



CONSERVING AND RESTORING AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

2021

A preliminary report to the National Climate Task Force recommending a ten-year, locally led campaign to conserve and restore the lands and waters upon which we all depend, and that bind us together as Americans.

Represented Agencies



U.S. Department of the Interior



U.S. Department of Agriculture



U.S. Department of Commerce



Council on Environmental Quality

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Envisioning America the Beautiful

“Positive, bipartisan, community-driven conservation efforts are already happening in our community. I pledge to continue to pull stakeholders together—recognizing this goal will take action at the neighborhood, community, state, and national level. Together, we can and must protect nature for generations to come.”—**Letter from more than 70 mayors**

“...We support 30 by 30 policies that recognize hunting and fishing as well-managed and sustainable activities that are in harmony with other management goals. Maintaining the sense of connection to our abundant resources and unrivaled natural beauty that these activities provide is essential to ensuring we have natural resource and biodiversity stewards for the next century, just as we have had in the past.”—**Hunt Fish 30x30**

“We view the intent of...30 by 30...as an opportunity to build durable conservation, outdoor recreation, equitable access to the outdoors, and climate resiliency outcomes that are crucial to our industry and our constituents.”—**Outdoor Alliance, Outdoor Industry Association, The Conservation Alliance**

"All communities should have equitable access to nearby green space, the ability to reach it, and features that honor and welcome diverse languages, inclusive histories, and uses of parkland. Natural areas and natural resources should be managed inclusively and locally, reflecting the communities they serve, with co-management by Indigenous and tribal nations."—**Hispanic Access Foundation**

“Traditional mechanisms of land protection like permanent acquisition, easement or federal designation will rightfully play a role in achieving 30 by 30. At the same time, over-reliance on these tools, or an insistence that these mechanisms are the only way to protect land fails to recognize the contributions to conservation of those already on the land. Working landscapes are the cornerstones of communities and functional ecosystems in the West. They are disappearing and taking nature with them as they go.”—**Western Landowners Alliance**

“...the Council stands ready to assist the Administration in implementing the Executive Order and engaging impacted native communities. This includes promoting fishing practices in line with sustainability and local island culture, supporting international agreements, protecting essential habitat, developing underutilized or underrepresented fisheries, allow fair and equitable access to participate in management processes, promoting a ‘bottom-up’ approach to resource management, and optimizing sustainable use of resources through its management plans.”—**Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council**

“We’re working to ensure 30x30 is built on the needs of the people – those who live closest to, and are most dependent on, these lands and waters, as well as those who have been disproportionately burdened by nature loss and lack of access to the benefits of nature. We must also ensure that what we protect is preserved as a network of linked habitat, including both large-scale landscapes and small parks, so species are able to migrate and otherwise move around in response to climate change and other shifts.”—**The Wilderness Society**

“Tribal Nations are key to the success of the 30x30 policy initiative in the U.S. as they are intrinsically linked, presently and historically, to existing and prospective protected areas. Tribal Nations are the original stewards of these lands and waters and have been the most effective managers and protectors of biodiversity since time immemorial....The 30x30 policy serves as a vitally important opportunity to safeguard the environment, Tribal cultural values, strengthen the Nation-to-Nation relationship, and uphold Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.”—**Letter from Tribal Leaders and Tribal organization leaders**

“...our nation’s farmers, ranchers, and foresters [are] essential allies in the effort to reach the 30x30 goals for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation. The lands that they manage are critical for wildlife habitat, carbon sequestration, food security, clean water, and rural prosperity....To be successful, these policies must embrace USDA’s legacy of voluntary, incentive-based, and locally led conservation and be strategically targeted.”—**American Farmland Trust**

"Protecting public lands and increasing representation, meaningful participation, quality, and access to the outdoors must go hand in hand. President Biden's recent commitment to '30x30' is an important step in that direction. Conserving more public lands and rivers will give more Black people a chance to reconnect and revel in nature. Protecting lands and waters near Black communities will also help ensure that Black people have cleaner air to breathe and safer drinking water. Our planet needs our collective stewardship."—**Outdoor Afro**

“To succeed requires better science and large-scale spatial planning to identify, conserve, restore and protect climate-resilient habitats. It must include sustainable resource management backed by robust public policies and funding to address systemic changes in different geographies and communities.”—**The Nature Conservancy**

“Counties recognize that comprehensive land use planning and growth management are central to our social and economic stability. How we use our land directly affects our ability to accommodate development, protect valuable natural resources, minimize pollution, preserve the cultural and historical character of our community, and maintain a high quality of life for current and future residents.”—**Chair of National Association of Counties’ Environment, Energy and Land Use Steering Committee**

"We applaud this ambitious goal and the attention it brings to the power of nature-based climate solutions. Natural resource professionals are key allies in tackling climate change and improving the overall health and resilience of ecosystems across public and private lands."—**Society of American Foresters, Association of Consulting Foresters, Society for Range Management, The Wildlife Society**

“By protecting at least 30% of the U.S. ocean by 2030—a commitment that is supported by four out of five American voters—the U.S. can ensure that our coastal communities and economies thrive, that our ocean life is protected, and that our ocean is given a chance to adapt to climate change and ocean acidification.”—**National Ocean Protection Coalition**

“Comprised of both land sector practitioners and senior advisors to the governors, the U.S. Climate Alliance would welcome the opportunity to support federal 30x30 efforts by facilitating sustained collaboration with the states – at a technical and political level – to inform robust, integrated federal and state 30x30 strategies.”—**U.S. Climate Alliance, representing a bipartisan coalition of two dozen U.S. governors**

Letter to America

As we write this, America is engaged in an all-hands-on-deck effort to defeat a deadly pandemic and tackle the climate crisis. We are proud to be a part of a team that is delivering relief to families in need, helping businesses weather the economic storm, and ensuring that millions of Americans receive vaccine shots each day.

