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How Much Nature Should America Keep?

By Matt Lee-Ashley and the CAP Public Lands and Oceans teams

August 2019

Center for American Progress



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Contents

- 1 Introduction and summary**
- 3 The state of America's natural places**
- 5 The scientific case for protecting 30 percent by 2030**
- 9 Toward 30X30: Nature for all**
- 13 Conclusion**
- 14 About the author and acknowledgments**
- 15 Endnotes**

Introduction and summary

The United States is quietly losing its remaining forests, grasslands, deserts, and natural places at a blistering pace. Every 30 seconds, a football field worth of America’s natural areas disappears to roads, houses, pipelines, and other development.¹

These losses are largely preventable. In fact, over the past 150 years, the United States has built an extraordinary capacity to protect and restore the natural environments of its choosing. A crackdown on commercial hunting, along with the creation of wildlife refuges, national parks, and national forests, stemmed the obliteration of American game species in the early 20th century.² The Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act have made the nation’s air more breathable and its water more drinkable.³ And a law to combat overfishing, first passed in the 1970s, is bringing life and prosperity back to America’s oceans.⁴

Each time America has confronted an environmental problem, the nation’s power to conserve nature has grown. The United States has developed a rich tradition of locally led conservation activism, trained a deep bench of scientists and environmental professionals, and labored to establish and improve its environmental laws. More importantly, the natural wonders and wildlife that the nation has protected—from the marshes of the Everglades to the high mountains of Idaho—have become a source of shared pride. Even in an era of extreme partisan division, the desire to conserve lands, clean water, and abundant wildlife for future generations binds Americans across political parties and ideologies.⁵

These shared values, if channeled through available legal, advocacy, scientific, and political pathways, give current generations immense power to successfully curb wildlife extinctions, fight climate change, reduce toxic pollution, and safeguard healthy natural systems upon which future generations will depend. The country, however, lacks a clear, common vision for how much nature it wishes to conserve, in what form, at what cost, and for whom. As a result, the United States is vastly underutilizing its capacity to conserve nature.

This report argues that the question—“How much nature should America keep?”—should be the subject of an urgent national conversation. Much like climate change, America must confront the conservation crisis head-on and address the role that it wants nature to play in society, the economy, and communities in the decades ahead. Science should inform this debate; indeed, scientific recommendations to protect at least 30 percent of lands and oceans in a natural state by 2030 offer a much-needed starting point for a vision and a baseline for a plan.

But numbers alone cannot adequately answer the question of how much of America’s lands, waters, and wildlife the country wishes to protect. There can be no single or simple answer to a question that is simultaneously moral, economic, religious, historical, cultural, scientific, and, for many people, deeply personal. A discussion of how much nature to protect—and how, where, and for whom—must honor and account for the perspectives of all people, including communities that are disproportionately affected by the degradation of natural systems; communities that do not have equal access to the outdoors; tribal nations whose sovereign rights over lands, waters, and wildlife should be finally and fully upheld; communities of color; and others.

The complexity of this conversation, however, is not a good reason to shy away from it. Every elected leader, environmental leader, and candidate for office should formulate a thoughtful and ambitious plan for the protection of the natural world that sustains the country.

Over the coming year, the Center for American Progress will issue a series of publications examining how the United States can thoughtfully, equitably, and justly protect 30 percent of its lands and waters by 2030. This work will be informed by a recently completed assessment of natural area loss—the most comprehensive of its kind ever completed in the United States—and national public opinion research. This report and the publications to follow will reflect ideas and insights received from more than 150 interviews and consultations that the authors conducted over the past year with people who have experience in natural resource policy, in the environmental and environmental justice movements, in academia, and in federal, tribal, state, and local governments. The goal of this project will be to provide policymakers, thought leaders, and communities with the data, analysis, and ideas they need to protect the natural world in a condition that is worthy of future generations.

