

# Messenger

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## Five years of *Laudato Si'*: Our Catholic Connection to Conservation



Calvary Cemetery Prairie in the Archdiocese of St. Louis  
Photo by Lisa Johnston, St. Louis Review

In June, we celebrate the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si'*. Pope Francis issued the encyclical in 2015, calling upon all of humanity to be better caretakers of our common home. "*Laudato si', mi' Signore*" – "Praise be to you, my Lord". In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs".

In the five years since the release of this document, Catholics and others around the world have worked together to better care for creation. This has been done in many ways, and on scales large and small. Care for creation, our communities, and each other is an outward expression of our recognition of the gift the earth is to us, and of the dignity of each human person as a child of God. When we work to preserve our environment and to serve one another, we work for the benefit of something greater than ourselves.

In this issue of *Messenger*, we take a look at the many ways different organizations are working to care for our common home. One such organization is the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC), whose headquarters are located in Jefferson City, but whose efforts spread to every corner of our state. Since 1936, the department has worked with landowners and citizens to safeguard our state's natural habitats and the creatures that live within them. Thanks to those cooperative relationships, the state is a leader in conservation efforts, and has created hundreds of conservation areas—nature centers, shooting ranges, parks and private land programs—across Missouri. To share more about this organization's efforts, we sat down with MDC Deputy Director Aaron Jeffries for a Q&A.

During our chat, Jeffries said that one way Catholic organizations can answer the call of *Laudato Si'* is to use school and church grounds as a focal point and location for conservation efforts and education. Across all four dioceses, Missouri Catholic parishes and schools have answered this call, many of them collaborating with MDC to make use of church and school grounds for such efforts. We've highlighted one such program from each diocese in the pages of this *Messenger*. Keep reading to find inspiration on how you can care for our common home!



### Timeline: The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC)

*A few major achievements of the MDC since its formation*

**1936** — Missouri voters approved a state constitutional amendment creating the Conservation Commission. This new agency included a Forestry Division, an innovative idea at the time.

**1938** — The first issue of MDC's nature magazine *Missouri Conservationist* (which is still in wide circulation in the state today) was published

**1976** — Missouri voters passed a constitutional amendment that provides a 1/8 of 1 percent sales tax that funds the Missouri Department of Conservation

**2014** — MDC launches conservation app for hunters, anglers, and trappers

**2020** — MDC launches "Nature Boost" podcast to better connect with Missourians

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### MDC Deputy Director Aaron Jeffries on MDC's most notable accomplishments

*I would say the formation of the commission, but also the sales tax. The restoration of deer, turkey, [and] bear. Some of the hatchery programs that we have with hellbenders [salamanders] and paddlefish are research projects that have been extremely beneficial. Most important is the citizen interest and support in conservation. Nine out of ten Missourians tell us that they have an interest in fish, forests, and wildlife. Seventy-six percent say they trust the department. And in today's political climate that's a pretty darn good number.*

*With conservation, you're not planning year to year, you're planning 10 to 50 years down the road. And so in 1976, voters passed the conservation sales tax, which is the 1/8th of 1% sales and use tax. So that provided us with a steady funding stream that makes up 60% of the agency's revenue... we have the dedicated funding, which has led to a variety of restoration projects, research, our nature centers, shooting ranges, private land programs, educational programs; the list goes on and on.*



# Q&A

with MDC Deputy Director Aaron Jeffries

Missouri Department of Conservation Deputy Director Aaron Jeffries sat down with us to share information about the history of the MDC, and how Missourians can get involved in the future of the department.

## Would you describe Missouri as a leader in conservation efforts?

Definitely a leader, especially when you look at the research and some of the hatchery innovations; most recently we were one of the first ones to breed hellbenders in captivity, [and] to help with the restoration, we came up with how to spawn paddlefish—that had never been done before. A lot of our research is state of the art; other states look to us for their research needs and what they should be doing in their states. We have the only conservation department in the nation that has a commission with a constitutional responsibility. And we're only one of three that have a dedicated tax for conservation purposes. I travel to other states and folks are jealous of what we have, what we're able to do. You look at other states that may only have one or two staffed shooting ranges and have very few public land areas for people to access. They have no nature centers. We have 15 nature centers here in the state, so that is pretty special.

**What changes did Missouri see after MDC was put into place?** Prior to 1936, the department was a political agency. Deer numbers and turkey numbers were at all time lows, forests had been completely cut over, the Ozarks were a mess, and the streams in north Missouri had erosion problems. So this is where the Conservation Federation comes in. They had a meeting up in Columbia, worked to put a ballot initiative together, and it passed overwhelmingly. That formed the Conservation Commission in 1937. That constitutional amendment gave the commission constitutional authority to manage fish, forests and wildlife here in the state of Missouri. So from the 30s through 60s, the restoration of deer and turkey and other wildlife species started. We had our first deer season in 1946. A few hundred deer were harvested by hunters, and now today a million deer hunters are harvesting 280-300 thousand deer each year.

