

# PUBLIC LANDS, WE THE PEOPLE: CREATING A HEALTHY AND JUST FUTURE FOR ALL



The [Aspen Institute](https://www.aspeninstitute.org) is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States and the world. The Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado. It also maintains offices in New York City and has an international network of partners. [www.aspeninstitute.org](https://www.aspeninstitute.org)

The [Aspen Institute Energy and Environment Program](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/energy-environment-program) explores significant challenges with diverse thinkers and doers to make a more prosperous, equitable, and sustainable society for all. We address critical energy, environmental, and climate change issues through non-partisan, non-ideological convening, with the specific intent of bringing together diverse stakeholders to improve the process and progress of policy-level dialogue. The Program aims to address complex energy and environmental policy challenges in a collegial atmosphere that allows deliberation, creativity, collaboration, and compromise to flourish. Like the Aspen Institute as a whole, the Energy and Environment program seeks to inspire and explore new ideas and provoke action in the real world. [www.aspeninstitute.org/eep](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/eep)

The [Wilderness Society](https://www.wilderness.org) seeks a future where people and wild nature flourish together, meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing planet. Founded in 1935, and guided by a mission to unite people to protect America's wild places, we have worked closely with partners to protect 111 million acres of wilderness and contributed to the passage of almost every major conservation law while fighting hard against attempts to undermine them.

The Wilderness Society's focus is on making America's system of public lands part of the solution to the most pressing conservation challenges of our day: climate change, unprecedented species extinction and inequitable access to nature's benefits. We work with partners and support our staff to find common ground around enduring conservation solutions, combining long-term investment in community-led conservation, deep public lands policy expertise and an ability to catalyze inclusive local-national advocacy networks that share power, voice and collective impact. Learn more about our approach at <https://www.wilderness.org/our-mission-timeline>.

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# PREFACE

This spring, as schools, offices, civic centers and houses of worship all closed their doors to attempt to contain the COVID-19 virus, people across the United States rediscovered our public lands as healthy outlets for recreation, learning, peace and even work as they sought socially distanced, responsible ways to get outdoors. Simultaneously, millions of others took to the streets to confront another crisis in our nation: racial violence and inequity.

**National, state and local parks and forests, and areas protected by the Wilderness Act, are natural allies in efforts to address climate change and wildlife loss, and to improve community health via access to nature. Their sheer scale, scope and reach offer unmatched potential for absorbing large amounts of carbon emissions, providing habitat that imperiled wildlife need to survive and adapt to rising temperatures, and creating the space for people and communities to flourish.**

Together, these events more clearly revealed that public lands are a microcosm of our society, and as such, many of the challenges we are grappling with in our towns and states are also occurring in our parks and green spaces. More explicitly, the benefits of our public lands have not been enjoyed evenly across the nation—not historically, as evidenced by the forced dispossession of hundreds of Indigenous nations from their ancestral lands, nor at this moment, when Black, Indigenous and people of color continue to grapple with historic and current racism and exclusion in parks and open spaces. Barriers still exist today and continue to leave only some of us with adequate access to public lands and the many benefits they can provide.

As front and center as they are, the pandemic and fight against systemic racism—particularly against Black people—aren't the only crises that public lands can help address. Climate change and the degradation of critical ecosystems also threaten our very future on this planet. Fortunately, we know that national, state and local parks and forests, and areas protected by the Wilderness Act, are natural allies in efforts to address climate change and wildlife loss, and to improve community health via

access to nature. Their sheer scale, scope and reach offer unmatched potential for absorbing large amounts of carbon emissions, providing habitat that imperiled wildlife need to survive and adapt to rising temperatures, and creating the space for people and communities to flourish.

**But public lands in America are not managed in a way that prioritizes addressing these crises. We must reimagine a management system for our public lands that benefits all communities and living things.**

The Aspen Institute and The Wilderness Society initiated *Public Lands, We the People* to explore how U.S. public lands can contribute to solving the climate and biodiversity crises, as well as help address the racial inequities we face in our country. Acknowledging that public lands are not always managed for their conservation, climate and community benefits, we also enlisted ideas on how to reignite more robust public participation in how land management decisions are made in the U.S.

Our organizations share a mutual connection to the benefits of public lands. The Wilderness Society was founded in 1935, during a time when roads and public works projects were carving up pristine forests and wild, open spaces. Since then, guided by a mission to unite people to protect America's wild places, the organization has led the charge to protect 111 million acres of wilderness and contributed to the passage of almost every major conservation law while fighting hard against attempts to undermine them. In the 1940s, the Aspen Institute was founded in the midst of majestic mountains, intact alpine forest and abundant wildlife in what was then little more than an abandoned Colorado silver mining town. It is a setting conducive to relaxing the spirit and rejuvenating the mind, perfect for hosting world leaders, cultural icons and celebrated thinkers to work through complex problems.