The state of America's natural places

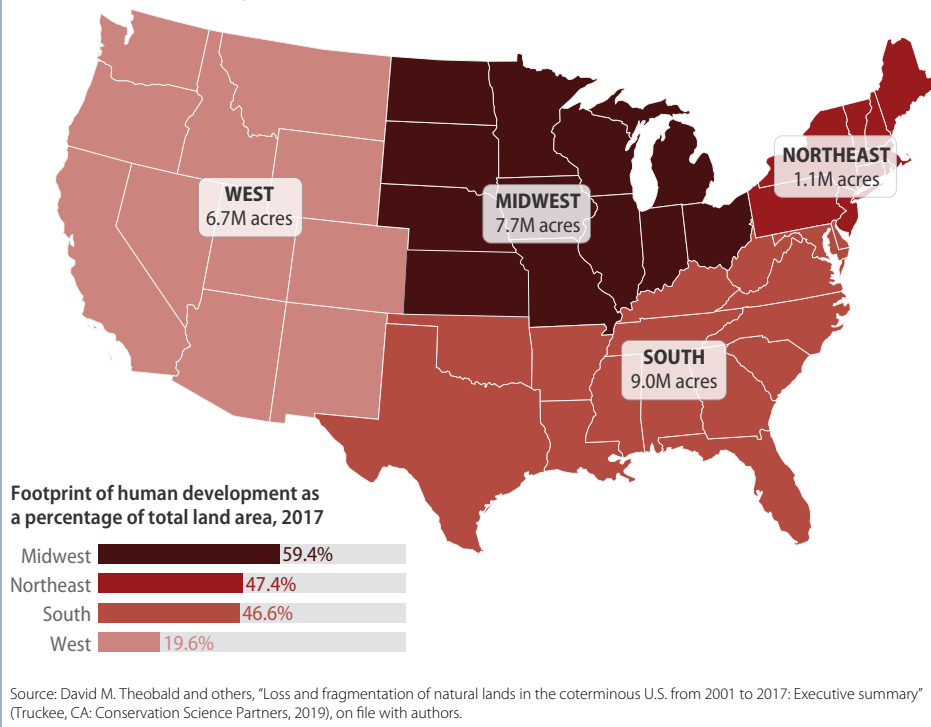
Evaluating the condition of nature in the United States is a bit like watching a leaking pipe. If a person focuses on each drop as it falls to the floor, the leak hardly seems damaging. If they leave for the day, however, they are likely to come back to a room full of water.

In the industrial age—and even more so in the digital age—the world has moved so rapidly that the steady drip of changes in the natural world can be lost in the noise. A person might notice a couple new oil production platforms pop up off the coast or that the ranch down the road has been subdivided to accommodate vacation homes. These changes might draw a mention in the checkout line at the grocery store or even inspire a local protest, but when seen as individual drops, they do not garner the attention or headlines that they deserve.

To better understand the broader trends in these development patterns, CAP commissioned Conservation Science Partners (CSP), a nonprofit group of scientists, to develop the most detailed map ever composed of the human footprint in the contiguous 48 states. Over the course of five months at the end of 2018, CSP incorporated dozens of datasets and developed unique algorithms to map the degree of human modification and natural land loss in the contiguous 48 states from 2001 to 2017.

The scientific team at CSP found that human activities are causing the persistent and rapid loss of America's natural areas. The human footprint in the continental United States grew by more than 24 million acres from 2001 to 2017—equivalent to the loss of roughly a football field worth of natural area every 30 seconds. The South and Midwest experienced the steepest losses of natural area in this period; the footprints of cities, farms, roads, power plants, and other human development in these two regions grew to cover 47 percent and 59 percent of all land area, respectively. If national trends continue, a South Dakota-sized expanse of forests, wetlands, and wild places in the continental United States will disappear by 2050.⁶

FIGURE 1
Natural area loss by region, contiguous 48 states, 2001–2017



The losses that CSP documented pose a direct threat to the nation’s clean air and clean drinking water supplies, the prosperity of its communities, and its ability to protect itself from severe weather, floods, wildfires, and other effects of a changing climate. Moreover, climate change is itself accelerating the decline of nature in America. As human development constricts America’s remaining natural areas, rising concentrations of greenhouse gases are deforming ecosystems, poisoning the oceans, and rendering the American landscape unlivable for many plant and animal species.⁷ States have identified approximately 12,000 animal and plant species that need proactive conservation efforts to avoid a plunge toward extinction.⁸

