

Public Lands Benefits, Threats, and Current Issues

Main Takeaways

Public lands offer many ecological, social, cultural, and economic benefits.

There are many threats and issues affecting public lands today.

Notwithstanding the complex and troubling history of public lands, these lands provide significant public benefits to people and wildlife. They also face significant threats.

Benefits of Public Lands

Public lands provide significant benefits to people, the environment, and the economy. People receive many of these benefits even if they do not visit public lands.

- **Ecological Benefits** include air and water filtration; clean water supply; healthy wildlife habitats, migration routes, and breeding grounds; preservation of diverse plant and animal communities; and climate change mitigation and adaptation that occurs when biodiversity, vegetation and land cover take up atmospheric carbon dioxide.
- **Economic Benefits** include providing support and infrastructure for a \$887 billion outdoor recreation economy that provides over 7.6 million direct jobs (as of 2017); and natural resources such as timber, minerals, fossil fuels, and renewable energy (wind, solar, geothermal).
- **Social Benefits** include diverse recreational opportunities that support physical and mental health and provide endless possibilities for fun for individuals, groups, and families; educational opportunities that support valuable nature-based, experiential learning; connection to the cultural and natural history that is part of our national heritage; and the ability to build and enhance community through connection to place.
- **Cultural Benefits** include connection to spirituality and the sacred (Indigenous Peoples, despite being dispossessed of their land, still visit sacred land and often consider the land an essential part of their well-being); connection to cultural history of Mexican Americans in the Southwest; and connection to African American history.

These benefits don't always complement one another, and sometimes are in direct conflict with one another. For example, natural resource extraction and recreation are generally incompatible and cannot take place at the same location.

Threats to Public Lands

We cannot take the benefits listed above for granted. Many of these benefits are in jeopardy because of the following threats, all human created:

- Climate change and the resulting impacts.
- Destruction of Indigenous Peoples' sacred places.
- Congressional and administrative rollbacks of protections for public lands.
- Pollution from automobiles and industry.
- Unsustainable mining, logging and energy development on public lands, driven by high consumption in the U.S. and around the world.
- Reductions in funding for federal land management agencies, along with recurring government shutdowns that result in serious adverse impacts to public lands.
- Proposals to transfer federal lands to state control.
- Lack of awareness or indifference to public lands amongst a changing population.

Current Issues on Public Lands

As stewards of public lands, Americans have a responsibility to learn about contemporary issues relating to public lands. These issues change over time, but as of the publishing of this curriculum, the most pressing issues are:

- **Lack of diversity in public land use:**

Research shows that the racial and ethnic demographics of people visiting certain public lands does not reflect the demographics of the U.S. A disproportionate number of visitors are white, with people of color visiting at a rate below their representation in the U.S. population. We should ensure that everyone has the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of public lands.

- **Perceived lack of diversity in public land appreciation:**

Research shows that there is a perception and stereotype that people of color do not appreciate public lands. The reality is that sometimes people of color have different ways of appreciating and connecting with nature and the outdoors, ways that are not reflected in these stereotypes.

- **Inequitable treatment of Indigenous Peoples:**

Issues include sovereignty, historical trauma, and preservation of and access to natural and cultural resources and sacred sites. Destruction of sacred sites is a significant issue in some areas.

- **Access to public lands:**

Public lands are not easily accessible for everyone. Many people living in urban areas, people without financial means, and people of color lack the transportation necessary to go to public lands. This inability to get there is one of the biggest barriers to sharing in the benefits. Other barriers to access include fees to use public lands, cost of equipment, lack of knowledge of recreation, and concerns for safety.

- **Negative experiences on public lands:**

Many people report experiences of exclusion and “othering” on public lands. Some of this is because public lands management staff do not reflect the identities of visitors (ie. race, ethnicity, and gender). However, some of this can also be traced to narrow views on proper public lands etiquette and the “right” way to recreate that have developed in the recreation and outdoor communities. Many populations also continue to experience violence on public lands.

- **Lack of funding and resources for public lands management:**

Agencies continue to struggle with the limited resources they have been given to maintain and protect public lands. Even with support from the for-profit and nonprofit conservation sector, land management at current agency funding levels is not fiscally sustainable over the long term. The 2018-19 government shutdown vividly demonstrated the adverse impacts that occur when agencies lack the resources they need to manage public lands properly.

