

What do we mean by public lands?

Main Takeaways

Federal public lands belong to everyone.

United States public lands are managed under many different departments within the federal government.

Lands can be under different designations and managed according to different goals and objectives.

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What are public lands?

Public lands and waters are areas of land and water that are managed by government agencies with guidance and support from people residing in the United States. Public lands are different from private lands, which are owned by an individual, a business or another type of non-governmental organization. Most public lands are managed by the federal government, by a state or local government, or by a sovereign tribal nation. Other lands open for public use include conservation easements on private land that are managed by nonprofit land trusts and private lands that are accessible via special hunting and fishing permits.

This curriculum will focus primarily on public lands managed by the United States government. For the purposes of this curriculum, we generally use the term “public lands” to mean areas of land and water that are managed by one of eight federal land management agencies. These federal government agencies are tasked with managing these lands and waters in trust for all people. Not all federally managed lands are public. For example, public access is tightly restricted on military bases. However, across the country, there are more than 640 million acres of parks, forests, preserves, and historic sites that are open to the public.

In formulating our working definition of public lands, we recognize that the term has different meanings to different people. In particular, Indigenous Peoples think about public lands very differently. For Indigenous Peoples, both public and private lands across the United States were and continue to be ancestral homelands, migration routes, ceremonial grounds, and hunting and harvesting places of great significance. Because of this, Indigenous communities remain deeply connected to and reliant on these places even though their ancestors were forcibly removed from them.

From an Indigenous person’s perspective, public lands are stolen lands that were taken from Indigenous people and later transformed into the public parks, forests and refuges we know today.

To best protect these lands for future generations and prevent the deep racial injustices of the past from being repeated, the entire history of public lands must be acknowledged. No portion of this history should be forgotten or overlooked. In the later modules of this curriculum, we provide a more detailed review of public lands history and provide pathways for engagement with a fuller story of public lands. We offer this as a step forward, though we recognize that there are still gaps in our knowledge and we have not yet captured the complete story.

While we strive to deepen our knowledge, we should remember that people think about public lands in different ways and value public lands for different reasons. In order to fully engage people as advocates, activists and leaders in the public lands movement, we must embrace and respect all these viewpoints. Without that recognition and respect, the promise of public lands can never be fully realized.

How are public lands managed?

Some lands have special designations that protect them for recreation and conservation. Others are preserved for wildlife and the intrinsic value of the ecosystem. Others are managed for more intensive commercial uses such as mining, logging, grazing, and energy development. Still others are preserved for their cultural significance.

Different designations and agencies have different management mandates, which determine the specific approaches to administering and regulating public lands.

Who manages public lands?

Federal public lands are primarily managed within four executive departments of the federal government: the Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of Defense.

MOST FEDERAL LANDS ARE MANAGED BY THESE FOUR AGENCIES:

National Park Service (NPS)

MISSION: To preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.

Forest Service (USFS)

MISSION: To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

MISSION: To work with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

MISSION: To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of America's public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

THESE AGENCIES ALSO MANAGE FEDERAL LAND:

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)

MISSION: To enhance the quality of life, to promote economic opportunity, and to carry out the responsibility to protect and improve the trust assets of American Indians, Indian tribes, and Alaska Natives.

Bureau of Reclamation (BoR)

MISSION: To manage, develop, and protect water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner in the interest of the American public.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

MISSION: To conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources.

Army Corps of Engineers (ACoE)

MISSION: To deliver vital public and military engineering services; partnering in peace and war to strengthen our Nation's security, energize the economy and reduce risks from disasters.

Land designations include:

National Parks: managed by NPS to preserve the natural and cultural resources of an area and to provide for the enjoyment of the area and its resources for future generations.

National Forests and Grasslands: managed by USFS to provide for multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services, including timber, recreation, range, watersheds, and fish and wildlife.