The road to a full recovery remains steep, but President Biden is determined to lead America to new heights. He has laid out a vision and a plan for building back better that will repower America with clean energy, reduce greenhouse gas emissions at home and abroad, create millions of good-paying jobs, and—importantly—conserve and restore the lands and waters that support and sustain us.

President Biden has challenged all of us as Americans to join together in pursuit of a goal of conserving at least 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030. The ambition of this goal reflects the urgency of the challenges we face: the need to do more to safeguard the drinking water, clean air, food supplies, and wildlife upon which we all depend; the need to fight climate change with the natural solutions that our forests, agricultural lands, and the ocean provide; and the need to give every child in America the chance to experience the wonders of nature.

The President's national conservation goal also provides an opportunity to better honor and support the people and communities who serve as stewards of our lands and waters. Rather than simply measuring conservation progress by national parks, wilderness lands, and marine protected areas in the care of the government, the President's vision recognizes and celebrates the voluntary conservation efforts of farmers, ranchers, and forest owners; the leadership of sovereign Tribal Nations in caring for lands, waters, and wildlife; the contributions and stewardship traditions of America's hunters, anglers, and fishing communities; and the vital importance of investing in playgrounds, trails, and open space in park-deprived communities. The President's challenge is a call to action to support locally led conservation and restoration efforts of all kinds and all over America, wherever communities wish to safeguard the lands and waters they know and love. Doing so will not only protect our lands and waters but also boost our economy and support jobs nationwide.

The central recommendation of this report, which we submit to the National Climate Task Force, is that the pursuit of a decade-long national conservation effort be faithful to eight core principles. These principles—which include a commitment to collaboration, support for voluntary and locally led conservation, and honoring of Tribal sovereignty and private property rights—are essential ingredients to building and maintaining broad support, enthusiasm, and trust for this effort. These principles are also indispensable to achieving durable outcomes that meaningfully improve the lives of Americans.

This report is only the starting point on the path to fulfilling the conservation vision that President Biden has outlined. Where this path leads over the next decade will be determined not by our agencies, but by the ideas and leadership of local communities. It is our job to listen, learn, and provide support along the way to help strengthen economies and pass on healthy lands, waters, and wildlife for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Deb Haaland
Secretary of the Interior

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture

Gina M. Raimondo
Secretary of Commerce

Brenda Mallory
Chair, Council on Environmental Quality

Introduction

This report and the recommendations that follow are anchored in a simple truth: nature is essential to the health, well-being, and prosperity of every family and every community in America.

Since before America's founding, the health and productivity of the continent's lands and waters supported an abundance of human life and activity. From the bounty of the Great Plains and vast coastal forests to the high deserts of the Southwest and beyond, Native peoples built some of the most enduring and advanced civilizations on Earth. Many hundreds of Indian Tribes lived sustainably on the lands for millennia.

The promise of arable and productive land fueled centuries of migration to America's shores, bringing fortune-seekers and refugees who sought a better life, and also millions of women, men, and children who were captured and forced into generations of slavery and oppression. As the Industrial Age dawned, the new nation's coal, oil, minerals, and timber powered fast-growing industries. America's rich seas—and the cod, salmon, lobster, and other seafood they supplied—became the engine for the most productive and profitable fisheries on the planet. Farmers, ranchers, and forest owners have built vibrant rural economies that supply food and fiber to the world, while also developing strong and lasting stewardship traditions that are a proud cornerstone of America's conservation heritage.

Over the past century, the breathtaking beauty of the American landscapes and coastlines emerged as their own economic engine, attracting visitors from around the globe to the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and the country's unparalleled parks, monuments, and public lands and waters. Outdoor recreation contributes an estimated \$460 billion to the nation's economy, with mayors and local leaders recognizing parks, beaches, and open spaces as indispensable infrastructure for livable and prosperous communities, for purifying air and drinking water, and in defending against the impacts of climate change.¹

Often, our nation's lands and waters have been venues of struggle and injustice. For well over a century, the U.S. Government waged war against Native peoples, taking their lands, killing their sacred wildlife, implementing brutal assimilation policies, and making and breaking promises. The horrors of the Civil War are still etched in the American landscape, reminders of the costs and consequences of slavery, racism, and division.

At their best, however, America's lands and waters are places where Americans find unity and forge common bonds. Over the past year, in particular, America the Beautiful has been a source of strength, comfort, and inspiration for a nation battling a deadly pandemic. Parks, playgrounds, riverfronts, and open spaces offered refuge to families seeking fresh air and a safe place to unwind.

