



DLiA connects communities and scientists in discovering, understanding, and conserving the natural world.

DLiA
Discover Life in America

STRATEGIC PLAN 2026-2028

STRATEGIC PLAN AT-A-GLANCE

VISION • Biodiversity being conserved through an engaged community.

MISSION • Connecting communities and scientists in discovering, understanding, and conserving the natural world.

WHY? DLIa updated the strategic plan to ensure that DLIa is delivering on their commitments to society and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park while also aligning the staff and Board on quarterly commitments. Based on the strategic plan, this one-pager was developed to share the key information.

WHICH INITIATIVES WILL BE THE GUIDE STARS? WHICH BENCHMARKS WILL MAKE IT REAL?

INITIATIVE #1

Advancing the All
Taxa Biodiversity
Inventory

BENCHMARKS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED BY 2028

Benchmark #1.1 Published a complete species checklist for Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Benchmark #1.2 Identified taxonomic groups and habitats within Southern Appalachia in need of heightened conservation and published this information.

Benchmark #1.3 Streamlined a DNA barcoding workflow and trained expert volunteers.

Benchmark #1.4 Launched a deep dive on a priority taxonomic group, including the Smokies Bee Diversity Project.

Benchmark #1.5 In collaboration with the National Park Service, published non-sensitive ATBI data as a public, usable database.

Benchmark #1.6 Adapted and expanded the Atlas of the Smokies platform for generating and sharing ATBI-based species distribution models.

Benchmark #1.7 Developed a process map for global data sharing of documentation outside of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

INITIATIVE #2

Studying species and
ecosystem changes
over time

BENCHMARKS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED BY 2028

Benchmark #2.1: For at least one taxon, developed a methodology for detecting population trends and threats from existing ATBI data; published the methodology and species-specific findings.

Benchmark #2.2: For at least one species or taxonomic group, developed a methodology for detecting early signs of population changes in response to environmental pressures; published the methodology and species-specific findings.

Benchmark #2.3: Identified pre-existing model(s) or research that may predict changes to species migration patterns through Southern Appalachia; identified priority species based on this information.

Benchmark #2.4: Engaged community scientists through iNaturalist campaigns, phenology plots, or dedicated bioblitzes to aid in long-term studies related to species identified in Benchmark #2.3.

Benchmark #2.5: Published a longitudinal analysis revealing key biodiversity trends influencing regional conservation priorities.

INITIATIVE #3

Funding the future

BENCHMARKS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED BY 2028

Benchmark #3.1: Each year, fully funded the annual fund.

Benchmark #3.2: Established quantitative goals for expanding the annual fund and/or an endowment.

Benchmark #3.3: With appropriate partners and permissions, expanded the annual fund and/or established an endowment.

INITIATIVE #4

Accelerating
outcomes by
transforming
operations and fusing
education, outreach,
and communications
into each initiative

BENCHMARKS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED BY 2028

Benchmark #4.1: Ran quarterly meetings to align on quarterly milestones that fulfilled these initiatives.

Benchmark #4.2: Supported Board Members in championing quarterly milestones.

Benchmark #4.3: Increased scope and effectiveness of regional community science initiatives.

Benchmark #4.4: Facilitated connections between the people of Southern Appalachia and their natural world.

Benchmark #4.5: Reimagined and implemented new volunteer and internship programs that increased organizational capacity to carry out mission-critical work while providing meaningful experiences for everyone involved.

Benchmark #4.6: Identified and cultivated institutional and media partnerships.



UPDATED • October 31, 2025

VISION • Biodiversity being conserved through an engaged community.

MISSION • Connecting communities and scientists in discovering, understanding, and conserving the natural world.

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01 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What are the takeaways?

Discover Life in America's (DLiA) is committed to biodiversity being conserved through an engaged community, the **Vision**.