Today, we are watching what remains of our nation's natural areas disappear before our eyes. Every 30 seconds, the United States loses a football field's worth of forest, grassland, desert, and other natural places to sprawl, energy infrastructure and other development. Despite being publicly managed, our public lands are not necessarily protected. The majority of the public lands managed by the federal government do not lie within the boundaries of a national park, wilderness area or other protected designation. Instead, they are lands managed to support multiple uses, including fossil fuel extraction.

Moreover, the benefits of the natural areas that are conserved are not shared equitably. The burden of pollution falls disproportionately on low income communities and communities of color—the same communities who, too often, are located miles away from green space with few, if any, transportation options to get there. And even when these lands are accessible, they are not always welcoming or safe for Black, Indigenous and people of color.

This project was designed to help inform the role public lands should play in solving the existential threats we face as a society—from climate change and the loss of biodiversity to the systemic racial inequities with which

we are finally reckoning. It is time to re-imagine the role of our public lands as the solution they can be for building a more sustainable and just world. A lot has changed since our organizations were established, but the promise of public lands endures.

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**It is time to re-imagine the role of our public lands as the solution they can be for building a more sustainable and just world.**

# PUBLIC LANDS, WE THE PEOPLE: AN ASPEN INSTITUTE - THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY CONVENING

This July, The Aspen Institute and The Wilderness Society convened experts and thought leaders for three panel discussions and one culminating roundtable to explore how public lands can be innovatively managed to more equitably benefit people and nature. Throughout the series, *Public Lands, We the People: The Critical Role Public Lands Play in Solving the Climate and Biodiversity Crises* panelists explored the ways in which we might re-imagine and expand the promise of public lands to address the climate and biodiversity crises. We were joined by a dynamic group of experts who contributed valuable insights and rich historical perspectives to generate guiding principles and policy recommendations for the future of public lands management.

The first topic, “A Bold Solution to the Climate Crisis: Public Lands,” looked at the ways our public lands can become an important component of the solution to the climate crisis, in part by transitioning away from polluting, fossil fuel development to clean, renewable energy. Our second topic, “Local Parks to Public Lands: Access for Communities, By Communities,” brought together three leaders for a candid discussion about the challenges of racial inequity in our nation’s outdoor spaces and how to build a more inclusive public lands system. The third topic, “Connecting the Continent: Conservation that Unites People, Lands and Wildlife,” focused on the nature crisis we face and how the vast system of public lands in the U.S. gives us an extraordinary opportunity to create a continental network of connected landscapes with the potential to sustain our remarkable wildlife as well as the health of our communities.

This paper represents a synthesis of the policy recommendations generated during these conversations. The Aspen Institute and The Wilderness Society fully support these recommendations and see them as critical pathways that move us forward to a better future for everyone.

To watch any of these panel discussions, please visit <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/energy-and-environment-program/public-lands/>.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

**The Aspen Institute** recognizes the invaluable contributions of Native American and Indigenous peoples including recognizing Native people as the first stewards of the land. Truth and acknowledgement are critical to building a mutual respect and connection across all barriers of heritage and difference. We recognize the many legacies of violence, displacement, migration and colonial settlement that has impacted the land we are on today. We honor the voices of Indigenous peoples, respect tribal sovereignty and treaty rights.

We commit to trust, respect and inclusivity in a manner to uplift and celebrate Native Americans and Indigenous peoples. This includes honoring culture, traditions, and working in consultation with Native Americans in land conservation efforts. We support actions that respect the priorities, traditional knowledge, and excellence of Native Americans to ensure a more just and equitable future.