The past year has deepened the love and appreciation that many people in our country feel for nature, and for the work that past generations have done to conserve natural places and wildlife for us to enjoy. It has also, however, brought into focus three problems that threaten the lands, waters, and wildlife upon which we depend:

- **The disappearance of nature:** Both globally and nationally, scientists are sounding the alarm about a catastrophic extinction crisis that threatens the biodiversity of our planet and the

health of the natural systems that supply our food, water, and other resources.² In the U.S., approximately 12,000 wildlife species need conservation assistance to avoid the threat of extinction.³ The disappearance of bees and other pollinators is reducing crop yields and threatens food security.⁴ Already, there are three billion fewer birds in North America than there were 50 years ago.⁵ Critical ocean habitats are declining, including an estimated 90 percent loss of live corals in the Florida Keys over the past 40 years and up to a 90 percent loss of bull kelp off of the northern coast of California in less than 10 years.⁶ Roughly half of the riparian ecosystems and wetlands in the lower 48 States have already been lost, while more than 17,000 square miles of rangeland and farmland were lost to development or fragmented in the last two decades.⁷

- **Climate change:** The nature crisis is exacerbated by climate change, which is rapidly altering ecosystems on land and water. Ocean waters are warming, causing sea level rise, species migration, and altering circulation patterns.⁸ Ocean acidification and deoxygenation due to climate change pose significant threats to many marine species that sustain ocean life as we know it, such as seagrasses, krill, and corals.⁹ Climate change is contributing to historic droughts and floods, more frequent and intense wildfires and natural disasters, and the spread of invasive species.¹⁰ The impacts of climate change on habitat are forcing some wildlife to new areas to survive, while squeezing other species closer to extinction.¹¹ These trends are predicted to continue, disrupting the balance of nature across the country.
- **Inequitable access to the outdoors:** As a result of discrimination and segregation in housing, transportation, conservation, and natural resource policy, communities of color and low-income communities have disproportionately less access to nature's benefits, such as clean water, clean air, and access to nature.¹² These same communities, meanwhile, shoulder a disproportionate share of the costs of nature's decline, including more pollution nearby, loss of subsistence fishing and hunting, and encroaching industrial development.¹³ An estimated 100 million Americans do not have a park within a ten-minute walk of their home.¹⁴ In too many neighborhoods and communities across America, families are finding too few close-to-home opportunities to safely enjoy the outdoors.

Together, these three issues pose grave risks to the abundance, resilience, and accessibility of the natural resources that are at the foundation of America's economy and well-being. These challenges, however, also present opportunities. Restoring forests to a more resilient condition creates jobs and reduces the threat of catastrophic wildfire. Restoring and maintaining healthy marine ecosystems supports fisheries and recreation. Building and improving parks in underserved neighborhoods improves public health, reduces temperatures on hot days, and creates joy and opportunity. Providing incentives for voluntary conservation practices rewards ranchers and farmers for being good stewards of working lands, waters, and wildlife habitat.

As the country works to recover and rebuild from the coronavirus pandemic and fully address the climate crisis, now is the time to develop and pursue a locally led, nationally scaled effort to conserve, connect, and restore the lands, waters, and wildlife upon which we all depend. The America the Beautiful campaign recommended and outlined by this report is inspired by President Biden's ten-year conservation challenge, builds on the nation's proud and collaborative stewardship traditions, and strives to give every person in America—present and future—the chance to experience the freedoms, joys, bounties, and opportunities that the nation's rich and

vibrant lands and waters provide. Rising to meet this conservation challenge will improve the nation's resilience against climate change and strengthen the foundation of America's economy.

President Biden's Challenge

President Biden and Vice President Harris wasted no time in mobilizing their administration to confront the environmental challenges of our time, and to harness the economic opportunities that will come from addressing them.

On January 27, 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order 14008, *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, which launched an all-of-government effort to confront climate change, repower America's economy with clean energy, and create millions of jobs. The President's directive articulates a clear and powerful vision for the role that the nation's lands and waters can play in achieving these goals:

It is the policy of my Administration to put a new generation of Americans to work conserving our public lands and waters. The Federal Government must protect America's natural treasures, increase reforestation, improve access to recreation, and increase resilience to wildfires and storms, while creating well-paying union jobs for more Americans, including more opportunities for women and people of color in occupations where they are underrepresented. America's farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners have an important role to play in combating the climate crisis and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, by sequestering carbon in soils, grasses, trees, and other vegetation and sourcing sustainable bioproducts and fuels. Coastal communities have an essential role to play in mitigating climate change and strengthening resilience by protecting and restoring coastal ecosystems, such as wetlands, seagrasses, coral and oyster reefs, and mangrove and kelp forests, to protect vulnerable coastlines, sequester carbon, and support biodiversity and fisheries.¹⁵

The President's directive recognizes the opportunities that America's lands and waters offer and outlines a historic and ambitious challenge to the nation. The U.S. should aim to conserve "at least 30 percent of our lands and waters by 2030."¹⁶ This challenge is the first-ever national goal for the stewardship of nature in America. Notably, the President's challenge specifically emphasizes the notion of "conservation" of the nation's natural resources (rather than the related but different concept of "protection" or "preservation") recognizing that many uses of our lands and waters, including of working lands, can be consistent with the long-term health and sustainability of natural systems. The 30 percent goal also reflects the need to support conservation and restoration efforts across all lands and waters, not solely on public lands, including by incentivizing voluntary stewardship efforts on private lands and by supporting the efforts and visions of States and Tribal Nations.

The goal of conserving 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030 echoes the recommendations of scientists who encourage world leaders to work together to conserve or restore a substantial portion of our planet to stem the extinction crisis, safeguard water and food supplies, absorb carbon pollution, and reduce the risks of future pandemics and other global health emergencies.¹⁷ As a long-standing global leader in conservation, the U.S. is among the top four countries in the world in the amount of remaining intact natural lands, has already established marine protected areas in approximately one quarter of U.S. waters, has a strong stewardship tradition on working

lands among ranchers, farmers, and forest owners, and has been a pioneer in the management of fish and wildlife.¹⁸ By supporting and accounting for existing and future conservation of public lands and waters, as well as collaborative and voluntary conservation efforts on working lands, Tribal lands, and State, local, and private lands, the U.S. is well positioned to achieve a 30 percent goal over the next decade.