Our economies and wellbeing rely on natural systems. When healthy and functioning, these ecosystems protect food and water supplies, regulate climate, offer buffers for extreme weather, and provide the templates, raw materials, and genetic resources that power innovation in sectors from medicine to agriculture.¹²³⁴⁵⁶⁷ For nearly three decades, DLiA has developed expertise in biodiversity knowledge and conservation—an investment that positions the organization at the forefront of discoveries and biodiversity conservation. Supporting species discovery and biodiversity conservation is more than an ethical imperative—it is a smart, future-proof financial strategy that safeguards the natural systems upon which economies and wellbeing depend.

Yet, biodiversity loss is accelerating at an alarming rate, threatening trillions in global economic value and destabilizing communities worldwide.⁸⁹¹⁰ By directing energy and capital into conservation initiatives, climate resilience, and sustainable resource management, communities have the opportunity to generate both measurable returns and lasting environmental impact. DLiA's decades-long, unique work provides rare insights into species interactions and adaptations and holds important information about our collective future. Through this work, biodiversity knowledge becomes a foundation for resilience, inspiring informed decisions and a renewed care for the environment. DLiA makes this possible by connecting communities and scientists in discovering, understanding, and conserving the natural world, the **Mission**.

Identified through research and conversations with staff, Board of Directors, partners, and experts, the following four initiatives ensure both DLiA's contributions and relevance to the richness of life in the Smokies and on Earth:

Initiative #1: Advancing the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, in which DLiA commits to extending work throughout Southern Appalachia, while continuing the taxonomic research within Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Initiative #2: Studying species and ecosystem shifts over time, in which DLiA commits to integrating, analyzing, and sharing the taxonomic data gathered across the decades, and including temporal elements in future studies.

Initiative #3: Funding the future, in which DLiA commits to the simultaneous expansion of the annual fund and the establishment of an endowment.

Initiative #4: Accelerating outcomes, in which DLiA commits to transforming operations and partnerships while also fusing education, outreach, and communications into scientific and taxonomic work.

Grounded in DLiA's strategic context and core principles, DLiA's initiatives are the guide stars that pull us toward 2028.

02 STRATEGIC CONTEXT

What is the bigger picture? How does the strategic context fit with core values?

Earth's ecosystems form an intricate web of relationships, with each species playing a role. Yet, much of this biodiversity remains poorly understood, with countless organisms awaiting formal recognition and documentation. The challenge is bigger than cataloging life—it is about building the information that underpins effective stewardship of landscapes, waters, and resources in a time of rapid environmental and political change. Absent clarity about which species exist, where species exist, and how they are interconnected, actions for conservation, climate resilience, and resource management will be based on incomplete information or won't happen at all.

As we grapple together with growing demands on natural systems, shifting climates, and biodiversity loss, critical decisions require reliable information and inspiration. Identifying species, uncovering their ecological roles, and tracing changes in populations over time illuminate patterns of resilience and vulnerability within ecosystems. These outputs must be contextualized in order to offer stakeholders relevant guidance about what to protect, restore, or adapt, and how to do each.

DLiA's unique work in long-term biodiversity documentation, data sharing, and community engagement is a model for a science-focused conservation approach. Investments in foundational knowledge become investments in resilience, informing and inspiring scientific insights and practical strategies for sustaining the food systems, clean water, and cultural values that we all rely upon. DLiA's work equips present generations to respond to environmental challenges and ensures future generations have an environment to enjoy.

This strategic context drives DLiA's core principles:

Science: DLiA's decisions are grounded in science, and our focus is centered on our foundational biodiversity research. DLiA's science differentiator? Over the decades, DLiA has built an extraordinary approach to identifying and cataloging species.

Community: DLiA shares our work and data with communities of scientists and the broader public, inspiring wonder and awe. DLiA's community differentiator? Over the decades, DLiA has fostered mutually beneficial connections with other nonprofit organizations, scientists, universities, and the general public through taxonomic work and events.

Insights: DLiA focuses on transforming our new and historical biodiversity data into actionable insights that support conservation and ecosystem management. DLiA's insight differentiator? With decades of curated species data, DLiA provides the foundation for confident, science-based decisions in conservation, climate resilience, and resource management.