- **Transfer of federal public lands to state control:**

Numerous proposals have been made to transfer control of federal lands to the states. These proposals are the subject of passionate debate. Advocates for these transfers argue that the states should have the right to control lands within their boundaries. Opponents point to past history that indicates that when states are given control over federal lands they often sell them to private interests, primarily for mineral, oil, and gas development. This reduces or eliminates public access to these lands.

- **Rollback of land protections:**

In 2017, President Trump issued an order significantly reducing the size of two National Monuments, thereby undoing land protections that applied to these areas and opening them up for mineral and energy development. Indigenous Peoples and the conservation community do not believe the President has the authority to take these actions and have gone to court to block them. Also, legislation has been introduced in Congress to undesignate numerous areas designated as Wilderness Study Areas, thereby undoing land protections for those areas.

- **Management of cultural resources:** Increasingly, people recognize that the heritage of public lands is not solely one of recreation and adventure, but that many public lands areas are culturally significant to many different communities.

- **Contribution to climate change:**

According to a report from the U.S. Geological Survey, greenhouse gas emissions from federal energy production on public lands are a significant source of total U.S. emissions. Over the past decade, approximately 40% of total U.S. coal production, 26% of U.S. oil and 23% of U.S. natural gas were produced from U.S. federal public lands and waters. If U.S. public lands were a country, it would rank 5th in the world in total emissions behind China, India, the United States, and Russia.



Site-specific Examples of Threats and Issues

• **Dakota Access Pipeline:**

The Dakota Access Pipeline is a \$3.7 billion project that crosses four states. The 1,772-mile pipeline stretches from the oil-rich Bakken Formation—a vast underground deposit where Montana and North Dakota meet Canada—southeast into South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois. The pipeline threatens to pollute the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's water source and damage and destroy sites of great historic, religious, and cultural significance to the Tribe. In 2016, one of the largest gatherings of Indigenous tribes in post-colonial history came together in Cannon Ball, North Dakota to protest construction of the pipeline. Protesters were arrested, shot at, and sprayed with water and tear gas by law enforcement.

• **Mato Tipila/Devil's Tower:**

Mato Tipila, also known as Bear's Lodge or Devil's Tower, is a sacred place for many of the Plains tribes, including Lakota, Cheyenne, and Kiowa. Additionally, Devil's Tower was the first National Monument, established in 1906. Devil's Tower is not only a popular tourist destination, but is also a popular climbing destination. However, many of the tribes view the act of climbing to be deeply disrespectful of such a sacred area. In response, the National Park Service issued a voluntary climbing ban in the month of June (the month for important ceremonies). Since the climbing ban, several lawsuits have been filed both in support and denial of Indigenous religious rights.

• **San Francisco Peaks/Arizona's Snowbowl:**

Arizona Snowbowl is a ski resort that occupies sacred land (the San Francisco Peaks) and U.S. Forest Service land. The resort has a long-standing lease with the Forest Service, which has permitted clearing, lift construction, and parking lot construction on sacred land. In 2008, Snowbowl proposed to use reclaimed wastewater for their snow-making operations, which Indigenous Peoples find very disrespectful. Despite a litany of lawsuits that reference the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, Snowbowl continues to be granted legal rights to the lease and to use reclaimed wastewater to create snow.

• **The Occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge:**

In January of 2016, a group of armed militia, led by Ammon Bundy, occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Burns, Oregon in protest of two ranchers' arson convictions. The ranchers, Dwight and Steven Hammond, had been convicted on two counts of arson. Prior to the arson, the Hammonds had been repeatedly denied grazing permits by the BLM because of permit violations. The acts of arson were to cover up an illegal hunt and to preserve the winter feed for their cattle, and were understood as yet another disregard for BLM's rules and regulations. The Hammond conflict and Bundy occupation highlights the tensions between ranchers and public lands managers.

• **Reductions in National Monuments:**

President Obama designated Bears Ears National Monument during his final week in office. This area includes many sites sacred to Indigenous Peoples, and several tribes strongly supported the designation. However, in 2017, President Trump issued an order reducing the size of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments, and began the process for opening these areas up for mining and energy development. Indigenous and environmental activists filed lawsuits challenging the order in an attempt to preserve protections for these areas under the Antiquities Act.