Recognizing America's long-standing leadership in the conservation of our land, water, and wildlife, President Biden's E.O. 14008 directs the administration to develop and pursue strategies that reflect our nation's perspectives and priorities. In particular, E.O. 14008 directs the Secretary of the Interior—in coordination with the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce, and the Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality—to deliver this report to the National Climate Task Force with input “from State, local, Tribal, and territorial officials, agricultural and forest landowners, fishermen, and other key stakeholders.”¹⁹ It also establishes the need for clear and transparent principles to steer the work, stating “the report shall propose guidelines for determining whether lands and waters qualify for conservation, and it shall establish mechanisms to measure progress toward the 30-percent goal.”²⁰

This report is a first step toward developing a national conservation effort that reflects the President's ambition, his determination to combat the climate crisis and address environmental injustice while also growing our economy, and his commitment to listening, learning, and supporting the extraordinary conservation work that is already underway across America.

Early Listening and Learning

Since the issuance of E.O. 14008, the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) within the U.S. Department of Commerce, and Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) have gathered input from a wide range of stakeholders on how to develop an ambitious and inclusive national conservation effort that honors America's conservation traditions. Senior agency officials participated in conversations with and received input from Tribal leaders, governors and their staff, Members of Congress and their staff, county officials, State elected officials, State fish and wildlife agencies, leaders on equity and justice in conservation policy, environmental advocacy organizations, hunting and fishing organizations, farming and ranching organizations, trade associations, forestry representatives, outdoor recreation businesses and users, the seafood industry, and others. The outreach conducted included virtual meetings and listening sessions, and a review of written letters and submissions.

This report is also informed by efforts in several states that are already moving forward with—or are laying the groundwork to pursue—their own conservation goals. California is embarking upon a stakeholder engagement process to inform its goal to conserve 30 percent of lands and coastal waters in California by 2030.²¹ The Maine Climate Council added a goal of conserving 30 percent of the land in Maine by 2030 in its comprehensive climate change plan.²² Hawaii launched an effort that focuses on effective management of 30 percent of nearshore waters and priority watershed forests by 2030.²³ Legislation has been introduced in South Carolina, New York, Nevada, and Michigan to pursue similar pathways.²⁴ More than 70 mayors from across the nation have written

in support of locally led conservation efforts in pursuit of conserving 30 percent of our nation's lands and waters by 2030.²⁵

In gathering input to inform this report and its preliminary recommendations, some common perspectives and values emerged across a broad range of stakeholders. There was, for example, universal appreciation of the value of America's lands and waters—in the form of working farms, ranches, and forests; freshwater and saltwater fishing areas; native hunting grounds; riparian habitats; wildlife refuges; urban parks; and more. Stakeholders described a feeling of responsibility to pass these lands and waters, traditions, cultures, and opportunities in the outdoors along to future generations.

Stakeholders also universally emphasized the importance of ongoing dialogue, engagement, and collaboration in developing approaches for conserving America's lands and waters. There was a recognition that many Americans, including communities of color, low-income communities, and Tribal nations, have often been excluded from conservation, development, and natural resource decisions and investments. There was also an emphasis on the importance of science in guiding good land and ocean management decisions, and of the value, breadth, and effectiveness of many existing conservation tools. Stakeholders across the board—from agricultural and fishing organizations to leaders who focus on equity and justice in conservation policy—also generously offered to provide ongoing input over the coming years to help guide effective, equitable, and enduring outcomes.

There were several areas in which stakeholders offered divergent perspectives or raised important questions and concerns. There were differing views, for example, of how broadly or narrowly to define "conservation" and how to measure progress toward a 2030 conservation goal. There were concerns raised about the impacts of conserving lands and waters on future abilities to mine critical minerals, conduct active forest management, harvest fish, and other activities—important considerations that underscore the value of making balanced land and ocean management decisions through public processes that are informed by the best available scientific information and accurate maps. Other discussions with stakeholders indicated the importance of working collaboratively with private landowners, Tribal Nations, State agencies, fishing communities, and others, and the need to affirm that private property rights will be honored and protected.

Input from stakeholders also conveyed important regional, State, and local considerations. Because Federal agencies manage significant expanses of public lands in the West, the Federal Government's conservation efforts and resources have, historically, been more focused on that region. Elected officials from Alaska, for example, noted that no State currently has more protected public lands. Ocean stakeholders also noted that many of the nation's marine protected areas are located in the Western Pacific. The comments spoke to a need to recognize the unique blend of priorities, threats, conservation tools, and opportunities across regions and ecosystem types, such as through the voluntary efforts of ranchers who are conserving the prairies and wetlands of the Midwest, forest owners who are conserving the rich biodiversity of the Southeast, and fishers who are conserving important fish habitats in the Pacific Northwest. Finally, the early listening and learning conducted for this report underscored the extraordinary depth of experience and passion the U.S. has demonstrated in stewarding the nation's natural resources, across regions, states, and stakeholders. This knowledge, ingenuity, and commitment offer great promise that the nation can, over the next decade, make great strides toward the President's challenge to conserve and restore the health, productivity, and connectedness of the lands and waters upon which every community depends.

Principles for a Locally Led Effort to Conserve and Restore America the Beautiful

Decades of land and water stewardship by ranchers, farmers, fishers, hunters, private property owners, conservation organizations, Tribal Nations, territories, State and local governments, and others have demonstrated that the most effective and enduring conservation strategies are those that reflect the priorities, needs, and perspectives of the families and communities that know, live, work, and care for the lands and waters.

