

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.

© Kevin McNeal

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.

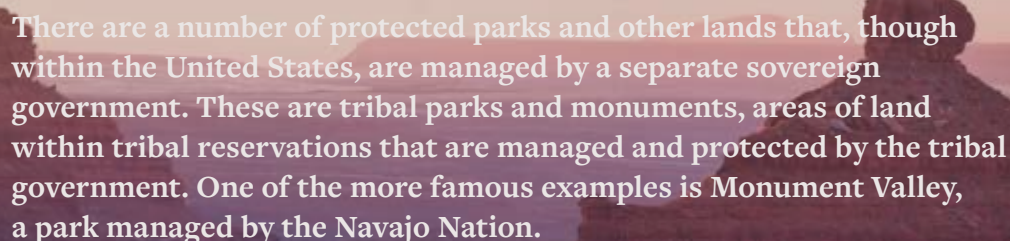
National Recreation Areas: managed by NPS, BLM, or USFS for conservation and recreation purposes; designated for a specific purpose and may have other values that contribute to public enjoyment.

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.

Module

1

Lesson

1

Personal Connection to Public Lands

© Wondercamp

Lesson at a Glance

Gallery Walk and Pair Share

(15 min): Participants will discuss personal connections to the outdoors by viewing and discussing visuals of outdoor places and public lands.

Brainstorm and Discussion (20 min)

Participants will brainstorm ideas that come to mind with the words “public lands”, review the definition of public lands, and discuss complicated aspects of public lands management and connection to land.

Conclusion (5 min):

Material review and questions

Learner Outcomes

Participants will:

- Discuss the role of public lands and the outdoors in childhood and adult experiences.
- Have a basic understanding of the term “public lands” and the complicated nature of public lands in the United States.

Getting Ready

Time: 40 minutes

Materials: Outdoor Spaces cards, butcher paper and pencil/markers

Preparation: Material collection, place public lands cards around instructional space

Location: Indoor or outdoor with room to sit in a circle and move around

Objective: To explore personal connections to public lands and develop a basic understanding of the definition of public lands.

Gallery Walk and Pair Share (15 min)

1. Distribute public lands visuals around the instructional space, with enough room for participants to gather in groups. Ensure that the images represent a wide variety of ways that people can connect with the outdoors, including urban and rural scenes and a variety of types of people doing different things.

Ask the group to think quietly for a minute what role the outdoors played in their childhood. Give the group 2 minutes to locate a visual that best describes their childhood experiences of being outside. After individual reflections, ask the small groups to discuss their choice with participants that chose the same visual or as a whole group, depending on group size.

2. Ask the group to move to a visual that best describes their connection to the outdoors in the present and allow time for discussion.

3. Pose the following questions to the group or pair up to discuss:

Was your choice of visual different from your childhood to now?

How did your initial exposure to the outdoors affect how you view or experience the outdoors now?

Was there a moment, event, or place that changed your perspective on being outdoors, for better or worse?

What kinds of feelings come up when you think about your connection to the outdoors? Ask participants to share as they feel comfortable. Note that we all have different relationships to the outdoors and to land, rooted in negative and positive feelings based on our experiences and the experiences collectively of the groups that we identify with.

Has an outdoor space ever felt like home? A beach, tree fort, bench in a city park, waterfall or overlook, etc.

Have you ever felt so connected to a place that it felt like ‘yours’?

What made it special?

4. Ask the group to consider that if your connection to the outdoors was forged in your backyard, farm or city park, or on federal public lands.

So what are ‘public lands’?

Public Lands Brainstorm (20 min)

1. Create small groups of 3-5 people and pass out butcher paper and markers to each group.
2. Pose the question to the group, “What are public lands?” Explain that we will be doing a group brainstorm, and their task is to think of words, images, people, places, and ideas that come to mind for “public lands.” There is no correct answer, and ideas may be written as words, phrases, or doodles. Encourage participants to open their minds up and be creative. Allow 5 minutes.
3. Ask each group to post their brainstorm in a central location and allow the group to silently review each paper. After 2 minutes, pose the following questions:

Are there similarities?

