for Coastal Communities

For Scott Brazell, floodplain manager for Camden County, Georgia, coastal resilience isn't just a professional interest. It's also deeply personal.

To help Camden County, TNC developed three online tools that allow users to visualize, understand, and plan for flood risks in their area. The Flood Risk application and Community Planner application are available at maps.coastalresilience.org/georgia/. Once they gauge their personal risk, homeowners can seek solutions such as installing flood-resilient structures in their homes and getting flood insurance. They can also pressure local officials to make good land-use decisions, such as turning a flood-prone area into a park instead of building houses there.

The third tool, which will be available for county use next year, is a Community Rating System (CRS) Open Space Explorer application to help identify locations in flood-prone regions where conservation and restoration should be high priorities. The application will help with conservation decisions that enable Camden County to claim points through a FEMA CRS program and reduce the cost of flood insurance for residents.

“When people live in flood-prone areas, local governments end up being faced with bailing them out and sometimes buying the houses if they're flooded too many times,” explains Ashby Nix Worley, coastal climate adaptation director for TNC in Georgia. These effects are in addition to the lives lost in weather events, the emotional costs of evacuating during storms, and the economic expense for the community of recovering from devastating floods. By providing flood data and creating tools to explore different potential scenarios, TNC is empowering communities to make choices that benefit both people and nature.



“I myself live on the coast, on the water,” he explains, “so I understand what flood zones you have to be concerned with and what storm surge can do to you. The Nature Conservancy has got to be the frontrunner in understanding environmental impacts and creating ways for those impacts not to be so harsh on people.”

Coastal areas like Camden County are typically the first to feel the effects of climate change: they're battered by storms and threatened by rising sea levels and frequent coastal flooding. As the severity and frequency of weather events increase, it's becoming critical for coastal communities to make decisions about land use to protect their residents.

PREVIOUS PAGE The city of St. Marys, in Camden County, has experienced sea level rise since the 1800s. © Georgia Department of Economic Development

Living Shorelines

Evidence shows that nature-based solutions like living shorelines protect coastal communities from rising sea levels and storm surges more effectively than seawalls and systems of bulkheads and revetments. The Nature Conservancy implemented some of the first successful living shorelines in Georgia as pilot projects in the Altamaha River system. With the leadership of Christi Lambert, director of marine and coastal conservation for TNC, we have now completed eight living shoreline projects along the coast. Another is being planned in Camden County, in partnership with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, landowners and managers.



Descend With Care

Fishing is a big deal on Georgia's coast, but there are signs that certain fisheries are in trouble. So TNC is sharing best fishing practices with recreational fishers and charter captains and asking them to help collect data on fish populations. "Fish are a resource in public waters—and they like to move. So it's very hard to figure out how many there are," says Robert Crimian, the southeast ocean conservation specialist for TNC. Crimian encourages fishers to collect data using apps that record the numbers and broad locations of fish caught. He also urges them to use special descending devices when they catch and release deepwater species like snappers and groupers. These devices can prevent barotrauma, which kills many deepwater fish when they're released on the surface. TNC is creating an online platform on the Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary website that educates fishers about the reef, best fishing practices, and the need for data.

FRESHWATER



Restoring a Watershed's Health

“Obsolete dams disrupt the natural life cycle of fish, crayfish, mussels and other organisms, and they degrade water quality.” Aging structures also pose a safety hazard explains Sara Gottlieb, director of freshwater science and strategy for TNC in Georgia.

Once upon a time, three earthen dams were constructed on two streams in west Georgia. By spring 2017, several years after TNC became the landowner, they had long since outlived their usefulness: water poured through chinks in a dozen places, and the structures were unsafe to cross. Even as they fell into disrepair, they continued to block fish passage to the upper reaches of the streams. So, TNC organized their removal.

With funding from the Coca-Cola Foundation, Gottlieb oversaw the removal of the three dams near Fort Benning, on the Chattahoochee Fall Line, and channeled lessons learned into a dam removal handbook for Georgia landowners, published by the Georgia Aquatic Connectivity Team she co-leads (ga-act.org). The handbook walks readers through the steps of removing a dam, from assessing the site to applying for permits to contracting with a company to carry out the work.



THIS PAGE Before and after. Collapsing and perched culverts at Mill Creek in the Chattahoochee National Forest limited fish passage for important species. TNC and partners replaced them with a bottomless culvert. © Katie Owens/TNC **LEFT PAGE** A student works with professor Troy Keller (in the stream) to monitor aquatic species after the removal of two dams near Fort Benning. © Henry Jacobs, HJacobs Creative



Georgia has more barriers to aquatic connectivity than any other state in the Southeast, and many landowners want to remove dams on their land but don't know where to start. In addition, "dam removal in Georgia is new, unlike in other parts of the country where they have a lot of experience," Gottlieb notes.