03 A VIEW FROM 2028

What are we achieving?

By 2028, DLiA will be recognized as a leader in long-term biodiversity observation—identifying and documenting life's diversity while inspiring communities to act on conservation insights. DLiA's focused work in Southern Appalachia will be defined by continual scientific investigation

and vibrant public engagement that maintains and renews the sense of wonder around the region's flora and fauna. These efforts will reach far beyond the region, not only illuminating changes in Southern Appalachia, but informing global strategies for resilience. Species documentation will continue to be about more than data—it will be about the shared experience between researchers and our community members.

04 INITIATIVES AND BENCHMARKS

How will we recognize that we're on the right track?

Our terminology within this strategic plan reflects DLiA's commitments to thinking strategically while implementing milestones on a quarterly cadence. Again, DLiA's initiatives are the guide stars that pull us toward 2028: What are our broad areas of focus for the next three years? Benchmarks tell us whether we're on the right path: Where is the progress? Where are the opportunities?

IMPORTANT • All initiatives and benchmarks depend upon annual and endowment funding.

04.1 Initiative #1, Advancing the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory

The big idea of Initiative #1, advancing the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, is to expand DLiA's successful model of biodiversity monitoring within Great Smoky Mountains National Park to include the rest of Southern Appalachia—building a connected network that can also inspire communities worldwide to engage with, and care for, the natural world. Great Smoky Mountains National Park exists within a 3.7 million acre corridor of contiguous public lands that stretch from Georgia to Virginia. Deeper understanding of this region's unique suite of flora and fauna includes not only continued work to determine which species are here and their relative distributions, but also deep dives into key groups, as demonstrated by the Smokies Bee Diversity Project. Dedicated focus beyond federal land boundaries also provides DLiA with more opportunities for data housing, data modeling, and global data sharing. For geography and information, this implies a focus on:

- Which geography? Documenting life in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and across Southern Appalachia. Inspiring communities and researchers on a global level.
- Which information? Species occurrence; relative distribution; informing and inspiring next actions for conservation, climate resilience, and resource management.

INITIATIVE #1

Advancing the All Taxa
Biodiversity Inventory

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Benchmark #1.6 Adapted and expanded the Atlas of the Smokies platform for generating and sharing ATBI-based species distribution models.

Benchmark #1.7 Developed a process map for global data sharing of documentation outside of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

04.2 Initiative #2, Studying Species and Ecosystem Changes Over Time

The big idea of Initiative #2, studying species and ecosystem changes over time, is to begin the development of a unique and valuable long-term biodiversity monitoring framework. DLIA's current All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, made up of nearly three decades of data, is rare. We also recognize that there are many opportunities for these data to be more useful, and this recognition informs the ways we collect and build upon the framework in the future. By studying species and ecosystem changes over time we transition an inventory to something dynamic and actionable. Whether integrating morphological, genetic, or occurrence data, the intention is to recognize patterns of species range shifts, decline, and adaptation, ultimately informing and inspiring conservation, climate resiliency, and resource management. This implies a focus on one or two species or taxonomic groups, gauging population trends, adaptations, or early signs of ecosystem health or stress.

INITIATIVE #2

Studying species and
ecosystem changes over
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Benchmark #2.5: Published a longitudinal analysis revealing key biodiversity trends influencing regional conservation priorities.

04.3 Initiative #3, Funding the Future

The big idea of Initiative #3, funding the future, is the simultaneous expansion of the annual fund and the establishment of an endowment. For 28 years, the organization has benefited from a mix of annual income and donations that must continue even as DLIa establishes and grows an endowment that ensures longer-term security for the organization. This implies a focus on not only ensuring that everyone around the organization is enrolled in the vision and mission but is also committed to identifying and cultivating the necessary annual and endowment funding. Built into this Initiative are the continued fiscal disciplines that DLIa has practiced historically, including transparent budgeting, consistent financial reviews, and regular audits to ensure accountability and cost efficiency. The incorporation of active portfolio management will protect and grow investments. This commitment to sound financial management not only ensures DLIa's long-term stability but also strengthens the region's economy by supporting jobs, partnerships, tourism, and local investments tied to conservation, climate resilience, and resource management.