Differences?

Remind participants that we all have a different relationship to public lands so these brainstorm visuals may look very different from group to group.

4. Post and review the following definition of public lands and waters: **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.** Offer the following concepts for discussion:

- a. Lands considered “public lands” are the current and ancestral homelands, migration routes, ceremonial grounds, hunting and harvesting places for Indigenous peoples who were forcibly removed historically and currently. 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.

Why is it important to consider that different people have different relationships to public lands? What does that mean as people offer “guidance and support” for public lands management?

- b. Protection and management of public lands means that land is managed for use by different stakeholders- from ceremony and prayer, to recreation, to resource extraction and energy development.

What does this mean for the nature of public lands management? What happens when two (or more) stakeholders have competing interests in public land use?

Conclusion (5 min)

1. Go around the group and ask each person to share a word or phrase that reflects what they learned in this lesson. Review that relationships to the outdoors and to public lands are complicated- each person connects to land in different ways and each way is valid and extremely personal. Just like people connect to land in a myriad of ways, public lands are managed in many ways. Public lands are an amazing, complicated resource that we all share.
2. Time for questions.

Adapt the Lesson

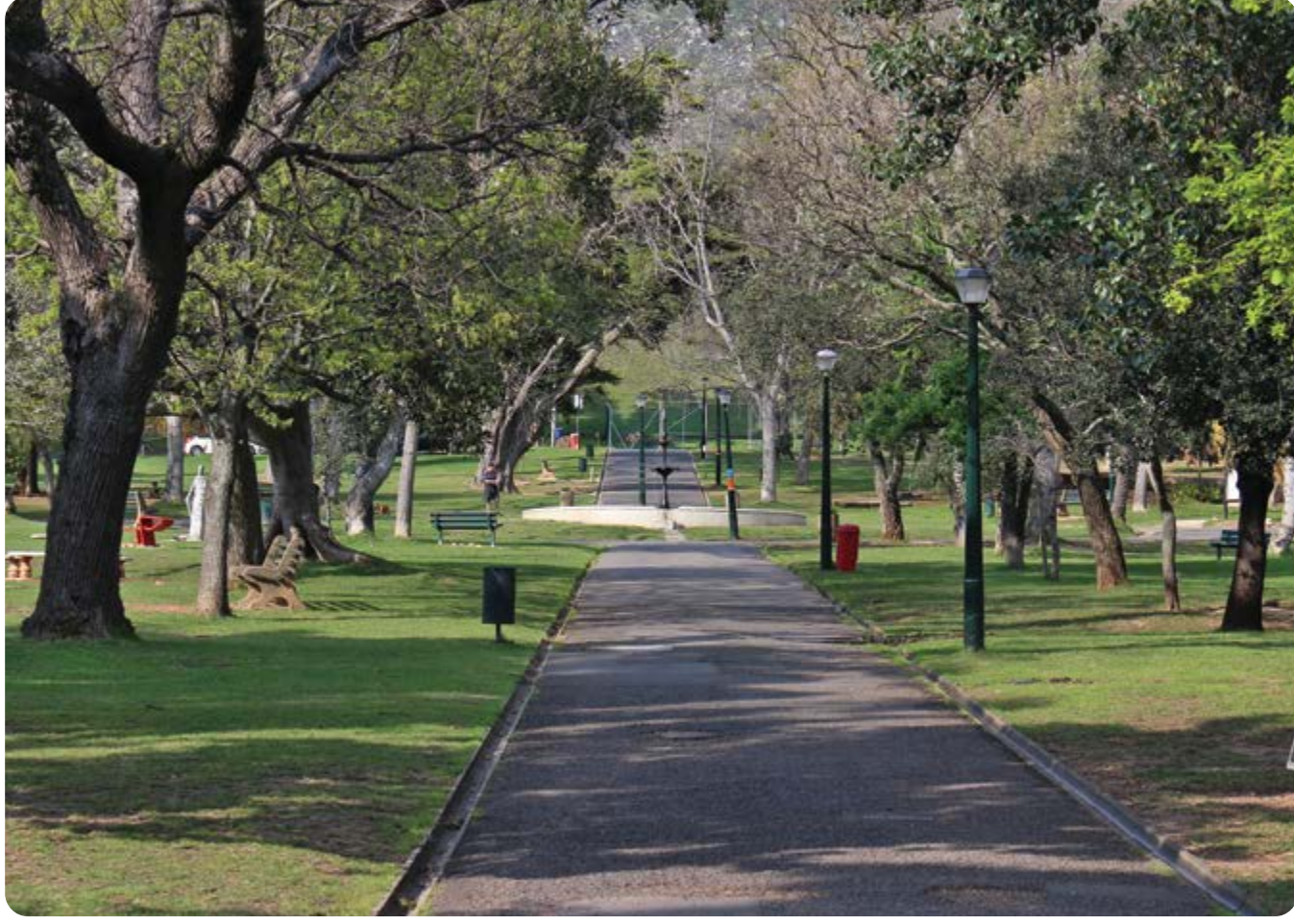
Create public lands visuals that reflect the green spaces in and around the instructional location.