TNC worked with a private contractor with expertise in stream restoration and dam removals. The company came up with a design to restore damaged stream reaches by establishing stable channels and banks.

Although the streams won't fully recover for years, TNC staff noticed fish and crayfish moving between upstream and downstream reaches within weeks after the dams were removed. The gradual return of the area to its natural state provides a rich study site for scientists. Dr. Stacey Sloan Blersch and Dr. Troy Keller, professors at Columbus State University's Department of Earth and Space Sciences are building a curriculum around the project, and their students will continue to collect data from the area over the next few years to document the restoration.

"Our goal is to make this a continued, living classroom. We want to have multiple years of data and as we improve our methods, we'll hopefully continue to train the next generation of scientists," says Dr. Sloan Blersch.

Road-stream crossings with culverts can form as much of a barrier to aquatic organisms' passage as dams in some places. Katie Owens, TNC's Coosa River Basin program director, oversaw culvert replacements at two creeks in north Georgia. The Raccoon Creek culvert severely impaired the ability of over 40 species of fish to move between habitats. With partners, we replaced it with a freestanding bridge that allows the creek to flow freely. The work reconnected populations of endangered Etowah darters and threatened Cherokee darters. At Mill Creek, TNC partnered with the U.S. Forest Service to replace a collapsed culvert that was posing a major barrier to fish passage and promoting erosion.

Over the next year, in Holly Creek, four culverts are scheduled for replacement. "Replacing these culverts will open over seven miles of habitat in the watershed," says Gottlieb.

HEALTHY CITIES



“We’ve waited so long for something in this area that we could be proud of, that fits into the future plans of the city, and that is a place of beauty for its residents.”

— Shirley Nichols

Park Acquisition Marks Step Forward for South River Forest

South River Gardens is a community of ranch-style homes on tree-lined streets in southeast Atlanta. Adjacent to Lake Charlotte Nature Preserve, bordered by I-285, and bisected by the river, it is a classic metro Atlanta community.

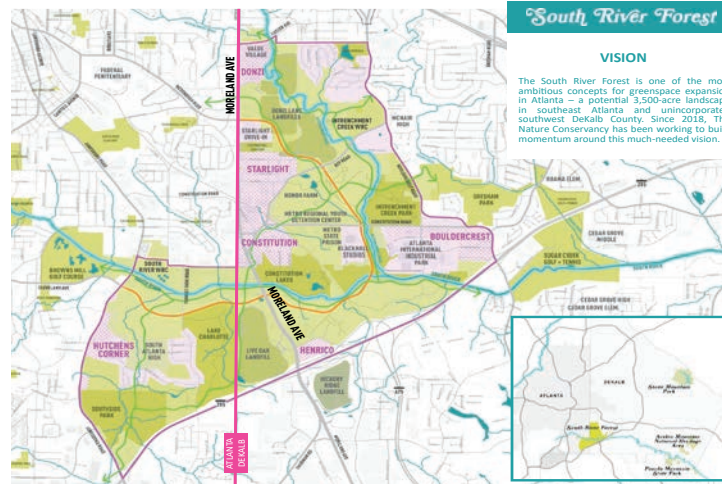
Shirley Nichols, a resident of the neighborhood for 45 years, is a long-standing advocate of the area and the surrounding forest. She and her neighbors fought for decades to protect the 200-plus forested acres from development. Recently, The Nature Conservancy helped The Conservation Fund purchase the land from its private owner before transferring it to the city so that it can be permanently protected. For Nichols and the other residents, that's a big win.

"This is probably the greatest thing that's happened in southeast Atlanta in the last 25 or 30 years," enthuses Nichols.

Although Lake Charlotte is not yet open for public access, Nichols looks forward to that day. "Now that it's perpetually greenspace, it's a big relief for us," she shares. "We're looking forward to having people come in and enjoy the beauty of it. It's right in the heart of the city, but it's like a different world."

"This achievement is the direct result of The Conservation Fund's leadership on all things regarding Atlanta's tree canopy, and their strong relationships with the City of Atlanta and within the conservation community," says Deron Davis, executive director of TNC in Georgia.

The protection of Lake Charlotte is one part of a very big vision that TNC is working with many partners to bring to fruition. TNC is following a 20-year plan for the area that



was inspired by the Atlanta City Design, which envisions a massive public greenspace within the South River watershed.

The 3,500-acre greenspace spanning Atlanta and DeKalb County would be carved out of a patchwork of public and privately owned parcels, including the site of the historic Atlanta Honor Farm, which sits abandoned on over 1,200 acres of densely overgrown forest.

"We are working with community leaders, neighbors and other environmental groups to build interest and support from people who live in the diverse communities in the watershed," says Ayanna Williams, TNC's healthy cities director in Georgia. "Long-term residents, like Ms. Nichols, have valuable experience-based knowledge about flooding and other environmental issues in the area, and they are invested in seeing their communities thrive."