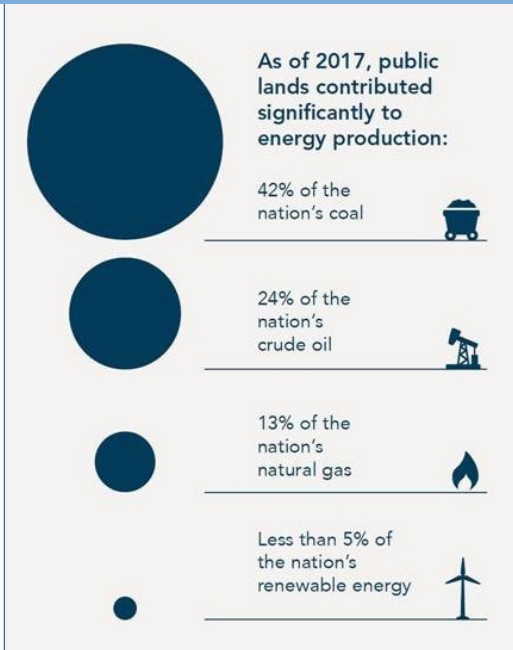
*Written by Nikki Pitre, Coeur d'Alene Tribe  
Executive Director of The Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute*

**The Wilderness Society** recognizes Native American and Indigenous peoples for their continuing land stewardship. We respect tribal sovereignty and honor treaty rights, including off reservation rights. Further, The Wilderness Society recognizes the historic and ongoing wrongs perpetrated against the Indigenous peoples of tribal nations who were forcibly removed from ancestral lands.

We are committed to being more conscientious and inclusive and to working closely with Indigenous peoples to advance the establishment of trust and respect in our relationships. We seek the guidance of Native American and Indigenous peoples to effectively advocate for the protection of culturally significant lands and the preservation of language and culture. We strive to support actions that respect the priorities, traditional knowledge, interests and concerns of Native Americans to ensure a more just and equitable future.







# PUBLIC LANDS AS A SOLUTION TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

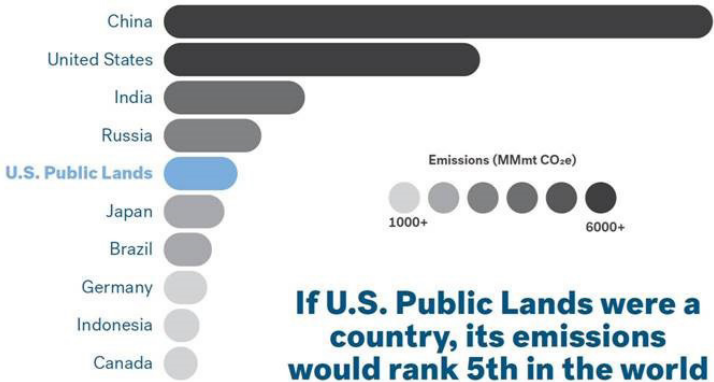
The U.S. government manages nearly 30% of the country's lands and billions of acres of ocean waters on behalf of the American public. Although these lands and waters are publicly managed, that does not mean they are protected from development. In fact,

for federal public lands it is often the opposite situation due to the fact that fossil fuel extraction has been prioritized on public lands and waters for more than a century. Today, more than 90% of multiple use lands are open to energy development, hosting nearly 100,000 wells on about 24,000 producing leases. As a result, these lands produce far more greenhouse gas pollution than they absorb. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, based on 2014 data, the equivalent of 25% of total U.S. carbon emissions can be accounted for in fossil fuels produced on public lands and waters, while capturing and sequestering less than 15% of that total in forests and natural systems. Beyond pollution, fossil fuel energy and other development proceeds at the expense of wildlife, recreation opportunities and conservation efforts. This is, in no small part, the result of outdated and unbalanced management programs.

Public lands have the potential to play a big role in climate solutions. If appropriately managed, public lands can become a natural tool to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, halt biodiversity loss, improve community health and wellbeing, create new sustainable economic opportunities, and enhance the resilience of natural systems.

## A CLOSER LOOK

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When reimagining the management of our public lands to deliver these climate benefits, **we urge policymakers to:**

1. Manage U.S. public lands first and foremost for conservation by prioritizing the protection of vulnerable lands, restoration of damaged areas, and responsible development of renewable energy and associated transmission rather than fossil fuel extraction;
2. Manage the entire system of U.S. public lands and waters—including those places open to the public at the municipal, regional, state and federal levels—as an indispensable part of a national strategy to reduce emissions and improve the health and resilience of communities;
3. Engage communities who are on the frontlines of the climate crisis as crucial partners in identifying solutions;
4. Enact equitable public lands management to address the injustice of pollution associated with public lands energy development, which disproportionately impacts communities of color, both at the point of extraction and at end use; and,
5. Thoughtfully manage the rapid transition away from fossil energy development so as to not leave fossil fuel dependent communities behind.