Consider adding in a group contract discussion to promote respect and emotional safety within the group, especially around the discussion of negative experiences in the outdoors.





























Module

1

Lesson

2

Management and Uses of Public Lands

© John McCarthy

Lesson at a Glance

Rapid Fire Brainstorm (5 min):

Participants will collectively create a list of the different types of public lands.

Each One Teach One Activity (30 min):

Participants will teach about the map of public lands, federal land designations, and activities on different types of public lands.

Conclusion (5 min): Round robin or pair share. Questions.

Learner Outcomes

Participants will:

- Explore maps of federal public lands.
- Learn about the different agencies within the federal government that manage public lands.
- Learn about the different designations for public lands and recognize Wilderness as the most protective type of land designation.
- Understand the different uses for public lands and their potential conflicts.

Getting Ready

Time: 40 minutes

Materials: Each One Teach One fact sheets, print out of federal lands map, agency logos and missions, print out of organizational chart and designations cards, print out of land use icons

Preparation: Examples of land designations relevant to the audience and location

Location: Indoor or outdoor with room to sit in a circle and move around

Objective:

To understand public lands distribution, how federal public lands are managed, different designations, and how uses differ depending on that designation.

Rapid Fire Brainstorm (5 min)

1. Divide participants into groups of 3-5 people. Assign a scribe and piece of butcher paper to each group. Give the groups 3 minutes to brainstorm different types of lands found in the United States. Note that examples could include federal (National Parks or Forests), state (Parks, Recreation Areas), and private lands (Preserves, Conservation Areas).
2. After 3 minutes, have each group put a star by each of the examples of federally managed public lands. Mention that the focus of the lesson will be on federally managed public lands.

Each One Teach One Activity (30 min)

Divide participants into 3 groups and provide a fact sheet for each topic and associated teaching materials. Give the groups 15 minutes to plan their lesson to the group, 5 minutes to present. Have groups present in the order listed below. As each group is presenting, the participants should write down 3-5 main takeaway points to share at the close of the lesson.

1. Public Lands Distribution

What percentage of the country is public lands?

How many acres are federal public lands in the US?

Poll the group for their thoughts before giving the correct answer. Who was closest? Are the numbers surprising?

(Answer: 640 million acres, 26% - in all 50 states!)

Present the map of federal public lands to the group. Ask the group to make observations about the distribution of public lands in the country.

Is it surprising? Why do you think it is that way?

As the country expanded westward, the government claimed ownership of land across the country. Through dispossession, genocide, and relocation, many Indigenous people were removed from these lands (although some still live on their aboriginal lands). Most of these lands were then transferred to individuals through grants and homestead acts. Other lands became state land when states entered the Union. However, the federal government retained ownership of some parts. In the East, the government had to purchase and acquire land later on, specifically for the purpose of conservation, not for

expansion. This was done through Acts of Congress and was generally a lot more complicated, hence the relatively small amounts of federal public lands in the East.

