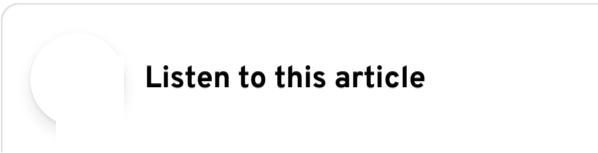




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Business & Policy Earth Watch



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Protecting Public Lands



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

MAR 27, 2023 [conservation](#), [industry](#), [recreation](#), [wildlife](#)



Pollution and the [impacts of climate change](#) threaten all types of land, whether public or privately owned. Even the most isolated conservation area is not protected from [wildfires](#). Exotic species can still invade wildlife refuges, and [plastic pollution](#) litters national parks. Protected public lands aren't even protected equally. There are many different classifications of public lands, and their protections vary widely.

Public Lands

National Parks

[The National Park Service](#) is a federal agency within the Department of the Interior. It manages 28 different land designations including battlefields and even seashores. Although in theory, they are [all national parks](#), not all

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designations receive the same level of protection. [CLOSE](#)

National Monuments

Unlike national parks, which are created by Congressional legislation, national monuments are created by the President under the [Antiquities Act of 1906](#) to protect archeological sites, historic landmarks and structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest on federal lands. Monuments may be managed by any one or more of seven different federal agencies.

National Forests

The [US Forest Service](#) is a federal agency under the U.S. Department of Agriculture that manages 193 million acres of public forests and grasslands. Unlike parks, national forestlands are mandated to balance multiple uses including mining, logging, ranching, and motorized off-road vehicle use.

National Wildlife Refuges

Like monuments, national wildlife refuges are established by the president. There are more than 560 refuges, managed by the [US Fish & Wildlife Service](#), a bureau within the Department of the Interior with the mission to conserve fish, wildlife, and plants. Even so, most refuges are open for a variety of public recreation activities, including hunting and fishing.

National Conservation Lands

[National conservation areas](#) are designated by Congress and feature scientific, cultural, historical, and recreational features. They are managed by the [Bureau of Land Management](#) (BLM) under the Department of the Interior for the benefit and enjoyment of the public. Like the Parks Service, BLM manages lands under numerous "similar designations" that enjoy varying levels of protection.



While their mission is to conserve fish, wildlife, and plants, most refuges allow various public recreation activities, including hunting and fishing.

Threats to Public Lands

Changing Rules

National monuments and wildlife refuges are among the most vulnerable protected lands because any president can reverse their designation. To protect the protections, Congress has established national parks around many national monuments. However, other monuments have [lost protection](#) by being declared extraneous or transferred to state ownership. Other public lands can also be threatened by policy changes. Guidelines for oil and gas leases shift with each administration. The federal government holds quarterly sales of [oil and gas leases](#), which means that several times each year, the amount of public land vulnerable to industrial resource extraction grows.

Industry

Fossil fuel extraction is a dirty business and a lot of it takes place on public land. BLM [prioritizes oil and gas leasing](#) on its conservation lands, but some [national preserves](#) managed by the Parks Service are at risk, too. Even when drilling is not permitted, protected areas can suffer water, air, and soil pollution from [drilling in adjacent areas](#).

Both the Forest Service and BLM are authorized to conduct timber sales, subjecting national forests and conservation areas to logging. Most [old-growth trees](#) on public lands are protected, but the Forest Service has [more than 20](#) logging projects planned for 370,000 acres of older forest around the country, primarily through the highly destructive practice of [clearcutting](#).

Grazing

The [most widespread](#) land management practice in the American West, grazing takes place in some national parks (including [Yellowstone](#)) and national monuments, [national forests](#), [wildlife refuges](#), and nearly all [conservation areas](#) except those containing endangered or threatened riparian species. Unlike drilling, livestock grazing can be done sustainably, as many native ecosystems rely on grazing species that are no longer widespread. However, sustainable [adaptive grazing](#) is not yet widespread, and typical grazing practices create loss of biodiversity, decrease wildlife populations, and disrupt ecosystem function.

Poaching

Besides adding terrorism to the list of threats, the 2016 [occupation](#) of Malheur National Wildlife Refuge by militia points to another threat – poaching. The armed occupation resulted from the conviction of two arsonists who set fires to cover up an illegal hunt. Hunting and fishing is permitted on nearly all kinds of public land, even some national park lands designated as “preserves.” But the species, seasons, quantity and size of catch, and method of capture are strictly regulated to be sustainable. Some people disregard these rules entirely. There is little data on the scale of poaching in the U.S. But Utah reported [nearly 1,300](#) wild animals and fish were illegally caught in 2022, and a study in Kentucky estimated that [fewer than 3%](#) of poachers in the U.S. are caught, resulting in millions of dollars in lost income for governments and untold environmental damages.

Recreational Damage

The U.S. has 40 [national recreation areas](#), which may be managed by the National Park Service, BLM, or Forest Service. These lands near large reservoirs prioritize water-based activities from swimming to fishing and boating and are subjected to heavy use. But most public lands are and should be accessible to the public. Unfortunately, recreational activities can threaten the very areas people wish to enjoy. Some amenity developments (such as pit toilets) are low impact, but development on public lands can be significant. For example, there are more than 100 [ski resorts](#) in National Forests, like [Arizona Snowbowl](#), complete with lifts, parking lots, and [artificial snowmaking](#).

Popular areas, regardless of the managing agency, experience the impacts of [crowds](#). Even in heavily protected parks, litter is a problem. Parking lot overflow and off-trail hiking damage native vegetation, increase erosion, and disturb wildlife – to the point where some areas have [had to be closed](#) to recover. All-terrain, or off-highway, vehicles (OHVs), which are allowed on Forest Service land and even some sea and lake shores managed by Parks, are extremely [destructive](#) when used off of designated roads and trails.



The Forest Service has more than 20 logging projects planned for 370,000 acres of older forest, primarily through the highly destructive practice of clearcutting.

Protecting Public Lands

Public lands are no exception to the federal government's labyrinthine bureaucracy. They are managed by multiple agencies with dozens of designations offering different levels of protection and almost as many exceptions as protections. Almost no public lands receive the kind of hands-off preservation that people imagine for public land, and conservation is rarely the top priority when "balanced" against industry and recreation. If the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, citizens must extend that vigilance to the conservation of our public lands.

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