



Connecting everyone to the outdoors™



America Needs More Public Lands, Not Less

Contents

Public Lands Are America's Great National Unifier	2
What and Where Are Public Lands, Who Uses Them and How?	3
Supply Should Meet Demand	3
The People Have Spoken...And Voted	4
It's The Economy	5
Protecting Landscapes and Lifeways	6
Presidents and Precedent	7

Primary Author

Lisa W. Foderaro, Senior Writer and Researcher, Trust for Public Land

Contributors

Carrie Besnette Hauser
Jeff Danter
Linda Hwang
Will Klein
Keith Maley
David Patton
Dale Watt
Deborah Williams

Publication date: May 2025

Suggested citation: Foderaro, Lisa W. *America Needs More Public Lands, Not Less*.
San Francisco: Trust for Public Land, 2025. <https://www.tpl.org/america-needs-more-public-lands-not-less>



Family hiking, Washington. Photo: Adair Rutledge

After a long day backpacking, a father-and-daughter duo set up camp amid dense stands of yellow birch and sugar maple in Vermont's Green Mountain National Forest. They don't watch viral videos or doom scroll on their devices all evening; they connect with one another across the campfire.

A young hunter, continuing a multi-generational tradition, takes aim and harvests his first Northern Pintail in Bald Knob National Wildlife Refuge, linking himself to a community and a culture in Arkansas.

An angler wades into a stream coursing through the glaciated valleys of the High Schells Wilderness Area of Nevada and hooks fat brook and rainbow trout, which she'll take home to feed her family.

The popularity and the value of public lands to the millions of Americans who treasure them is clear. Yet there are worrying developments in Washington, where officials are advancing proposals to reduce our public lands, either by transferring them to states, selling them to private interests—or some combination. The fact is we need more public lands, not less.

Cobblestones on the rocky coast at dawn near Birch Harbor in Gouldsboro, Maine. Photo: Jerry and Marcy Monkman/EcoPhotography

Public Lands Are America's Great National Unifier

Not only do protected public lands offer recreation opportunities—and the health benefits that come with them—to everyone in this country, they're also the backbone of a growing and sustainable recreation economy. By expanding—not divesting—public lands, we deliver opportunity and resilience to urban and rural communities; preserve historical and archeological sites; and safeguard the environment.

Few, if any, issues draw such broad support and agreement across generations, income brackets, political parties, geographies, and demographics. Selling or transferring public lands contradicts hard data and public opinion.

Visitation statistics show a steady uptick in people accessing public lands for recreational use. Research shows that time outdoors delivers positive health outcomes. Economic studies point to job growth, small business growth, and increased consumer spending in gateway towns and cities. Poll after poll shows the majority of people across the political spectrum—including those at the highest levels of government—oppose closing or privatizing public lands.

Perhaps most convincing, voters choose time and again to invest their tax dollars to conserve and improve public green spaces. Americans—Republicans and Democrats—agree that public lands are worth protecting and growing.

What and Where Are Public Lands, Who Uses Them and How?

Most people are familiar with the National Park System, which includes some of the most storied and majestic landscapes in the nation, such as Acadia National Park, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, and Yosemite, as well as battlefields, lakeshores, seashores, recreation areas, scenic rivers, and trails. There are 433 NPS sites spanning a total of 85 million acres.

But the NPS represents only a fraction of America's federally managed lands. Beyond those are federal public lands overseen by three agencies: the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

All of them have seen a rise in public use. Federal statistics that shine a light on the use of public lands reveal a nation increasingly engaged with the natural world, underscoring the need for more, not less.

The National Park Service reported 331.9 million visitors—a record—in 2024. That's more than the top 10 built tourist attractions combined.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates 70 million annual visits. It reported 45 million visits to national wildlife refuges in 2012. Last year, that figure had jumped to 67 million visits (twice as many as JFK airport sees in a year). Wildlife refuges hosted 42 million birding excursions, 2.6 million hunting expeditions, and 8.6 million fishing visits.

The U.S. Forest Service reported 159 million annual visits in its 2022 visitor summary, the most recent available.