Allow participants to review the cards that show the different agencies that manage public lands and their mission statements. Ask participants why they think multiple agencies are involved. Ask the participants to locate some public lands near to where they live and point them out on the map- answers could include city parks, privately owned conservation land, state parks, or federally-managed lands. Present the following questions:

How do you or your community use the land?

How did you find out about it?

Who lived there before you did and where are those people now? (If time, use this prompt to introduce the <https://native-land.ca/> resource for identifying ancestral lands.)

2. Federal Land Designations

Present the Land Management Agency organizational chart. Note that under each agency are different ways that lands are designated within that agency.

Pass out the designation cards and have each person read out their card. Note that some of the designations may be managed by multiple agencies. Pose the following questions to the group:

Can you think of an example of your type of designation?
Be prepared with relevant examples to your group and location.

What challenges are there if one type of designation is managed by multiple agencies? For example, National Monuments are managed by NPS, USFWS, BLM, and USFS. The potentially competing missions of these agencies might cause inconsistencies in management.

What is the most protective type of designation?

What is (are) the least?

(Answer: Wilderness is the most protective. Non-Wilderness areas of National Forests and BLM land are the least protective.)

3. Federal Land Uses

The designation of a particular area of federal lands or water generally determines what activities can and cannot take place in those areas. The general rules are described below. However, activities may be subject to limitations imposed by land managers in specific locations, during specific times of year, and during ceremonial use by Indigenous peoples.

Review the allowed activities using the land use icon cards.

- a. **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.
- b. 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.
- c. **Construction and road building, mining, logging, and energy development** also occur on public lands. However, they are generally prohibited in areas designated as Wilderness.

Ask each person to choose two activities that may potentially come into conflict and take 1 minute to think about why and ways to mitigate the conflict. Ask for volunteers to share their thoughts. Example: off-road vehicles and wildlife viewing.

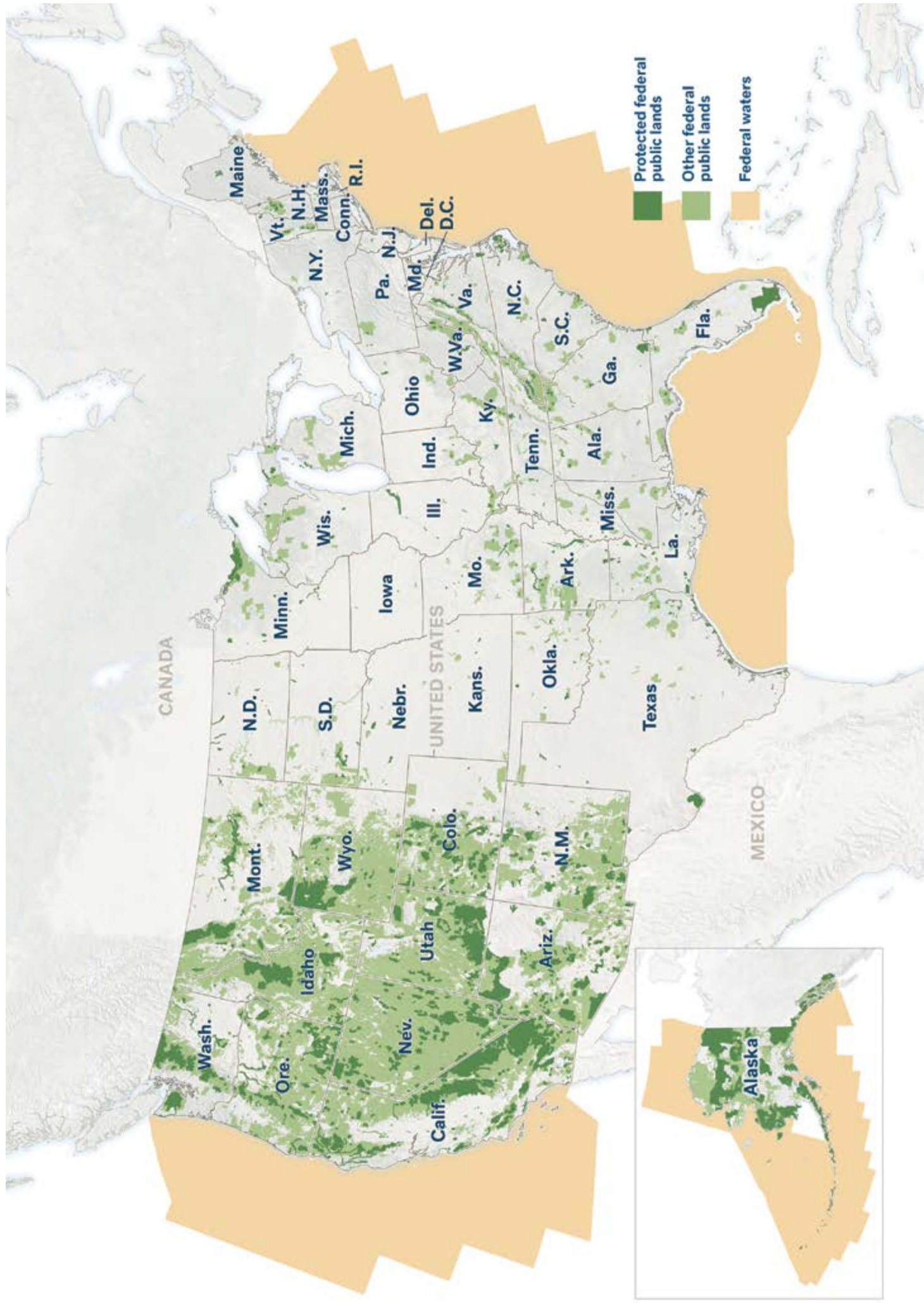
Conclusion (5 min)