The decline of natural areas and wildlife in the United States echoes global patterns. A recently released global scientific assessment by the United Nation’s Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) found that three-fourths of the planet’s lands and two-thirds of its marine environments have been “significantly altered” by human activity.⁹ Pressed by agriculture, housing sprawl, climate change, invasive species, pollution, and other stressors, approximately 1 million plant and animal species are threatened by extinction today.¹⁰ “We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide,” said IPBES Chair Robert Watson upon the release of the report.¹¹

Despite these worrisome domestic and international trends, the United States can still curtail the decline of its natural systems and protect a substantial portion of its remaining natural areas. Sixty percent of lands in the continental United States are in a largely natural condition or could plausibly be restored to a natural condition.¹² Further, the United States ranks as one of the top five countries in the world for the total amount of wilderness-quality land that remains.¹³

To date, however, only a modest proportion of America's remaining natural places has been protected. A 2018 CAP study found that only 12 percent of the country's land area has been conserved as national parks, wilderness areas, permanent conservation easements, state parks, national wildlife refuges, national monuments, or other protected areas.¹⁴ Twenty-six percent of America's nationally owned ocean territory is safeguarded from the most intense extractive uses such as drilling for oil and gas, but 97 percent of these protected waters are in the remote western Pacific Ocean or northwestern Hawaii. There is not a single section of U.S. waters in the Gulf of Mexico, the mid-Atlantic, or the North Pacific that is highly or fully protected from extractive uses.¹⁵



Status quo protections for the nation's lands and oceans are not sufficient to prevent nature's continued decline in the United States. Unless the country takes ambitious action to better safeguard and restore natural systems, the forests that filter drinking water, the insects that pollinate crops, and the estuaries that supply seafood will continue to deteriorate and disappear. The United States needs to do far more to protect the building blocks upon which the nation's prosperity, well-being, and cultures depend.

The scientific case for protecting 30 percent by 2030

To confront the deterioration of natural systems and the loss of biodiversity around the world, scientists recommend adopting a range of strategies—from pollution reduction to combating invasive species. But the most basic, essential, and effective way to keep nature healthy is to protect more land and ocean areas in their natural condition. Ecologist Edward O. Wilson has recommended that half the Earth’s surface be conserved in a natural state. This “Half Earth” prescription, as it has come to be known, is “the only way to save upward of 90 percent of the rest of life,” Wilson writes.¹⁶

As a step toward achieving Wilson’s vision of a planet with half of its lands and oceans protected—a future in which humanity saves nature to save itself—a growing number of scientists are recommending that nations commit to conserving 30 percent of their lands and oceans by 2030.¹⁷ In an article in *Science*, Jonathan Baillie and Ya-Ping Zhang write:

*Given the evidence to date and the implications of an underestimate, we encourage governments to set minimum targets of 30% of the oceans and land protected by 2030, with a focus on areas of high biodiversity and/or productivity, and to aim to secure 50% by 2050. This will be extremely challenging, but it is possible, and anything less will likely result in a major extinction crisis and jeopardize the health and well-being of future generations.*¹⁸

Protecting 30 percent of the world’s terrestrial and marine habitats not only would reduce extinctions and safeguard food supplies, drinking water, and clean air, but it also would help prevent global temperatures from rising more than 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, a threshold beyond which scientists say the costs and effects of climate change worsen significantly.¹⁹ The 2015 Paris Agreement, a landmark international plan to limit global temperature increases, is, according to a 2019 study in *Science Advances*, “only a half-deal; it will not alone save the diversity of life on Earth or conserve ecosystem services upon which humanity depends. It is also reliant on natural climate solutions that require bolstering outside of the Paris Agreement to ensure that these natural approaches can contribute to its success.” The study’s 19 authors are unequivocal: “We support calls to conserve at least 30% of the Earth’s surface by 2030.”²⁰