**What challenges does MDC face today?** You have a society as a whole that is disconnected from nature. Some of us are two to three generations removed from being on a farm. A recent survey indicated more than half the people aren't getting outside at any time during the year to enjoy nature. So you think about the health perspective, the impact on the economy—outdoor recreation has a 12 billion dollar impact on our state's economy, deer hunting has a billion dollar impact. Having healthy fish, forests, and wildlife means we have healthy people and we have a healthy economy. Some of the big challenges we have now are obviously invasive species, such as feral hogs, which are being introduced to the state by people who want to hunt them. Invasive plants and diseases create challenges; Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is one that we've found here that we're spending a lot of staff time and resources to control. Other states have done nothing to control CWD and they have a prevalence rate of over 50%, which is starting to have a detriment to their deer herds, and that's what we're trying to stop. We're an 80+ year-old agency, [we're trying to maintain] infrastructure, doing an inventory of what we have and making sure we're taking care of what we have across the state. [We're also] trying to connect with a very diverse society. How do we reach out to communities that we haven't before? How can we show them that conservation is important to them?

## How can the average Missourian become an advocate for conservation?

From a private land side, you can do habitat work on your own property. It could be as simple as just doing stuff in your own backyard. To take that up a step or two, we encourage folks to volunteer at our nature centers, or to be a hunter-ed instructor, master naturalist, part of a stream team, there's a variety of ways [to be involved]. We have

an army of volunteers, probably 25-30 thousand folks. You can be an advocate for conservation, too; join the conservation federation, get the *Conservationist* magazine, get the *Xplor* magazine for kids.

**What can the church do to help conservation in Missouri?** I think the educational programs and some of the pollinator plots would be interesting. . . we have some grant programs for establishing pollinator plots for butterflies and... hummingbirds. If you've got a vacant area on the grounds that's being mowed, why not consider putting in a pollinator plot? And also doing some conservation-friendly practices around the church itself. Nearly all of our Catholic churches have a school; the MDC Discover Nature Schools program has educational units for teachers, offers field trips and archery programs in the schools which is extremely popular within the diocese [of Jefferson City].



To learn more about the Missouri Department of Conservation or to apply for one of the many grant programs, please visit [mdc.mo.gov](http://mdc.mo.gov).





## Care for our common home: How are Missouri dioceses showing care for creation?

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis urges the church and her people to commit to caring for our common home. Across the globe, Catholic churches are responding in incredible ways—big and small. Here are just a few examples of how Catholic churches and schools are making environmental efforts in our home state.



### Archdiocese of St. Louis: Calvary Cemetery prairie restoration

The restoration of the last prairie remnant in the city of St. Louis was underway well before Pope Francis wrote *Laudato Si'*. In 2005, St. Louis Archdiocese's Calvary Cemetery partnered with MDC to bring back to life this piece of nature's history. The prairie stretches on for 24 acres, blooming with native plants and grasses. Its appearance closely mirrors what the first European settlers would have seen as they crossed through the Midwest. The project began when a type of grass — Big bluestem, a hybrid of Little bluestem and Indiangrass — that hadn't been seen naturally occurring in the metro area for decades was discovered on the property. In the years since, the prairie has been ridden of invasive species, a process that took nearly five years. Like any natural prairie, the land is home to a number of species; bees, deer, and fox are often spotted roaming the acreage.

*Left: Erin Shank, an Urban Wildlife Biologist for MDC stands in the Calvary Cemetery prairie. Photo by Lisa Johnston, St. Louis Review*

### Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph: St. James Parish communal garden

Nearly a decade ago, parishioners at St. James parish in Kansas City, Mo., sewed the first seeds in their communal garden. Today, the garden has grown in size and variety, allowing parish members to reap the fresh benefits of each season's crop: in the Spring, lettuce, kale, onions and garlic. Summer brings tomatoes, squash, and more. After each Sunday Mass, produce is available to parishioners in the back of the church, free of charge. The vibrant immigrant population who make up this parish have helped diversify the garden by planting various herbs and produce, such as Taro, which usually grows in warm, tropical climates. Coordinators Toni and Sarah say this project has been an enormous benefit to their parish in many ways, maybe most especially, connecting young parishioners with nature and the food system.

