

What do we mean by public lands?

Main Takeaways

Federal public lands are for everyone.

Federal 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 open for public use and 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 and are generally not open for public use.

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 often managed by nonprofit land trusts that provide public access. Some private lands are also accessible via special hunting and fishing permits.

In formulating our working definition of public lands, we recognize that the term has different meanings to different people. As acknowledged at the beginning of this curriculum, Indigenous peoples are the longest serving stewards of the land. Since the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous peoples have faced and continue to face significant historical and ongoing injustices. As such, many Indigenous peoples think about public lands very differently.

From some Indigenous people’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. 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 may have been forcibly removed from them.

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.

What are “Federal public lands”?

This curriculum will focus primarily on federal public lands and waters. Federal public lands and waters are areas of public 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. It is important to note that not all federally managed lands are public. For example, public access is tightly restricted on military bases. This curriculum will focus on the more than 640 million acres of federal parks, forests, preserves, and historic sites that are open to the public.

Who manages federal public lands?

Federal public lands are primarily managed by agencies spread across 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. The agencies and their departments are listed below:

MOST FEDERAL LANDS ARE MANAGED BY THESE FOUR AGENCIES:

National Park Service (NPS) [Dept. of the Interior]

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) [Dept. of Agriculture]

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) [Dept. of the Interior]

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) [Dept. of the Interior]

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) [Dept. of the Interior]

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) [Dept. of the Interior]

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) [Dept. of Commerce]

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

Army Corps of Engineers (ACoE) [Dept. of Defense]

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.

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.

Land designations:

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 educational 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 Nation.

What can you do on federal public lands?

The status and management designation of a particular area of federal public lands or waters determines the kinds of activities that are permissible in those areas. Some activities are generally permissible on all federal public lands, including designated Wilderness. However, they may be subject to limitations imposed by land management agencies 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 non-Wilderness 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, and rafting** are generally allowed on all federal 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 federal 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 federal public lands outside designated Wilderness, subject to location-specific limitations determined by the managing agencies. Motorized and mechanized travel (including mountain biking) are prohibited in designated Wilderness.
- **Construction and road building, mining, logging, and energy development** also occur on public lands. However, they are generally prohibited in areas designated as Wilderness.

Generally allowed on all federal 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 federal public lands outside designated Wilderness:

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

Generally limited to non-Wilderness on National Forests and BLM lands:

Construction
Road building
Mining
Logging
Energy Development

In addition to these general rules, Congress sometimes provides exceptions to these rules to allow non-conforming uses when designating a specific area as Wilderness. 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.