The growing scientific evidence supporting national conservation targets has sparked an emerging conversation among thought leaders and prospective policymakers on how the United States might adopt and implement its own “30X30” goal of protecting 30 percent of lands and oceans by 2030. The Wilderness Society Action Fund, for example, was the first to endorse a domestic 30X30 goal. In April 2019, the organization’s president, Jamie Williams, wrote:

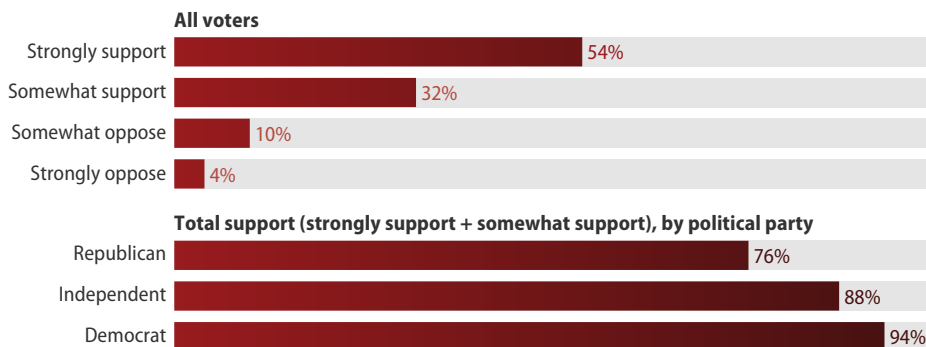
Protecting more of our public lands and managing them to sustain wildlife and natural systems is our best chance to avoid the worst impacts of climate change and ensure we leave a livable world for future generations. This means ensuring that public lands play a critical role in meeting the goal set out by renowned scientists, conservationists and indigenous leaders to protect 30 percent of lands by 2030.²¹

The conversation about protecting 30 percent of U.S. lands and oceans by 2030 has a receptive audience among Americans. A 2019 survey of more than 1,200 American voters, commissioned by CAP and conducted by Hart Research Associates, found that 86 percent of voters support—and 54 percent strongly support—setting a national goal of protecting 30 percent of America’s lands and ocean areas by 2030.²² Further, voters are confident in the United States’ ability to protect far more lands and waters than it currently does: Nearly three-quarters of voters say that a goal of protecting 30 percent by 2030 is realistic, while 67 percent of voters say that the United States could, over time, achieve protections for at least half of all lands and ocean areas.²³

FIGURE 3

Public support for an ambitious national conservation target is high and bipartisan

Percentage of voters who support or oppose the following statement: 'We should set a national goal of protecting 30% of America's lands and ocean areas by 2030.'



Source: Survey of 1,203 registered voters, conducted by Hart Research Associates for the Center for American Progress, February 20–26, 2019, data on file with authors.

According to the survey, Americans' support for a 30X30 goal is rooted in a strong and bipartisan consensus that the United States needs to do more to conserve its natural places, including increasing efforts to protect ocean areas that are important to at-risk sea life and public lands that people use for outdoor recreation. In fact, overwhelming majorities—85 percent—of voters support significantly increasing the amount of lands and ocean areas that the United States protects.²⁴ This broad and intense base of support should give policymakers, thought leaders, and candidates for office ample encouragement to develop a far more ambitious suite of policy solutions to help curb the loss of America's natural areas and wildlife.

Toward 30X30: Nature for all

Establishing a target of protecting 30 percent of America’s lands and oceans by 2030 would add urgency and clarity of purpose to the nation’s efforts to confront the conservation and climate crises. But embracing a 30X30 goal is only the starting point of the hard work that is needed to build a strong, ambitious, inclusive, and equitable plan to safeguard natural systems for the benefit of all America’s communities. How the United States reaches 30 percent by 2030 is as important as the objective itself.

