

Call to action: What can you do for public lands?

Main Takeaway

Everyone can advocate for the protection of public lands.

Passionate individuals play a critical role in ensuring the continued protection and responsible management of our public lands. Here are some things that you can do to help make sure our public lands are inclusive and will always be around for future generations to enjoy:

- Appreciate, in whatever way makes sense to you, this incredible resource that we have and that belongs to you.
- Share your passion for wild places with others and be open to learning about other people's passion for land.
- Educate yourself through books, social media, radio, and articles about public lands, public lands issues, and public lands history at the state, local, and federal levels.
- Continue to connect the dots between social issues and environmental issues. Learn about the social complexities behind public land management.
- Visit your public lands and learn about projects that are occurring. For instance, you may find a timber sale marked for harvest during a hike and be inspired to find out more.
- Realize that all things are connected and every decision you make impacts ecosystems around the world. We cannot build a fence around our public lands and expect them to remain safe and healthy functioning ecosystems.
- Join organizations that monitor projects on public lands and contribute your support and voice in favor of what you believe.
- Submit comments on public lands issues and participate in community hearings on public lands decisions at the local, state, and federal level.
- Participate in or organize volunteer work on public lands.
- Call your elected officials when bills or policy are up for vote and let them know that you care about public lands. It is their job to listen to their constituents even when they disagree. You can also write a letter, or try to meet with them in person.
- Vote in local, state, and national elections! Support candidates who share your environmental values.
- Run for office and champion conservation.
- Recognize the myriad ways in which people connect with the outdoors and public lands and advocate for all connections to public lands.
- Research and share your learning about Indigenous Peoples, how places are named, and the connection to local public lands history. Include land acknowledgements on written materials and at the beginnings of events. Whenever possible, use the first names of places like Denali (Mt. McKinley, AK) and Mato Tipila (Devil's Tower National Monument) and advocate for changing place names that perpetuate racial slurs and stereotypes.

Federal public lands are available to all and we all have the responsibility to care for them. Having a basic understanding of the decision-making process can help you be actively involved in public lands protection. When considering the designation of public lands, there are different procedures for different kinds of designations:

- **National Monument** - this designation can be made by the President under the Antiquities Act without legislative branch (House/Senate) approval. National Monuments can also be established by Congress through the legislative process.
- **National Park** - the creation of a National Park requires legislative action in the form of a bill passed by Congress. Lands with other designations, like National Monuments and National Recreation Areas, may be converted to a National Park by an act of Congress.
- **Wilderness Area** - the designation of a Wilderness area requires an act of Congress. In most instances, Congress considers an area of public land for Wilderness designation after the agency that manages the land completes an eligibility study and determines that the area meets the criteria in the Wilderness Act of 1964. If the land is deemed eligible, the managing agency submits a recommendation for wilderness designation to the President who then makes the recommendation to Congress. Congress introduces a bill and confers the designation through the legislative process.

Not all public lands management decisions focus on the creation of new protected tracts of land. The scope of public lands decision-making is broad and also includes:

- Development of land use plans by managing agencies. These plans go by various names but they all determine the way a specified area will be managed for ten years or more. They are a vital part of the land management process and offer many opportunities for the public to provide input.
- Development and modification of recreation management policies and practices. Examples include policies governing rock climbing, mountain biking, snowmobiling and outfitting and guiding on public lands.
- Natural resource extraction decisions, such as opening up areas of public land for mining, logging, grazing, or oil and gas development.
- Securing funding for the creation of public spaces. One source is the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which provides funding to conserve lands and develop recreational facilities.

Regardless of the focus, public lands decisions requiring legislative action typically go through the following process:

1. **Coalition building** - a group of concerned and/or affected people, businesses, and organizations work together to create a shared vision for a legislative proposal.
2. **Sponsor recruitment** - the coalition identifies and recruits a Senator or Representative to introduce the bill in Congress.
3. **Committee consideration** - once introduced, the bill is sent to one or more committees for consideration. Committees generally hold hearings and then amend and vote on the bill. If the committee passes the bill, it is sent to the full House or Senate for a vote .
4. **Floor debate or unanimous consent** - if a committee passes a bill, that bill goes to the floor of the House or Senate for a vote. Some bills that are not controversial get approved by unanimous consent.
5. **Vote** - bills must pass in both the House of Representatives and the Senate before being sent to the President.
6. **Presidential signature/veto** - once passed by both the House and Senate, the President either signs the bill into law or vetoes the bill and sends it back to Congress. Congress can override a Presidential veto with a 2/3 vote in both the House and Senate.

While this process may look straight-forward, it requires diligence and perseverance on the part of sponsors and advocates. Sometimes it takes years to complete. Often, a bill can go into a committee for review and come out for a vote looking very different, with new language added that doesn't relate to the intent of the original bill. Additionally, a bill may pass in one chamber but be rejected in the other, in which case the bill may go back to the first chamber for revisions. There are many opportunities to engage in the process and advocate for public lands legislation through involvement in local coalitions and communicating with elected officials all throughout the legislative process.