Establishing a greenspace corridor at this scale, with the involvement of all stakeholders, is not easy. But the payoff will be worth it. Nichols sums it up: "We've waited so long for something in this area that we could be proud of, that fits into the future plans of the city, and that is a place of beauty for its residents."



THIS PAGE A blue heron in repose at Constitution Lakes in the South River watershed © Michael Halicki
OPPOSITE PAGE Constitution Lakes © John Amis
INSET Community advocate Shirley Nichols © Ron Goldfarb/TNC

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

RIGHT Georgia LEAF interns spotting marine life at Blowing Rocks Preserve in Florida. © JKlein Photography
BELOW Participants in the S.T.E.P. program doing fieldwork at Moody Forest Natural Area. © Zoe Hall/TNC
OPPOSITE PAGE Cumberland Island National Seashore, which TNC helped protect, receives LWCF funding. © TNC



Launching People in Environmental Careers

Everything we do at The Nature Conservancy is about investing in the future, and one of the most important tasks is to inspire the next generation of conservation leaders. We're giving people the tools and experience they need to launch careers in conservation.

"I always say 'it's hard to care about green when you need green,'" explains LA Allen, youth engagement program manager for TNC in Georgia. "So if you're worried about how to put food on the table and care for your family, we can show you how to make a career out of caring about the environment."

Georgia LEAF

This four-week internship gives high school students hands-on experience doing trail maintenance, species population counts, invasive plant removal, and more. It also introduces them to potential career paths and gives them a taste of big-picture conservation. In the most recent Georgia LEAF session, the female interns worked at TNC sites in Florida, including Disney Wilderness Preserve, Tiger Creek, and Blowing Rocks. The male LEAF (Leaders in Environmental Action for the Future) interns did culvert assessments at Mill Creek in north Georgia to improve the health of the Conasauga watershed.

“Nowhere else could I have gotten the chance to do hands-on work with endangered species, community service to different states and local communities, and met with tomorrow’s leaders of the environment as I did in my time with TNC,” shares Alana Levester about her Georgia LEAF internship.

S.T.E.P.

Young adults who have completed high school can apply for the 16-week S.T.E.P. (Stewardship Training for Environmental Progress) land stewardship training, which teaches them how to prepare for and conduct prescribed burns. The most recent team worked in the Osceola National Forest, just south of the Okefenokee Swamp in north Florida, and earlier cohorts traveled as far as Arizona to work with partners. Participants, who come to TNC through a partnership with JobCorps and the Student Conservation Association, learn by doing and connect with potential future employers.

“I have learned a lot about myself through the whole duration of this position. What I am proficient in doing and what are my weak areas that I need to work on to be a better individual and firefighter,” says participant Rojae Davis, of Cherokee, North Carolina. “I am very excited and motivated to pursue a career in land management and land conservation in the early future just because of this position.”

Urban Green Jobs

Another program changing lives is the Urban Green Jobs program in Atlanta. TNC cosponsors the program with HABESHA, a Pan-African organization that cultivates leadership in youth and families. Whereas TNC’s other job programs take people out of the city to work on preserves and wilderness areas, Urban Green Jobs shows people how they can make a difference in their own neighborhoods—doing paid work such as stream restoration, water quality testing, tree health assessments and plantings, and urban farming. The third cohort completed the program in summer 2020, and three of them already have jobs in the field.

Although the pandemic impacted some of TNC’s workforce programs, we are optimistic about the long-term trajectory of the programs.

“It’s amazing the bonds that form,” says LA Allen, youth engagement program manager for TNC in Georgia. “It’s not just about the relationship with the land, it’s about the relationships that participants build with their fellow humans. With these programs, TNC is creating an environment that will help sustain land, water, people and communities.”

Something We All Can Agree On...A Huge Policy Win for Conservation

The Great American Outdoors Act, signed into law in August, permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at \$900 million a year. This money, which comes from federal offshore oil and gas drilling revenue, directly benefits natural areas, historic sites and local parks in Georgia. The funds are also used to enhance wildlife habitat, improve water quality, and maintain opportunities for outdoor recreation in these special places.

Over the past 50 years, Georgia has received approximately \$351.3 million in LWCF funding, helping protect places such as Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, Cumberland Island National Seashore, Mayors Park, the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site and the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

“TNC staff, board members, and supporters lobbied hard for this bill, and it received bipartisan support from Georgia representatives and was supported by both of Georgia’s senators.”

— Michael O’Reilly, director of government relations for TNC Georgia



-  Visit us online at nature.org/georgia
-  Like us at facebook.com/NatureConservancyGA
-  Tweet us at [@Nature_GA](https://twitter.com/Nature_GA)

THANK YOU
FOR YOUR
SUPPORT