The more than 150 interviews and consultations that CAP conducted for this project in the past year have made clear that the United States will only achieve a 30X30 goal if policymakers, thought leaders, and candidates for office develop and advance conservation plans and policies that reflect the values and needs of all Americans. It must be a truly democratic effort led by local communities across all geographies who tailor conservation strategies and solutions to their needs. The role of national and state-level policymakers should be to provide support, resources, and policy tools for communities—including tribal communities, communities of color, and economically disadvantaged communities—so that they can achieve their own visions for the stewardship of the natural resources upon which they depend.

To mobilize the full scope of the nation’s nature conservation capacities—and to ensure that everyone shares in the benefits of protecting more of America’s lands and waters—it is important to establish at the outset some clear parameters for how the country will pursue a 30X30 goal. The following are eight initial principles for consideration in this effort.

1. **30X30 should be a shared national goal, but conservation objectives and strategies should be designed and implemented locally and regionally.** Because land and ocean uses and traditions differ across the country, conservation strategies must be tailored for each place. What works to improve forest health in publicly owned national forests in the Northwest, for example, may not succeed on privately owned timber reserves in the Southeast, and vice versa. Moreover, protected lands and oceans are not currently distributed evenly, nor do they need to be

under a nationwide 30X30 vision; some regions and states will succeed in conserving a larger portion of their lands and waters than others. Communities should design their own inclusive strategies for conserving at-risk ecosystems and apply conservation tools that fit the needs, priorities, and values of community members and their unique geographies.

2. **The pursuit of a 30X30 goal must uphold the sovereignty of tribal nations and help American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities fulfill their own priorities for the stewardship of natural, cultural, and historic resources.** Tribal nations in the United States have sovereign ownership of more than 56 million acres of U.S. land and have rights to natural resources—including fish, game, and water—that extend well beyond reservation boundaries.²⁵ Any effort to expand protections for America’s lands, waters, and wildlife—including the establishment and pursuit of a 30X30 goal—should honor the rights of indigenous communities and be guided and informed by formal consultation with tribal nations.

3. **The protection of more of America’s lands and waters must yield a more equitable distribution of nature’s benefits to all people, including communities of color and economically disadvantaged communities.** The pursuit of a 30X30 goal should, as scientists recommend, place a high priority on conserving lands and waters with high value for biodiversity. Of equal importance, however, should be the protection and restoration of places that matter most to the livelihoods, well-being, identities, and health of all peoples, including communities of color, economically disadvantaged communities, and tribal communities.

Currently, the costs of nature’s deterioration are falling disproportionately on economically disadvantaged communities and communities of color. In the West, for example, communities of color and low-income communities are seeing nearby natural areas disappear faster than the regional average.²⁶ This can result in diminished outdoor opportunities, deterioration of drinking water quality, and worsening air pollution. These effects and others often exacerbate the legacy of environmental degradation that these communities have long experienced. Meanwhile, in coastal communities, exclusionary policies that have their roots in segregation and racial discrimination persist, limiting physical access to coastal recreation for low-income communities and communities of color.²⁷ Legacies of racism, exclusion, and injustice affect nearly all aspects of natural resource policy—from land development patterns and the demographic composition of regulatory agencies to the vulnerabilities of communities to fires, floods, and other natural disasters.²⁸

Any effort to conserve and restore more of America's lands, coasts, and waters must include, account for, and respond to the voices, needs, and priorities of communities of color, indigenous communities, and economically disadvantaged communities. America's system of parks, public lands, and protected natural areas must, among other things, become more accessible to all people, more reflective of the experiences, cultures, and histories of traditionally underrepresented communities, and better able to provide cleaner air and water for communities that have been shouldering a disproportionate burden of pollution. Nature's benefits must be more equally shared.