Science can provide information about the places that are most rich in wildlife, that store the most carbon, or that are most rare or imperiled, but data alone should not be the sole guide or measure of success for how the nation protects, conserves, or restores its lands and waters. While the U.S. has a remarkable record of success in safeguarding iconic lands, species-rich waters, and at-risk wildlife, the Federal Government has also caused pain along the way: dispossessing Tribal Nations and Indigenous people of their lands and infringing upon their subsistence rights; evicting private landowners to create national parks; imposing segregationist policies on public lands and beaches; ignoring the contributions of communities of color and underrepresented communities in the preservation of national resources; and more. A renewed national commitment to land and water conservation can and must strive to honor the needs and priorities of all communities in America, help address the climate crisis, and help to strengthen the foundation of the nation's economy.

In pursuing the President's goal of conserving and restoring America the Beautiful, this report recommends adhering to eight key principles that will be critical to the success and durability of the effort. These equally important principles reflect a broad consensus of views and recommendations among the many stakeholders, agencies, and Tribes consulted in developing this report.

Principle 1: Pursue a Collaborative and Inclusive Approach to Conservation

The spirit of collaboration and shared purpose should animate all aspects of America's nature conservation and restoration efforts over the next decade. The U.S. should seek to build upon the myriad examples where collaboration and consensus-building have led to significant conservation outcomes. Just last year, Congress passed the Great American Outdoors Act on a bipartisan basis, providing the single largest investment in public lands and waters in decades. In the Crown of the Continent in Montana, the northern Everglades in Florida, the Prairie Potholes of the upper Midwest and beyond, farmers, ranchers, and sportsmen and sportswomen have teamed up to conserve some of our nation's most cherished landscapes and watersheds. From Bristol Bay, Alaska to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands to the coral reefs in the Gulf of Mexico, fishers, Indigenous communities, and local businesses have worked together to conserve the health and productivity of unparalleled marine resources.

Principle 2: Conserve America’s Lands and Waters for the Benefit of All People

The conservation and restoration of natural places in America should yield meaningful benefits in the lives of all Americans, and these benefits should be equitably distributed. The conservation value of a particular place should not be measured solely in biological terms, but also by its capacity to purify drinking water, to cool the air for a nearby neighborhood, to provide a safe outdoor escape for a community that is park-deprived, to help America prepare for and respond to the impacts of climate change, or to unlock access for outdoor recreation, hunting, angling, and beyond. Centering this effort on people also means recognizing the oversized contributions that farmers, ranchers, forest owners, fishers, hunters, rural communities, and Tribal Nations already make in safeguarding wildlife and open spaces for the benefit of the rest of the country, and therefore recognizing and encouraging these remarkable efforts.

Principle 3: Support Locally Led and Locally Designed Conservation Efforts

Every community in the United States has its own relationship with nearby lands and waters, and every community is working in some way to conserve the places that matter the most to it. The Federal Government should do all it can to help local communities achieve their own conservation priorities and vision. Locally and regionally designed approaches can play a key role in conserving resources and be tailored to meet the priorities and needs of local communities and the nation.

Conservation and restoration efforts should also be regionally balanced. For example, instead of focusing land conservation efforts primarily on western public lands—as has been a past practice of Federal agencies—agencies should support collaborative conservation efforts across the country on private, State, local, Tribal, and territorial lands. Similarly, marine conservation efforts should reflect regional priorities and seek to achieve balanced stewardship across U.S. ocean areas.

Principle 4: Honor Tribal Sovereignty and Support the Priorities of Tribal Nations

Tribal Nations have sovereign authority over their lands and waters, possess long-standing treaty hunting and fishing rights on and off reservations, and have many cultural, natural, and sacred sites on national public lands and the ocean. Efforts to conserve and restore America’s lands and waters must involve regular, meaningful, and robust consultation with Tribal Nations. These efforts must respect and honor Tribal sovereignty, treaty and subsistence rights, and freedom of religious practices. Federal agencies should seek to support and help advance the priorities of American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Indigenous leaders, including those related to sustainable land management and the conservation of natural, cultural, and historical resources.

Principle 5: Pursue Conservation and Restoration Approaches that Create Jobs and Support Healthy Communities

Conserving and restoring the nation's lands and waters can yield immense economic benefits.²⁶ A healthy ocean, for example, supports productive fisheries and vibrant working waterfronts. Reducing wildfire risks and restoring ecological balance to the nation's forests creates jobs in rural communities. Conserving water and restoring ecosystems supports the reliability of the water supply, resiliency to drought, and resistance to flooding. Conserving fish and wildlife habitat and improving access for hunting and fishing spurs the sale of gear, boats, travel, and outfitting. Creating more parks and tree cover in cities cools neighborhoods on dangerously hot days, saves money on utility bills, and improves human health and well-being. These are among the many ways that a locally driven, nationally scaled conservation campaign over the next decade can help lift America's economy, address environmental justice, and improve quality of life.

Principle 6: Honor Private Property Rights and Support the Voluntary Stewardship Efforts of Private Landowners and Fishers

There is a strong stewardship ethic among America's fishers, farmers, ranchers, forest owners, and other private landowners. U.S. working lands and waters give our nation food and fiber and keep rural and coastal communities healthy and prosperous. They are also integral to conserving functioning habitats and connecting lands and waters across the country. Efforts to conserve and restore America's lands and waters must respect the rights of private property owners. Such efforts must also build trust among all communities and stakeholders, including by recognizing and rewarding the voluntary conservation efforts of private landowners and the science-based approaches of fishery managers. President Biden has recognized and honored the leadership role that farmers, ranchers, forest owners, and fishers already play in the conservation of the nation's lands, waters, and wildlife, and has made clear that his administration will support voluntary stewardship efforts that are already underway across the country's lands and waters. This commitment includes a clear recognition that maintaining ranching in the West—on both public lands and private lands—is essential to maintaining the health of wildlife, the prosperity of local economies, and an important and proud way of life.