Similarly, visitation to Bureau of Land Management properties increased by 46 percent since 2006, according to the Outdoor Alliance. In 2024, the agency reported 82 million annual visitors.

Supply Should Meet Demand

Indeed, there are more hikers, hunters, mountain bikers, anglers, foragers, snowmobilers, birders, and campers enjoying public lands than ever before. That is a good thing. Time spent recreating outdoors promotes physical and mental health and also strengthens social connections and empowers communities.

"We are living in a golden age of outdoor recreation," says Dr. Carrie Besnette Hauser, president and CEO of Trust for Public Land (TPL), a leading national nonprofit that works to protect land and create parks where they are needed most.

"Americans love their public lands," adds Hauser. "People want greater protection of existing lands, and they are eager for more opportunities to explore and connect to new landscapes."

According to the Outdoor Industry Association, participation in outdoor recreation continues to climb, growing 4.1 percent in 2023.

Hiking and rock climbing, Washington. Photo: Adair Rutledge Photography



Outdoor Recreation Participation in 2024

- 36 million+** overnight campers
- 51 million** hikers
- 16 million** hunters with rifle/shotgun
- 26 million** freshwater anglers
- 9 million** saltwater anglers
- 4.5 million** rock climbers
- 20 million** bird watchers
- 8.8 million** mountain bikers
- 20 million** paddlers

According to [MRI-Simmons survey data](#), in 2023, more than 36 million Americans went on an overnight camping trip and more than 51 million took a hike. Nearly 16 million Americans hunted with either a rifle or a shotgun. Some 26 million people fished in freshwater, while 9 million fished in America's oceans. Then there were the millions of Americans who enjoyed rock climbing (4.5 million), bird watching (20 million), mountain biking (8.8 million), or paddling (20 million).

Across the nation, our current public lands and accessible recreation lands are simply unable to support current demand. We need new and expanded wilderness areas, new national forests, new wildlife refuges. Many weekend warriors (and afternoon amblers) know the disappointment of arriving at a trailhead only to find the parking lot full. Or reaching the summit of a favorite hilltop or mountain peak to find the path blocked by fallen debris. Or accessing a favorite trout stream to compete with other anglers standing shoulder to shoulder.

The People Have Spoken... And Voted

Support for public lands cuts across geographic boundaries, as well as socio-economic and partisan divides.

An annual poll of voters in several Western states revealed strong support for conservation. In January, 2025, more than 3,300 residents in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Wyoming, and Utah were asked by the Colorado College State of the Rockies Project about their views on everything from water resources to national monuments.

Sixty-five percent of respondents opposed giving states control of national public lands and 88 percent supported current national monument designations. Even among the 37 percent of survey respondents who support the broader Make America Great Again agenda, two-thirds opposed funding cuts at federal land-management agencies, including the Forest Service, National Park Service, Environmental Protection Agency, Bureau of Land Management, and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Widening the lens, Trust for Public Land commissioned a national survey conducted by YouGov of 4,000 US residents. Like the Colorado College poll of Western voters, ours shows striking levels of bipartisan support for conservation and public lands across the country. Three quarters of respondents oppose the closure of public



Paddle boarding in Lynn Haven Bayou Park, Florida. Photo: Jack Gardner

lands, while nearly two thirds object to layoffs of staff charged with protecting public lands. Respondents identified “lack of funding/maintenance” and “overdevelopment” as among the biggest threats facing public lands.

In perhaps the clearest retort against reducing public lands, America's voting record consistently tells a similar story.

Over the past 30 years, we've supported 813 state and local ballot measures in conservative and liberal states, rural and urban communities, large cities and small counties. Voters have passed 84 percent of those, demonstrating their willingness to incur modest taxes or fees to protect new rivers, forests, and grasslands, and reap the economic benefits they drive. In 2024, we supported 23 measures. Every one of them passed. **Public land is not a bygone American value; it is evergreen.**

David Patton, TPL's national lands initiative director, says it's not surprising that public lands enjoy universal support when you consider the host of benefits they provide.

“Robust, sustainably managed public lands offer a wide variety of recreation opportunities, help areas withstand extreme weather, and boost local economies,” he said. “It's hard to think of another public resource that confers so much value at once for so many communities.”