*Right: A group of St. James parishioners who volunteer their time to tend the garden pose for a photo in front of the raised beds. Photo courtesy of St. James Parish*



### Diocese of Jefferson City: Sacred Heart Solar Panel Array

Through a private donation from parishioners Steve and Karen Ellebract, construction began on a solar panel field at Sacred Heart School in Sedalia in the Spring of 2019. The entire project is funded by this donation alongside grant money received by the school. The solar field provides energy for the school, and also an added education piece for students, as they learn about how the panels function. According to a *Catholic Missourian* article, Sacred Heart School will save up to \$15,000 each year on electricity costs, and as an added bonus, the array provides shaded parking in one of the school's lots. The solar array has been set up on a net meter basis with Kansas City Power and Light (KCP&L), which provides electric service in Sedalia. When the energy provided by the panels is more than what the school needs, the power flows back into the KCP&L power grid, for which the school then receives credit. Other Catholic institutions, such as Rockhurst University in Kansas City, have also implemented the use of solar panels to source energy.



*Above: The solar panel array at Sacred Heart school in Sedalia provides energy and shade. Photo by Liz Suter-Van Leer, Catholic Missourian*



## Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau: Butterfly Garden at St. Mary's School in Joplin

At St. Mary's Catholic School in Joplin, a butterfly garden is blooming. Originally planted in 2011, the garden, along with the school, was destroyed in the 2011 Joplin tornado. After several years of rebuilding, the garden, too, had a rebirth. Teacher Debi Staton spearheaded the project, which is funded by a grant from the Missouri Department of Conservation. Students at the school planted the garden and continue to help tend it. Native plants, such as Milkweed and Wild Iris, bloom in the spring and fall, giving the students more than one chance to appreciate the beauty, and the opportunity to get in touch with nature. Ms. Staton says she's hopeful that this project will help students connect with nature, and especially help the second graders, who study metamorphosis of butterflies as part of their curriculum. Through the Missouri Department of Conservation grant, the school was partnered with an education coordinator to guide planting and growing, making the project easy to tackle. Her advice to schools looking to plant a butterfly garden? Don't be afraid—just dive right in.



*A monarch butterfly feeds in the St. Mary's school butterfly garden. Fourth grade teacher Debi Staton worked with MDC to establish this garden to provide educational opportunities to students at her school, and to use the land to benefit Missouri's environment.*

*Photo by Debi Staton*

# MOCAN

The Missouri Catholic Advocacy Network



## Interested in learning more about policy issues from a Catholic perspective? Join the Missouri Catholic Advocacy Network! (MOCAN)

Join the 10,000 + Catholic Missourians who make up the team of advocates who help the Catholic voice ring through the halls of the Missouri State Capitol. If you want to stay updated on pro-life legislation — or any of the many other legislative priorities the MCC advocates for — you will not want to miss the opportunity to join MOCAN.

If you're already a member, encourage your family, friends, and fellow parishioners to join! As MOCAN grows, so does the Catholic voice in Missouri's Capitol. Visit [mocatholic.org](http://mocatholic.org), send us an email at [mocatholic@mocatholic.org](mailto:mocatholic@mocatholic.org), or text MOCAN to 50457 to join.

## Catholic Climate Covenant

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) helped form Catholic Climate Covenant (CCC) in 2006. Inspired by the USCCB's 2001 statement on climate change, and supported by 18 national partners (which include the USCCB, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Health Association, congregations of religious men and women, and other national organizations), Catholic Climate Covenant helps US Catholics respond to the Church's call to care for creation and care for the poor, led by church teaching on creation, ecology, and the poor.

### St. Francis Pledge

Upon the release of *Laudato Si'*, CCC released the St. Francis Pledge as a way for Catholics to commit to caring for creation and the poor. Five years later, they call for a recommitment to the pledge.

"I pledge to pray, live, and advocate *Laudato Si'*"

*Take the St. Francis/Laudato Si' Pledge to mark the fifth anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical, Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home. By taking the pledge, you (re)commit to living out the vision of the encyclical and our Catholic faith through prayer, concrete action, and advocacy.*

Visit Catholic Climate Covenant online at [catholicclimatecovenant.org](http://catholicclimatecovenant.org) to learn more about their efforts and take the pledge for yourself today!

### MDC Discover Nature Teacher Portal

The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) provides educational resources for schools and other organization on its website through the Discover Nature Schools (DNS) program, a conservation science education program created with the input from teachers and education consultants.

Designed for pre-K through high school students, DNS emphasizes hands-on learning, teaches problem-solving, and provides authentic and local contexts for learning. Through DNS, students will learn about Missouri's native plants, animals, and habitats.

Key elements of the program include the following:

- full-color, illustrated student book
- student science notebook
- comprehensive teacher guides with outdoor activities and lesson plans
- student-centered, collaborative, and experiential learning approach
- free professional development and support from MDC Education Consultants
- grants for field trips and exploration equipment

Though we hope students will be able to return to in-person classrooms in the fall, this portal provides online resources for teachers to use for both in-person and virtual classrooms. Find these resources at [nature.mdc.mo.gov/discover-nature/teacher-portal](http://nature.mdc.mo.gov/discover-nature/teacher-portal).