Principle 7: Use Science as a Guide

Scientists have made remarkable gains in understanding the complicated natural systems that support human communities, particularly in the face of climate change. Studies of the carbon sequestration potential of lands and the ocean; of biodiversity loss, ecosystem services, and the movement and migration of wildlife; and of air and water pollution are part of a large and growing body of scientific information that can help guide decisions about how the nation should manage, connect, and conserve its lands and waters. Conservation efforts are more successful and effective when rooted in the best available science and informed by the recommendations of top scientists and subject matter experts. Transparent and accessible information will increase shared understanding and help build trust among stakeholders and the public. The use of Indigenous and Traditional Ecological Knowledge can complement and integrate these efforts.

Principle 8: Build on Existing Tools and Strategies with an Emphasis on Flexibility and Adaptive Approaches

The U.S. has long been a global innovator in natural resource conservation and stewardship, from inventing the idea of national parks to forging market-based strategies for slowing the loss of the nation's essential wetlands. Though President Biden's national conservation goal is ambitious, it can be achieved using the wide array of existing tools and strategies that Tribal Nations, territories, State and local governments, private landowners, non-profit organizations, fishing communities, Congress, and Federal agencies have already developed and deployed effectively. These tools range from grant programs for local parks and coastal restoration projects, to conservation programs on working lands, to the designation of locally crafted recreation and conservation areas on public lands and waters, to using the stakeholder-driven processes for marine fisheries management and sanctuary designations, among other examples. Agencies should support the flexible application of tools, innovation in designing new approaches, and, where appropriate, the use of adaptive management to help adjust to a changing climate, shifting pressures, and new science.

Measuring Progress for Nature and People

Executive Order 14008 sets a goal of conserving 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030 and directs DOI, in coordination with other agencies, to establish mechanisms to measure progress.²⁷ Each year, the Secretary of the Interior is to provide reports to the National Climate Task Force with updates on this progress.

This discussion should start with a recognition that, at its core, President Biden's conservation vision is about doing better for people, for fish and wildlife, and for the planet. There is no single metric—including a percentage target—that could fully measure progress toward the fulfillment of those interrelated goals. Similarly, there is no single database that could capture the texture and nuance of the economic and social values of every restoration or conservation action.

With these caveats, transparent and measurable goals for conservation can be a helpful tool to set a baseline, understand overall trends, and catalyze the collective action across the country that is needed to address the urgency of the climate and biodiversity crises.

The question of what should "count" came up regularly in the early listening sessions, followed by various perspectives on how to define conservation on the land and in the ocean. Many stakeholders recommended that a continuum of effective conservation measures be acknowledged, departing from stricter definitions of "protection" that do not recognize the co-benefits that working lands or areas managed for multiple use may offer. Other feedback encouraged the administration to focus on the quality and durability of conservation outcomes, noting that not every parcel of land or water is equal when it comes to enhancing nature's contributions to people, ecosystem health, biodiversity, or the sequestration of carbon.

In light of the above, this report recommends that the U.S. Government take two complementary steps to measure and report upon conservation progress in the United States: the creation of an

American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas that collects baseline information on the amount and types of lands and waters that are being managed for conservation and restoration purposes, and the publication of annual America the Beautiful updates on the health of nature in America and on the Federal Government's efforts to support locally led conservation and restoration efforts.

American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas

To develop and track a clear baseline of information on lands and waters that have already been conserved or restored, the U.S. Government should establish an interagency working group of experts to build an American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas. The Atlas would be an accessible, updated, and comprehensive tool through which to measure the progress of conservation, stewardship, and restoration efforts across the United States in a manner that reflects the goals and principles outlined in this report.

The interagency working group—led by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and NOAA, in partnership with the Council on Environmental Quality, and other land and ocean management agencies at the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Interior—would be tasked with gathering input from the public, States, Tribal Nations, a wide range of stakeholders, and scientists to assess existing databases, and to develop an inclusive, collaborative approach to capture and reflect conservation and restoration of lands and waters. The group, for example, could consider how to reflect State- and county-presented information, how to capture conservation outcomes on multiple use lands and ocean areas, and how to protect the privacy of landowners, and sensitive or proprietary information.

The U.S. Government has existing tools to draw from in developing the American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas, including USDA's Natural Resources Inventory and Forest Inventory and Analysis programs, the USGS's Protected Area Database (PAD), and NOAA's Restoration Atlas and Marine Protected Areas Inventory, among many others, but they should be refined, coordinated, and supplemented to better reflect the state of conservation in America. For example, the PAD contains useful, but incomplete, information about the conservation status of Federal, State, and local government lands and private lands subject to conservation easements.²⁸ It is an aggregated database built through contributions from States and partners throughout the nation; however, the PAD does not, for example, currently include information about the conservation strategies of Tribal Nations, and many other effective conservation tools that farmers, ranchers, and other private landowners are deploying to conserve the health of working lands.