1. Ask students to review their take away points for Each One Teach One lesson with a partner then pose the following questions: Why are public lands so complicated to manage? Do the challenges associated with managing public lands relate to anything in your life? Ask for volunteers to share their responses.

Adapt the lesson:

Instructors are encouraged to provide local maps and locally relevant case studies in addition to or in place of the ones provided.

The Each One Teach One lessons can also be taught in small groups of 3 participants each, with each participant responsible for one Each One Teach One lesson. Make sure to print out enough teaching materials for each group.



Bureau of Indian Affairs

(BIA)



Mission:

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:

Manage, develop, and protect water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner in the interest of the American public.

National Park Service

(NPS)



Mission:

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.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

(USFWS)



Mission:

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

Bureau of Land Management

(BLM)



Mission:

Sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

U.S. Forest Service

(USFS)



Mission:

Sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the Nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

(NOAA)



Mission:

Understand and predict changes in climate, weather, oceans, and coasts, to share that knowledge and information with others, and to conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources.

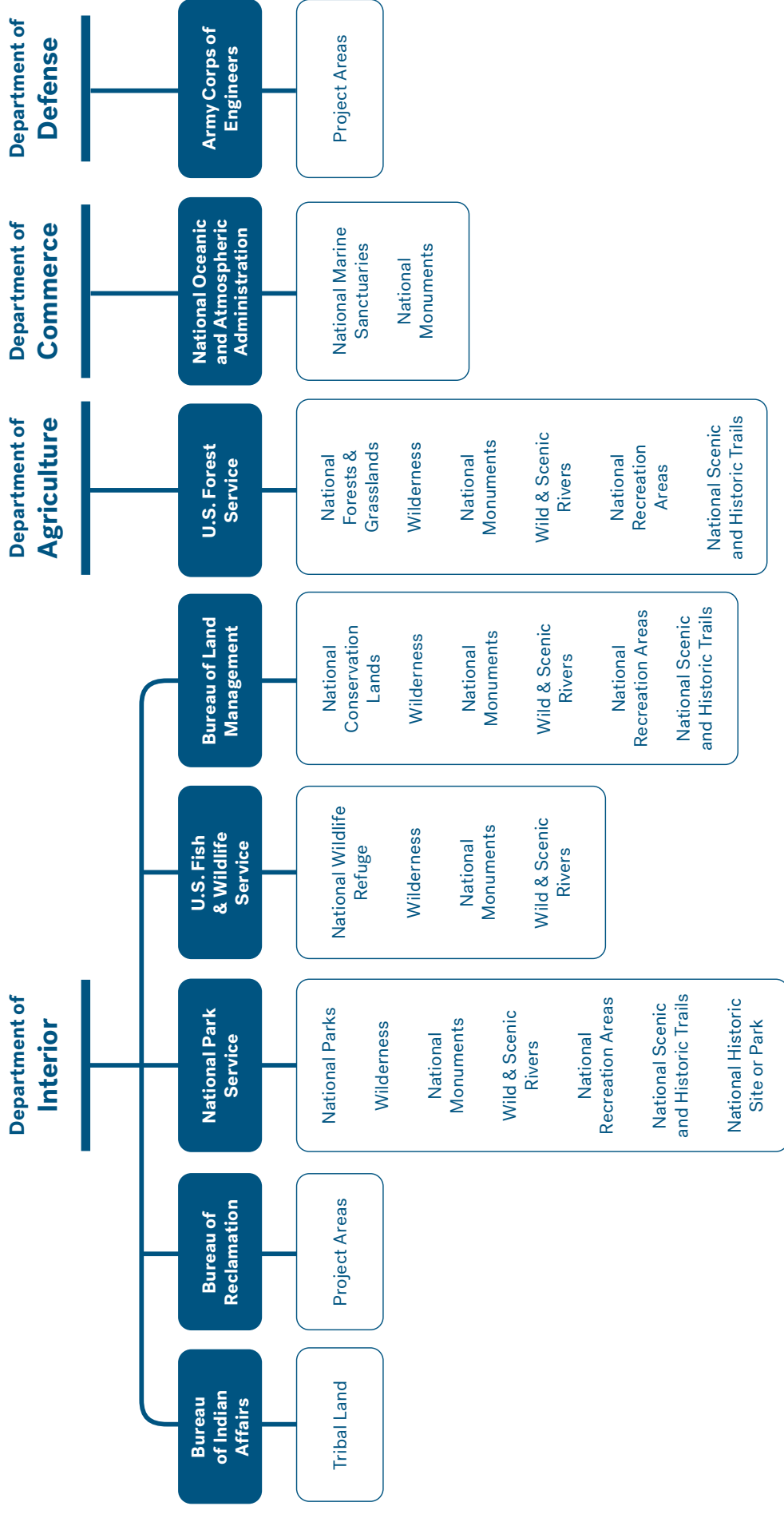
Army Corps of Engineers

(USACE)



Mission:

Provide vital public engineering services in peace and war to strengthen our Nation's security, energize the economy, and reduce risks from disasters.



National Parks

Managed by NPS

MISSION:

Preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.