More specifically, we offer these **policy recommendations:**

1. The Secretary of the Interior and Secretary of Agriculture should redesign federal public land management to prioritize climate change as a central component of the missions of their various management agencies.
2. The Secretary of the Interior should act to reduce emissions from fossil energy extraction from federal public lands by reinstating or enacting new rules that reduce methane waste and halting new fossil energy leasing until a strategy is developed to equitably wind down any future fossil energy leasing and production to levels consistent with climate science.
3. Congress should end the outdated favoritism of resource extraction (especially fossil energy development) on federal lands by eliminating direct and indirect subsidies, modernizing leasing programs, and fully funding the clean-up of abandoned wells and mine sites.
4. Congress should act to advance wind, solar and geothermal projects and associated clean energy infrastructure in a smart way that respects wildlife, wild lands and cultural resources.
5. Congress should invest in a new generation of conservation corps jobs restoring the nation's public lands and natural resources to improve the health of the land, strengthen resilience and enhance carbon storage.
6. Federal, state and local policymakers should develop strategies to aid resource-dependent communities in diversifying their economies as they transition away from fossil energy development.

**If appropriately managed, public lands can become a natural tool to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, halt biodiversity loss, improve community health and wellbeing, create new sustainable economic opportunities, and enhance the resilience of natural systems.**

# LOCAL PARKS TO PUBLIC LANDS; ACCESS FOR COMMUNITIES, BY COMMUNITIES: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Public lands are meant to benefit all people, but they have yet to realize that promise, in large part because of their origins. Following the forced removal of tribal nations from their ancestral lands, when the U.S. established its original vision for public lands in the early 20th century, Black, Indigenous and people of

color were left out of the discussion about how public lands should be defined, who they should serve and how they should be managed. Consequently, a narrow understanding emerged of who could partake of the outdoors and what it meant to be in nature. Crafting such narrow definitions of public lands and the users who should benefit from them has inevitably resulted in an unrepresentative and unequal system, and these inequities are only further exacerbated by the climate crisis. For as many people as there are, there are just as many unique definitions of what “public lands” are and what they mean to each individual. Yet, the lack of representation and perspective in decision-making from people of all sovereign nations, races, genders,

gender identities, immigration status, ability and income levels means that policies governing public lands and parks fit only the narrowest of those definitions.

Equity must be centered in all processes and outcomes of policymakers and in the implementation of funding programs by park and land management agencies. The passage of the Great American Outdoors Act offers a unique opportunity to increase equitable access to parks and public lands while creating a platform to rewrite the narrative of people’s connection to land. This will only be achieved when communities with the least access to public lands are truly heard and when the public lands and parks policy landscapes are reformed to be more inclusive and reflective of the diversity of the country.

When reimagining the management of our public lands so that all have equitable access to their benefits, **we urge policymakers to:**

1. Engage with communities by centering equity in policy decision making and implementation to ensure the equitable access of all to public lands, however they are defined;
2. Acknowledge the role of public parks at a neighborhood scale as a vital entry point in accessing public lands for residents of communities that lack access to bigger national parks, particularly youth; and,
3. Prioritize the resources committed through recent legislation, including the Great Americans Outdoors Act, to drive greater equity.

**Equity must be centered in all processes and outcomes of policymakers and in the implementation of funding programs by park and land management agencies.**

More specifically, we offer these **policy recommendations**:

1. Congress should modernize the foundational acts governing our public lands—including the Wilderness Act, the National Forest Management Act, the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act, and others—to align with our civil rights and environmental values and reflect the importance of equitable access to our public lands.
2. Congress should ensure transparency and collaboration in the development of formulas and priority lists for land acquisition programs, such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and reform the traditional process for setting land acquisition priorities. Equitable access, representation, and historical significance to communities who experience marginalization should be considered significant and equal factors in new acquisitions and projects, along with climate resilience and connectivity.
3. The same transparency and collaboration must be incorporated into the National Park Service’s deferred maintenance list. The dollars committed through the recent package of the Great American Outdoors Act should be allocated to repairing and improving infrastructure in park units that see the highest use and that have the greatest potential and plans for improving equitable access.
4. Congress should direct a substantial portion of the new funds appropriated through the Great American Outdoors Act to the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership Program, a program that funds parks that serve urban areas.
5. Future stimulus bills should support a Youth Conservation Corps to build links between youth and the outdoors. These links can build a connection to skills and careers in parks and public lands. Projects should prioritize investments in the significant restoration and conservation needs to ensure public lands are healthy and resilient in the face of climate change and development pressures.