The American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas would aggregate information from these databases and others, supplement this information with information from the States, Tribes, public, stakeholders, and scientists, and provide a baseline assessment of how much land, ocean, and other waters in the U.S. are currently conserved or restored, including, but not necessarily limited to:

- The contributions of farmers, ranchers, forest owners, and private landowners through effective and voluntary conservation measures;
- The contributions of Fishery Management Councils and their conservation measures under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act; and
- The existing protections and designations on lands and waters across Federal, State, local, Tribal, and private lands and waters across the nation.

America the Beautiful Updates

To provide clear updates on the progress being made to support conservation and restoration efforts across the country, the Department of the Interior, in coordination with the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce through NOAA, and the Council on Environmental Quality, should publish an annual, publicly available America the Beautiful report.

The first report, to be public by the end of 2021, should include:

- Progress on the areas of collaboration outlined in the next section of this report;
- An assessment of land-cover changes, including loss of open space; and
- A review of the condition of fish and wildlife habitats and populations.

Together and apart, the American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas and the America the Beautiful updates will provide a more comprehensive and inclusive accounting for the state of lands, waters, and wildlife in America, as well as document how local, State, national, and Tribal governments; private landowners; and other partners are working to conserve and restore lands and waters.

Recommendations for Early Focus and Progress in the America the Beautiful Campaign

There are hundreds of locally supported conservation and restoration efforts already underway in communities across America—in line with the principles and vision outlined above—that can be advanced over the coming decade to strengthen our economy, fight climate change, address environmental injustice, and improve outcomes for fish, wildlife, and people. Above all else, a national campaign to conserve and restore America the Beautiful should celebrate, leverage and enhance all of this remarkable work, and seek to inspire others with stories of on-the-ground collaborations and successes.

To better support and encourage locally led conservation and restoration efforts across the country, however, it will be important for Federal agencies to identify areas of priority and focus for investment and collaboration. This report identifies six recommended areas of early focus for the Biden-Harris administration's efforts to conserve and restore America the Beautiful. These areas of focus are intended to forge common purpose, support voluntary approaches to conservation, and reflect early inputs and ideas that elected officials, Tribal leaders, and stakeholders have lifted up as opportunities for successful collaboration. These recommendations are preliminary and not exhaustive. Additionally, this section primarily focuses on work that Federal agencies can do to encourage and advance locally supported conservation efforts across the nation. A successful effort will require a blend of innovative and lasting conservation work across Federal, State, local, private and Tribal lands and waters.

- **Create More Parks and Safe Outdoor Opportunities in Nature-Deprived Communities.** The Biden-Harris administration has made a historic commitment to ensure that 40 percent of the overall benefits from relevant Federal investments flow to disadvantaged communities.²⁹ In that spirit, the America the Beautiful campaign should support locally led conservation and park projects in communities that disproportionately lack access to nature and its benefits.

The Great American Outdoors Act, which Congress passed in 2020 on a bipartisan basis, could be among the tools used to address environmental injustice. The law provides dedicated annual funding for parks and open space projects across the country, including through Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) programs, such as the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP). The National Park Service, in particular, should strengthen and expand the ORLP program, which focuses on creating new parks and access to nature in historically underserved communities.

- **Support Tribally Led Conservation and Restoration Priorities.** Tribal governments have often struggled to access Federal funding and assistance to support their conservation efforts, either because they are not written into legislation that authorizes key Federal programs, or because they may not have capacity to navigate the bureaucracy to participate in the programs for which they are eligible. Federal agencies should review their most successful conservation programs, such as the LWCF and the National Marine Sanctuaries nominations process, to determine how to better include and support Tribal governments. This may include working with Congress to revise underlying statutes, or developing technical assistance and capacity-building grants to support Indigenous-led conservation efforts.

Additionally, Federal agencies should take steps to improve engagement with American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians on the care and management of public lands and waters, particularly regarding sacred and ceremonial sites, and trust and treaty rights. The Biden-Harris administration has committed to engaging in regular, meaningful, and robust consultation with Tribal Nations; this must include land management planning and relevant decision-making for public lands and waters.³⁰

Finally, the Federal Government should prioritize restoring Tribal homelands by improving the land into trust process. Tribes have time and time again proven to be the most effective stewards of natural resources.³¹

- **Expand Collaborative Conservation of Fish and Wildlife Habitats and Corridors.** Federal agencies should take several broadly supported steps to stem the decline of fish and wildlife populations and their habitats throughout the country. First, agencies can work with States, Tribes, local communities, and private landowners to establish and expand upon promising initiatives to conserve and restore wildlife migration corridors through incentives and local collaboration. The Trump administration launched a promising effort to enhance the winter range and migration corridor habitat of elk, deer, and pronghorn on DOI-managed lands.³² This initiative could be expanded to include other land managers, to build partnerships with working ranches and other landowners, and to conserve corridors and seasonal ranges for other species.

Second, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) should expand conservation efforts already identified through partnerships with external stakeholders, including fish passage projects in

the National Fish Habitat Action Plan, conservation of at-risk species identified in State Wildlife Action Plans, and bird habitat conservation through the Migratory Bird Joint Ventures. FWS should also work with States, local communities, and others to explore where there is support to enhance the National Wildlife Refuge System, which provides important anchors for wildlife conservation throughout the nation. The Biden-Harris administration welcomes Congressional efforts to support on-the-ground habitat restoration for at-risk species through collaboration with State fish and wildlife agencies.