Wild & Scenic Rivers

Managed by one of four agencies
(depending on the river)

MISSION:

Designated to preserve outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values; protected in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

National Conservation Lands

Managed by BLM

MISSION:

Designated to conserve, protect, enhance, and manage public lands for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Other BLM Land

Managed by BLM

MISSION:

Designated to conserve, protect, enhance, and manage public lands for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

National Marine Sanctuaries

Managed by NOAA

MISSION:

For the Nation's system of marine-protected areas, to conserve, protect, and enhance their biodiversity, ecological integrity, and cultural legacy.

National Wildlife Refuges

Managed by USFWS

MISSION:

For the conservation, management, and restoration (where appropriate) of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats. Wildlife-dependent recreation in refuges is facilitated where compatible.

National Recreational Areas

Managed by one of three agencies
(depending on the area)

MISSION:

For conservation and recreation purposes; designated for a specific purpose, and may have other values that contribute to public enjoyment.

National Monuments

Managed by one of four agencies
(depending on the monument)

MISSION:

Designated by Congress or the President to protect objects or areas of historic or scientific interest.

National Forests & Grasslands

Managed by USFS

MISSION:

Provides for multiple use and sustained yield of products and services, including timber, recreation, range, watersheds, and fish and wildlife.

Wilderness

Managed by one of four agencies
(depending on the wilderness area)

MISSION:

Wilderness is the most protective type of land designation and limits commercial activity, motorized equipment, and mechanized travel or tools.