It's The Economy

Public lands are the backbone of a \$1.2 trillion outdoor recreation industry. They support five million jobs and fuel businesses of all sizes, according to the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, a business coalition that promotes the industry. Among them: individual guides who lead trips into national forests, outfitters that sell gear, and the companies that make it.

According to the Consumer Expenditure Surveys, produced by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans last year spent more than \$1.5 billion on winter-sports equipment and \$2.1 billion on camping equipment. They spent a remarkable \$8.4 billion on hunting and fishing gear, and another \$1.6 billion on water-sports gear.

There are also gateway communities in and around popular wilderness destinations whose hotels, restaurants, and gift shops stay afloat on a steady stream of tourists. Estes Park, Colorado, for instance, lies next to Rocky Mountain National Park. With a year-round population of only 6,000, the town draws four million visitors a year.

Whitney Potter Schwartz, a spokeswoman for the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR), cautions against actions that would harm public lands. “Any effort to sell off or transfer public lands isn’t just a threat to recreation—it’s a direct hit to the jobs, businesses, and communities that rely on them,” she says. “Millions of Americans turn to public lands for adventure, health, and quality of life, and policymakers must recognize their immense value. ORR

strongly opposes any action that undermines access to these lands and urges leaders to end this harmful rhetoric once and for all.”

Trust for Public Land’s research shows that investment in conservation yields significant economic returns. In Vermont, for instance, conservation returns \$11 to the economy for every dollar invested, while in Maine it’s as much as \$15. Moreover, parks and green spaces improve water quality, naturally manage stormwater, reduce air pollution, boost public health, attract and retain business, and support economic development. The result is reduced costs for local governments and a stronger tax base.

If you zoom in on two states in different areas of the country, Colorado and North Carolina, you see what’s at stake—both for outdoor recreation and economic growth.

The Outdoor Recreation Roundtable estimates that Colorado had \$17.2 billion in economic activity from outdoor recreation in 2023, the most recent year for which statistics are available. That supported 132,000 jobs, or 4.3 percent of employees statewide. Likewise, North Carolina saw \$16.2 billion in activity, supporting 145,000 jobs, or 2.8 percent of workers statewide.

The outdoor recreation economy is booming in both states. From 2012 to 2023, it more than doubled in Colorado, from \$8 billion to \$17 billion. In North Carolina, economic activity swelled from \$9 billion to \$16 billion. Job growth related to the industry was also up in the two states, according to the [U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis](#).



Snowshoeing on the TPL managed property Allemansratt, Lindstorm, Minnesota. Photo: Andy Richter



“Public lands are our way of life [in Montana]. It’s not just Yellowstone and Glacier, it’s also the BLM and Forest Service areas where a kid fills their first tag, a lake in the Beartooths is the perfect picnic spot, and the trail just down the road helps you clear your head after a long workday. Public lands must remain public, and the federal government has a responsibility to manage and ensure access to those lands.”

—REP. RYAN ZINKE (R), MONTANA

Hiking in Big Fork, Montana. Photo: www.rebeccastumpf.com

Protecting Landscapes and Lifeways

Two drivers of the outdoor recreation industry are hunting and fishing. Groups that represent hunters and anglers strongly support keeping federal lands in federal hands.

Unlike urban areas, rural regions in the United States abound with open space. But many vast tracts of land are privately owned and thus dotted with no-trespassing signs. Conserving existing public spaces—and creating *new* ones—is vital to the large community of sportsmen and sportswomen, from the coastal plains of the Southeast to the ponderosa pine forests of the Northwest.

In early 2024, Ryan Zinke, a Republican Congressman who represents Montana, introduced a bill called the “[Public Lands in Public Hands Act](#)” to preserve access to public lands by banning the sale or transfer of most federally managed lands. Specifically, the legislation would require Congressional approval for the sale or disposal of publicly accessible federal lands measuring more than 300 acres. That one provision would protect access to an estimated 30 million acres of public land used by outdoor enthusiasts across Montana.