4. **Support the conservation efforts of private landowners, working waterfronts, and the private sector.** Although private lands account for approximately 60 percent of the land area in the contiguous 48 states, less than 1 percent of these lands are permanently managed for conservation.²⁹ Meanwhile, more than three-quarters of the natural area that the United States lost in the contiguous 48 states from 2001 to 2017 was on private lands.³⁰ The United States will not reach a 30X30 goal unless policymakers do more to help farmers, ranchers, fishermen, and other private landowners conserve lands, waters, and wildlife. These policies need not and must not infringe upon private property rights. Instead, they should support the stewardship values that are broadly shared among families, businesses, and communities who make their livings off the land and the ocean.

5. **Measuring progress toward a 30X30 goal should account for a wide range of enduring conservation solutions.** What should count as protected when measuring progress toward a 30X30 goal? According to the currently accepted international and domestic standards, for an area of land or ocean to be counted as protected, it must be permanently protected in a natural condition, and extractive uses must be limited or prohibited.³¹ U.S. lands and waters that fit this definition include national parks, wildlife refuges, national marine sanctuaries, national monuments, state parks, permanent conservation easements, and national wildlife refuges. For the purpose of measuring progress toward a 30X30 goal, however, this definition should be broadened to include other conservation tools and management structures that provide enduring—but not necessarily permanent—protections, as well as areas where some sustainable and traditional land uses are still allowed. Common sense, not dogma, should inform a determination of which lands and waters qualify as protected under a 30X30 goal.

6. The restoration of degraded lands and coasts will be critical to achieving 30X30.

Logging, mining, development, and other activities have left many ecosystems in a degraded state. For example, the U.S. Forest Service estimates that between 65 million and 82 million acres of national forest lands require restoration, and the amount of necessary restoration on other public and private lands is certainly much higher.³² On the coasts, much restoration work such as salt marsh and dune restoration is caught in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' \$98 billion backlog of unfunded projects.³³ Restoration work is essential to bolstering both the quantity and quality of protected lands in the United States.

7. Science is indispensable to making smart conservation decisions in a world in which climate is changing.

As communities develop strategies to protect the natural places upon which they depend, they must have access to sound, up-to-date scientific information about the lands and waters around them and how they are changing in a warming world. Where are the hotspots for biodiversity? Which ecosystems are rarest and in need of protection? How will climate change alter landscapes, seascapes, and wildlife habitats over the coming decades? And how do human communities value and connect to these places culturally, historically, economically, and otherwise? These are just a few of the questions that scientists can help local leaders, policymakers, and planners answer. This scientific work must be supported, funded, and widely shared.

8. Protecting 30 percent of lands and waters is not the last 30 percent.

Approximately 60 percent of U.S. lands in the lower 48 states are in a natural condition.³⁴ Therefore, even if the United States succeeds in protecting 30 percent of its lands and waters by 2030, there will still be ample room for the country's development footprint to grow and for additional conservation gains beyond 2030. In fact, if the United States achieves 30X30, the country will be well positioned to pursue a longer-term goal of conserving half of all its lands and waters.

Conclusion

“What a country chooses to save is what a country chooses to say about itself.”

– Mollie Beattie, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1993–1996³⁵

The United States is entering an era in which it will rely more than ever on the integrity and stability of the natural world to provide economic prosperity, safeguard the health of communities, and weather the effects of a changing climate. With the nation’s dependence on the natural world growing, now is the time to confront and reverse the rapid decline of its natural systems.

America’s remarkable track record in solving environmental problems should provide reason to be confident that the United States can conserve enough lands, waters, and wildlife to support a healthy, just, and prosperous society for future generations. Yet the scale and scope of the challenge ahead is substantial. To protect 30 percent of U.S. lands and oceans by 2030, the country will need to act in all domains, in all geographies, and in the interest of all communities. In so doing—by advancing locally led conservation initiatives, building a more inclusive, equitable, and just approach to stewardship, and responding to an ambitious national call to action—the United States can fulfill its promise as a conservation nation and serve as an example for the world to follow.

About the author

Matt Lee-Ashley is a senior fellow and the senior director of Environmental Strategy and Communications at the Center for American Progress. Previously, he served as deputy chief of staff and communications director for the U.S. Department of the Interior. He is a native of Colorado.

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Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

