

Duke | NICHOLAS SCHOOL *of*  
the ENVIRONMENT

# ANNUAL FUND IMPACT REPORT 2024-2025







# A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

Dear friends,

I am writing to extend my heartfelt thanks for your generous support of the Nicholas School Annual Fund. Your commitment plays an essential role in helping us fulfill our mission, and I want you to know how deeply we value your partnership.

The unrestricted funding provided through the Annual Fund gives us the flexibility to respond to emerging opportunities and challenges across all areas of our work. Your support is vital—not only to our students and faculty, but also to the broader global effort to understand and address pressing environmental issues.

From providing much-needed financial aid to expanding experiential learning opportunities, your gift helps ensure that our students are prepared to lead with knowledge, integrity, and a deep sense of environmental responsibility.

On behalf of our faculty, staff, and students, thank you again for your partnership. Your support sustains our momentum and inspires us to reach even greater heights. We are truly grateful to count you among the valued members of the Nicholas School community.

With gratitude,



Lori Snyder Benneer  
Stanback Dean  
Nicholas School of the Environment



## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The Annual Fund supports life-changing opportunities for students, providing hands-on learning and research experiences. It also offers financial aid to support students who demonstrate exceptional leadership potential and academic excellence.



### MEM Students Explore Energy Solutions in Barbados

A team of MEM students conducted field research in Barbados in March 2025 aimed at improving climate resilience and energy access for Small Island Developing States (SIDS). In partnership with the Rocky Mountain Institute, the team worked to develop an approach for identifying sites suitable for installing solar microgrids that could serve critical facilities like schools, health centers, and government buildings.



### Nicholas Scholar Uses Drones, AI for Shark Research

Maia Griffith, MEM graduate and former Nicholas Scholar, led field work using drones to capture high-resolution videos of sharks. She then modified and used a deep learning model to quantify their behavior. She presented her research at a conference in Thessaloniki, Greece, in October 2024.



### Undergraduate Research Scholars Program Sees Record Enrollment

The Undergraduate Research Scholars Program, which prepares Duke undergraduate students to make a difference in the world through hands-on learning and faculty-mentored research, hit record enrollment during the 2024-25 academic year. A total of 105 students participated across five program tracks ranging from marine conservation to technology to medicine.





## OUTSTANDING FACULTY

The Annual Fund provides the Nicholas School with additional flexible resources to recruit the most promising, accomplished, and ambitious faculty who are leading the way in their respective fields. Meet three new faculty members the Nicholas School welcomed during the 2024-25 academic year.



### Liyin He

He, who is assistant professor in the Division of Environmental Sciences and Policy, uses remote sensing data to understand how climate change affects crop production and human health, with the goal of improving agricultural management practices and climate change mitigation efforts.



### Jason Donaldson

Donaldson, assistant professor in the Division of Environmental Natural Sciences, studies savanna ecosystems in Tanzania and South Africa, with a focus on how fire and wildlife management affect the distribution of trees and grasses.



### Kimberly Marion Suiseeya

Suiseeya is associate professor of environmental policy in the Division of Environmental Social Systems, where she studies how marginalized groups affect and are affected by environmental policies.



## CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

The Annual Fund helps support various research initiatives in areas ranging from marine science to forestry to ecotoxicology and environmental health.

### Variations in Genetics May Affect PFAS Toxicity

This year **Sharon Zhang, Heather Stapleton** and colleagues published the first evidence that genetic variation contributes to susceptibility to harmful effects of PFAS, synthetic chemicals that can be found in nonstick cookware and firefighting foam. The team exposed genetically diverse strains of microscopic worms to 13 different types of PFAS. Some strains suffered adverse effects at lower doses of certain chemicals than others. This work could help identify people or populations who might be particularly susceptible to PFAS.



### Do Plastic Clean-Up Technologies Work?

Members of the Plastic Pollution Working Group conducted a study examining the effectiveness of 102 plastic pollution collection technologies. Despite the surge in clean-up innovations, the study highlights a significant lack of consistent, peer-reviewed data on their efficacy. The team, led by **Meagan Dunphy-Daly**, called for more investment in standardized monitoring practices to better evaluate these technologies, ultimately aiming for more effective solutions to combat global plastic pollution.



### Around the Clock: What Happens Before, During & After a Disaster

Nicholas School faculty and students are looking at how communities recover from extreme natural disasters and how they can rebuild more effectively. **Brian McAdoo** and **Betsy Albright** stressed the importance of communication and relationship building for faster recovery. However, lower income residents who are in most need of support are also least likely to participate in local recovery processes. Albright recommended providing resources such as child care to allow residents to attend community meetings and share their perspectives.







## BY THE NUMBERS

We express our deepest gratitude to the donors who have made these achievements possible. We are also pleased to introduce our new “Evergreen Circle,” donors who have given more than five cumulative years. They show that giving back is not just a moment, but a lasting commitment to the school and future generations.

Thank you to the nearly 450 donors who participated at a leadership level in FY25!

### Champion Level

\$100,000+  
30 members

### Blue Sky Vanguard

\$25,000-99,999 (Annual Fund)  
16 members

### Blue Sky

\$10,000-\$24,999 (Annual Fund)  
69 members

### Summit Society

\$1,000-9,999 (Annual Fund)  
330 members

*Introducing*

### The Evergreen Circle

The Evergreen Circle is a distinguished group of alumni, parents and friends who have shown exceptional dedication to the Nicholas School by contributing 5 or more years cumulatively. 1,590 donors qualified this year. Of these donors, 388 have given for more than 25 cumulative years.

Overall cash gifts to the Nicholas School

**\$15.6**  
million

Total new commitments to the Nicholas School

**\$17.6**  
million

Total cash gifts to the Annual Fund

**\$1.8**  
million

Number of Annual Fund donors

**2,249**

Admitted students who received financial aid

**87%**

Number of alumni volunteers

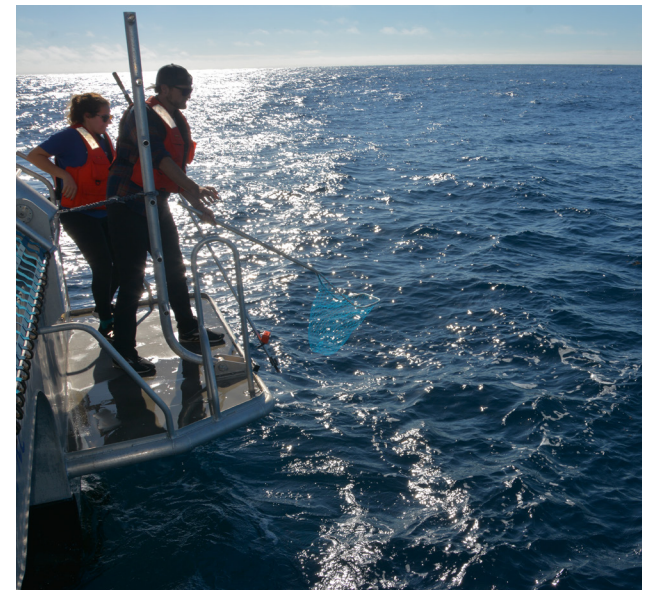
**692**

Number of Go.Grow.Give alumni

**66**

Alumni participation rate

**8.3%**



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