INITIATIVE #3

Funding the future

BENCHMARKS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED BY 2028

Benchmark #3.1: Each year, fully funded the annual fund.

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Benchmark #3.3: With appropriate partners and permissions, expanded the annual fund and/or established an endowment.

04.4 Initiative #4, Accelerating Outcomes by Transforming Operations and Partnerships while also Fusing Education, Outreach, and Communications into Scientific and Taxonomic Work

There are three interconnected ideas in Initiative #4, accelerating outcomes by transforming operations and partnerships while also fusing education, outreach, and communications into scientific and taxonomic work. First, to transform operations, the focus is on simplifying daily activities and staff and Board members' agreements with each other and with DLIa's partners. By simplifying workflows, automating routine tasks, and improving consistency with agreements, DLIa will free up staff and volunteer time to focus on high-impact activities, which are managed as quarterly milestones. Leveraging digital tools for project management, donor engagement, and data analysis will enable DLIa to make faster, evidence-based decisions and measure progress more effectively.

Second, to transform partnerships, the focus is on sharing biodiversity knowledge, engaging new audiences, and inspiring conservation action. New partnerships include new collaborations with universities, public media, museums, or technology organizations that can expand the visibility and influence of DLIa's work both regionally and globally.

Third, to fuse education, outreach, and communications into scientific and taxonomic work, the focus is on every activity with taxonomic and other scientific work, which means translating research into best practices for conservation, climate resilience, and resource management and educating and informing people about those best practices.

In short, accelerating outcomes implies a focus on embracing change, collaborating peacefully, and prioritizing activities, especially education, outreach, and

communications, that increase DLiA's capacity to deliver on the strategic plan itself.

INITIATIVE #4

Accelerating outcomes by transforming operations and fusing education, outreach, and communications into each initiative

BENCHMARKS TO BE ACCOMPLISHED BY 2028

Benchmark #4.1: Ran quarterly meetings to align on quarterly milestones that fulfilled these initiatives.

Benchmark #4.2: Supported Board Members in championing quarterly milestones.

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Benchmark #4.6: Identified and cultivated institutional and media partnerships.

05 MILESTONES AND STRATEGIC PLAN REVIEW

How will we keep the strategic plan relevant? How will we generate momentum? Given the view from 2028, do our choices make sense?

DLiA's commitment to three-year initiatives and benchmarks is possible because of our approach to quarterly milestones. The Executive Director, staff, and Board Chair (optional) will meet each quarter to review the strategic plan and align on milestones for the next two quarters. The staff invites Board committees to aid in the accomplishments of specific milestones, and committee chairs will further delegate to individuals.

Following the quarterly review and any discussion of changes to the strategic plan, all proposed changes are discussed within the Board of Directors via email or meetings. A revised version of the strategic plan document is available within 15 business days of the Board Meeting and the version control table is updated. Beyond internal accountability through the project management dashboard, the Board of Directors helps track key performance indicators (KPIs) related to the strategic plan. These KPIs may then be used for external accountability, media updates, and funding requests.

06 CONCLUSION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Takeaways?

This strategy ensures DLiA's contributions and relevance for years to come: Grounded in DLiA's vision for biodiversity being conserved through an engaged community and mission to connect communities and scientists in discovering, understanding, and conserving the natural world, there is much to accomplish over the next few years.

This strategic plan is dedicated to the staff, Board, experts, funders, partners, and volunteers whose contributions remind us that anything is possible.

07 ENDNOTES AND PHOTO CREDITS

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Fireflies in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

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A view of the Great Smoky Mountains.

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Branched coneflower
(*rudbeckia triloba*).

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