National Wildlife Refuges: managed by USFWS for the conservation, management, and restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats. Wildlife-dependent recreation in refuges is facilitated where compatible.

National Conservation Lands: managed by BLM and designated to conserve, protect, enhance, and manage public lands for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

National Historic Sites and Parks: managed by NPS to recognize an area of national historic significance.

National Marine Sanctuaries: managed by NOAA for the nation's system of marine protected areas, to conserve, protect, and enhance their biodiversity, ecological integrity, and cultural legacy.

National Monuments: managed by NPS, USFWS, BLM, and/or USFS (in some cases, may be managed jointly). Designated by Congress or the President to protect objects or areas of natural, historic, or scientific interest.

National Recreation Areas: managed by NPS, BLM, or USFS for conservation and recreation purposes; designated for a specific purpose and may have other values that contribute to public enjoyment.

National Scenic and Historic Trails: managed by BLM, NPS, and USFS as part of the National Trails System; National Historic Trails trace the routes of historically significant events, while National Scenic Trails are longer trails managed for recreation that pass through especially scenic and significant areas.

Wild and Scenic Rivers: managed by NPS, USFWS, BLM, or USFS to preserve outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values; protected in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

Wilderness: managed by NPS, USFWS, BLM, or USFS based on the lack of noticeable human impact, outstanding recreation opportunities, and other historic, ecological, scientific, and education value of the land. Wilderness is designated by Congress and limits commercial activity, motorized equipment, and mechanized travel or tools, making it the most protective designation.

Wilderness Study Areas: land set aside for wilderness designation; managed to ensure the land is unimpaired for preservation until Congress designates it as wilderness or releases the land for other uses.

There are a number of protected parks and other lands that, though within the United States, are managed by a separate sovereign government. These are tribal parks and monuments, areas of land within tribal reservations that are managed and protected by the tribal government. One of the more famous examples is Monument Valley, a park managed by the Navajo tribal government.

What can you do on public lands?

The status and management designation of a particular area of public lands or waters determines the kinds of activities that are permissible in those areas. Some activities are generally permissible on all public lands, including designated Wilderness. However, they may be subject to limitations imposed by land managers in specific locations, during specific times of year, and during ceremonial use by Indigenous Peoples.

Other activities are only permissible in areas outside designated wilderness. Mining, logging, road building and energy development are generally only allowed in undesignated areas of the National Forests and Bureau of Land Management lands, although some exceptions exist. In general:

- **Hiking, fishing, ceremony and prayer, hunting, rock climbing, wildlife viewing, photography, horseback riding, kayaking, canoeing, rafting** are generally allowed on all public lands and waters, including Wilderness. As noted above, these activities may be limited in specific locations and at specific times. Livestock grazing can occur on all public lands, including Wilderness, subject to location-specific limitations.
- All activities allowed in Wilderness, plus **mountain biking, off-road vehicles, RVs, motor boats, and scenic driving** are generally allowed on public lands outside designated Wilderness, subject to location-specific limitations. Motorized and mechanized travel are prohibited in designated Wilderness.
- **Construction and road building, mining, logging, and energy development** also occur on public lands. However, they are generally limited to undesignated areas of the National Forests and BLM lands.

Generally allowed on all public lands and waters, including Wilderness:

Hiking
Fishing
Ceremony and prayer
Hunting
Rock climbing
Wildlife viewing
Photography
Horseback riding
Kayaking
Canoeing
Rafting
Livestock grazing

Generally allowed on public lands outside designated Wilderness:

All Wilderness activities
+
Mountain biking
Off-road vehicles
RVs
Motor boats
Scenic driving

Generally limited to undesignated National Forests and BLM lands:

Construction
Road building
Mining
Logging
Energy Development

In addition to these general rules, Congress sometimes grandfathered in non-conforming uses when designating a specific area. For example, a limited quantity of motorboats are allowed in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, and aircraft are allowed in certain Wilderness areas in the west. Always check local rules and respect closures when visiting an area.