# CONNECTING THE CONTINENT: CONSERVATION THAT UNITES PEOPLE, LANDS AND WILDLIFE: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On their most basic level, our national public lands supply and filter clean air and water for millions of people, offer carbon storage, and provide refuge for a variety of wildlife. Yet many of these lands are isolated from each other and only selectively protect ecosystems that were perceived to be of value when they were initially created. Ecology is showing us that this is an unsustainable way to fulfill the promise of a fully functioning, healthy natural world. Connecting North America's last wild natural areas in a network of protected lands will

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ensure highly valuable habitat for all living things, including the human communities who have been careful stewards of these lands for centuries. In short, protecting public lands is a means to protect ourselves and the planet on which we rely. Conservation leaders must expand and connect these strongholds of wild nature, as they offer some of the greatest hope for sustaining wildlife and human communities in the face of a rapidly changing climate.

Public lands can and should provide the backbone of a connected, continental system of resilient landscapes to support wildlife and community health.

When reimagining the management of our public lands to achieve the goals inherent in connected systems of resilient landscapes, **we urge policymakers to:**

1. Manage the public lands system in the context of a national strategy for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation;
2. Modernize public lands management guiding principles from "multiple use" to "public use," creating a system that addresses the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss;
3. Manage this transformation in a way that addresses the current and historic inequities in who benefits from these lands;
4. Evolve from managing public land units in isolation to instead managing them as essential components of complex, integrated landscape ecosystems consisting of federal, state, and other public lands, tribal lands, and private ownership; and
5. Be guided by equitable, inclusive and collaborative public involvement.

More specifically, we offer these **policy recommendations**:

1. The President should submit, and the Senate should advise and consent to the ratification of the Convention on Biological Diversity. We cannot credibly claim to be addressing the biodiversity crisis without joining the international community committing to biodiversity conservation.
2. Congress should pass legislation protecting wildlife corridors and creating wildlife crossings. Connecting habitat through corridors and crossings enables wildlife to access resources for survival, and to migrate and better adapt to changing landscapes and climate.
3. Congress should create statutory authority for tribal co-management of public lands and appropriate funding to allow tribes to fulfill their co-management duties.
4. Congress should create incentives for agencies to collaborate on land management planning and should fund it at a sufficient level.
5. Congress should revise the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) to make explicit that FACA does not present a barrier to federal agency engagement with non-federal stakeholders in collaborative processes.
6. Congress should provide durable funding for public collaboration that allows equitable participation over necessary timeframes (e.g., competitive grants lasting 3-4 years).

**Public lands can and should provide the backbone of a connected, continental system of resilient landscapes to support wildlife and community health.**

## EVOLVING THE CONCEPT OF MULTIPLE USE

For more than half a century, public lands and forests in the United States have been governed by what is known as a **“multiple use mandate.”** This mandate is unlike the *preservation mandate* that governs the national parks, or the *conservation and restoration mandate* that governs the wildlife refuge system. Instead, a multiple use mandate states that agencies manage lands in a way that best meets the current needs of the public and in a sustained manner for current and future generations.

While a multiple use mandate includes certain conservation-oriented uses like protection of watersheds, fish and wildlife; scenic, scientific and historic values; wilderness; and recreation, it also includes extractive uses like logging, mining, oil and gas development, and grazing.

Despite the intent to include conservation-oriented uses, a multiple use mandate too often does not strike the balance required to meet the needs of current and future generations. Instead, land planning decisions have been dominated by those who wish to see public lands open to extractive uses on every acre. Federal agencies have failed to close nearly all public lands to damaging extractive activities. As a result, resource extraction remains the dominant use on public lands. More than 90% of U.S public lands remain open to oil and gas drilling and coal mining, and unsustainable logging continues to be subsidized by the federal government.

But the needs of the nation have shifted away from resource extraction, especially fossil energy, towards a greater need for conservation. It is time to center management decisions on the *public interest* where public lands are principally seen as a stronghold for nature and ensuring healthy communities, instead of place where everything and anything is allowed.

# CONCLUSION

The recommendations developed out of this project offer a critical first step in reimagining the way in which public lands are managed in the U.S. These policies outline a path forward that harnesses the potential of public lands to play an important role in solving the climate, biodiversity and systemic racism crises facing the U.S. They offer a vision of public lands as not only a critical solution to these intersecting crises but as a cornerstone of the U.S. effort to build a more sustainable and just society that is equally accessible to all.

The critical importance of public lands is more apparent than ever, as is the need to chart a new, more inclusive course. The panel discussions and culminating roundtable demonstrated the appetite for such conversations and more robust public participation in land management decisions. Policymakers must capitalize on this attention to implement this reimagined version of public lands. This is the moment to take urgent and innovative action for the sake of our planet and our communities.