Representative Zinke, who co-sponsored the bill with his Democratic colleague, Rep. Gabe Vasquez of New Mexico, says “public lands are our way of life” in Montana. “It’s not just Yellowstone and Glacier,” he adds. “It’s also the BLM

[Bureau of Land Management] and Forest Service areas where a kid fills their first tag, a lake in the Beartooths is the perfect picnic spot, and the trail just down the road helps you clear your head after a long workday. Public lands must remain public, and the federal government has a responsibility to manage and ensure access to those lands.”

Among the many sporting groups that support the legislation is the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), which points to the billions of dollars that hunting and fishing permits and equipment generate. An excise tax established in 1937 on firearms, ammunition and archery equipment has since generated \$17 billion for conservation and restoration projects.

Blake Henning, RMEF’s chief conservation officer, says his group had long ago taken a stand against the unrestricted transfer of federal land ownership to the states. “We don’t think the states have the resources to manage public lands,” he said. “And that’s important to us.”

Since 1984, RMEF and its partners have conserved or enhanced more than 9 million acres of North America’s “finest elk country.” Not only does RMEF want to stave off the transfer or loss of federal lands, it wants to conserve (and open access to) more public lands so state and federal agencies can continue to manage wildlife populations and maintain ecological balance without imposing more lotteries and waitlists for hunters.

Presidents and Precedent

Over the past eight years, two pieces of landmark bipartisan legislation have passed with overwhelming support from both sides of the aisle and under two opposing political parties.

The 2020 Great American Outdoors Act marked an historic investment in the protection and stewardship of public lands. Among other things, it permanently and fully funded the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a source of financing that has helped pay for the protection of natural areas across the United States.

The 2024 EXPLORE Act, which included the Outdoors for All Act, is vital for ensuring equitable access to parks and outdoor spaces. It allows tribal nations to directly access federal funding for conservation and provides essential resources for underserved communities.



THE TAKEAWAY: For most of our history and certainly in the past decade, under Republican and Democratic leadership, our country has found unity on this issue of shared outdoor spaces. Recent proposals to reduce America's public lands contradict and undermine what has been such an important unifying idea and would unravel previous administrations' responsiveness to the public will.



On the trails at Fishers Peak State near Trinidad Colorado. Photos, from top: Bergreen Photography, Jyotsna Bhamidipati

Power of Public Lands

Public lands are our great national unifier. Not only do they draw bipartisan support at the ballot box and in the halls of Congress; they also attract people of all ages, income levels, and interests; of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and from various regions of the country, both urban and rural.

No matter how they are used, public lands grace visitors with similar benefits. Hunters and hikers alike engage in physical exercise, commune with nature (and one another), and experience that elusive sense of awe.

“What’s often overlooked is that public lands aren’t just places we protect—they’re engines we can activate,” says Lucas St. Clair, chair of TPL’s National Board of Directors. “They support our physical and mental health. They power local economies through outdoor recreation. And they remind us that shared spaces can still unite a divided nation.

In a time when public lands are increasingly under threat, we need to protect and expand them, not shrink them.”

Polls and voting records make it abundantly clear that Americans not only oppose reducing the public land we already have, they are willing to invest in maintaining, improving, and expanding them.

As a nation, we must meet the challenge of connecting everyone to the outdoors. We can do that by protecting the federal lands we currently have and then building on that conservation legacy. Newly protected landscapes will fuel local economies and inspire Americans of all backgrounds to pursue healthful experiences in the great outdoors. Now, more than ever, we need more public land, not less.



Camping in North of Park Rapids, Minnesota. Photo: Andy Richter

**Trust for Public Land is a national nonprofit
that works to connect everyone to
the benefits and joys of the outdoors.**

tpl.org



The Wolcott Community Forest is primarily used for hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, and bird watching. Photo: Chris Bennett



**TRUST FOR
PUBLIC
LAND®**

National Office
23 Geary Street
Suite 1000
San Francisco, CA 94108
415.495.4014

**Office of Federal
Relations**
100 M Street SE
Suite 925
Washington, DC 20003
202.543.7552

**Office of the
President**
1410 Grant Street
Suite D210
Denver, CO 80203
303.837.1414