Third, NOAA should expand the National Marine Sanctuaries System and National Estuarine Research Reserve System. Through broad public engagement, NOAA can establish national marine sanctuaries that protect natural and cultural marine and Great Lakes resources and promote sustainable uses. The process to establish new national marine sanctuaries and accompanying management plans has already begun for sites in Wisconsin and New York, and several other sites have been nominated for potential future designation.³³ Similarly, under authorities provided by the Coastal Zone Management Act, NOAA is exploring new designations for national estuarine research reserves in Connecticut, Wisconsin, and Louisiana.³⁴ If approved, they would join a network of coastal sites managed in partnership with coastal states and local partners for the protection and research of estuarine systems. In addition, NOAA's Restoration Center should expand its work to conserve and restore habitats—like wetlands, rivers, and coral reefs—to boost fish populations, recover threatened and endangered species, and support resilient coastal communities.³⁵

Finally, the United States boasts one of the most dynamic and innovative wild-capture fishery management systems in the world under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act. The management measures that are available to fisheries management authorities, such as gear-based restrictions and habitat-based measures, could be applied to achieve improved conservation outcomes that benefit the health of fisheries as well as other marine species and habitats. NOAA should work closely with regional fishery management councils to identify areas or networks of areas where their fisheries management efforts would support long-term conservation goals.

- **Increase Access for Outdoor Recreation.** Additional conservation can and should improve access for hunting, fishing, hiking, boating, and other forms of outdoor recreation. Improved access to public lands and waters—in an equitable, well-managed and sustainable manner—can broaden and deepen connections to nature and its benefits, and encourage the next generation of outdoor stewards. Hunters, anglers, and other outdoor enthusiasts have not only played a positive role in stewarding our nation's lands, waters, and wildlife, but they also generate significant economic benefits to local communities.

Federal land and coastal management agencies should expand support for voluntary programs that unlock access to the millions of acres of public lands that are currently inaccessible to the public.³⁶ The administration should also prioritize management planning that identifies lands and waters that are appropriate to be conserved and managed for outdoor recreation. In the ocean, ongoing mapping efforts will be important to managing for sustainable uses and should be continued.

Finally, the Biden-Harris administration welcomes efforts in Congress to support outdoor recreation, including appropriate designations to improve conservation and appreciation of lands and waters.

- **Incentivize and Reward the Voluntary Conservation Efforts of Fishers, Ranchers, Farmers, and Forest Owners.** Federal agencies can and should advance conservation by supporting programs that incentivize voluntary conservation efforts and provide new sources of income for American farmers, ranchers, and forest stewards. Healthy rural economies are a key component of keeping working lands healthy, productive, and whole.

The USDA has an array of programs that offer effective strategies for advancing conservation on working lands, such as the Working Lands for Wildlife initiative and the Conservation Reserve Program. The reauthorization of the Farm Bill in 2023 provides a tremendous opportunity for the USDA and Congress to improve the effectiveness of relevant programs to conserve working lands.

Similarly, the FWS should enhance support for voluntary conservation efforts by private landowners through initiatives such as Conservation Without Conflict, tools such as species credit trading (conservation banking) and Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

NOAA should continue its Species in the Spotlight initiative to provide immediate, targeted efforts to halt declines and stabilize populations of the species most at-risk of extinction in the near future, which could increase public awareness, marshal resources, and focus conservation actions, including through voluntary measures and public-private partnerships.

- **Create Jobs by Investing in Restoration and Resilience.** The Biden-Harris administration, through the American Jobs Plan, has proposed bold investments to restore our nation's lands, forests, wetlands, watersheds, and freshwater, coastal and ocean resources. The proposal includes putting a new, diverse generation of Americans to work through a Civilian Climate Corps that can help conserve and restore public lands and waters. The investments in restoration, reforestation, reclamation, and other activities that improve the function and form of our natural systems—from the Everglades and the Great Lakes to the Chesapeake Bay—will not only bolster our nation's resilience to extreme wildfires, sea level rise, droughts, storms, and other climate impacts, but they will also create a new pathway to good-paying union jobs and provide economic benefits to communities across the nation.

Finally, and importantly, all of these recommendations should serve as a starting point for additional public input and conversations to inform the nation's progress toward the President's goal for conservation over the next decade. Federal agencies should establish formal and informal venues by which Tribes, States, territories, stakeholders, and the American public can shape and advance these efforts. In addition to Tribal consultations and opportunities for public comment, the Biden-Harris administration should explore the formation of advisory councils, Federal-State and Federal-Tribal working groups, and other ways to engage stakeholders and the public.

Conclusion

President Biden's direction in E.O. 14008 to establish and pursue a national conservation goal over the next decade is a challenge that America is well-equipped to meet. America has had tremendous success in forging solutions to environmental problems and experience in harnessing and conserving the bounties of the natural world. The forests, rivers, coasts, deserts, mountains, and grasslands that previous generations have passed down are living testaments to the nation's collective capacity to safeguard the resources that not only power our prosperity but bind us as one people.

An America the Beautiful campaign—community-led and nationally scaled—is a fitting and needed response to the challenges of this moment. While the coronavirus pandemic inflicted tragedy, grief, and pain, the natural world offered peace, escape, and hope for many. Now, as the nation recovers and rebuilds, it is time to do right by the lands and waters that sustain every community in every part of the country: returning American wildlife to abundance; safeguarding the health and productivity of the nation's working lands and waters; giving every child the chance to play and explore in a safe, close-to-home park; honoring and supporting the natural and cultural resource priorities of Tribal Nations; and far more.

The President's goal of conserving 30 percent of America's lands and waters by 2030 is more than a number—it is a challenge to build on the nation's best conservation traditions, to be faithful to principles that reflect the country's values, and to improve the quality of Americans' lives—now and for decades to come.

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