

REPORT SEP 20, 2023

# Protecting Vulnerable Public Lands Could Address U.S. Outdoor Recreation Needs

New analysis illustrates how the Bureau of Land Management's proposed Public Lands Rule and related conservation actions can help bridge the nature gap for underserved communities and meet surging demand for parks and outdoor recreation.

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The sun rises over the Goose Neck of the Colorado River at Bears Ears National Monument in Moab, Utah. (Getty/Jon G. Fuller)

## Key Takeaways

- Demand for outdoor recreation has skyrocketed in recent years, with many parks becoming overcrowded. At the same time, communities of color and other historically marginalized groups are experiencing the impacts of long-standing inequities in nature access.
- New analysis shows how vulnerable public lands overseen by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) could help address nature access gaps, meet recreation demand, and relieve pressure on overcrowded parks. This analysis identified, among the lower 48 states, more than 20 million acres of unprotected BLM lands within 10 miles of the nation's most socially vulnerable and nature-deprived census tracts; nearly 35 million acres within 50 miles of a national park; and nearly 50 million acres within 25 miles of either a national or state park.
- This analysis and specific place-based examples highlighted here—from Nevada, New Mexico, and Arizona—suggest significant potential for BLM lands to improve nature access for communities with the greatest need, to meet recreation demand near popular and overcrowded parks, and to benefit visitors to state and national parks.
- The Biden administration can capitalize on this outdoor recreation opportunity through near-term policy action, including by finalizing a strong BLM Public Lands Rule, acting on ripe community-led conservation proposals, finalizing regulations limiting oil and gas conflicts, investing in recreation infrastructure and management, and tackling other barriers to equitable nature access.

## Introduction and summary

The Biden administration is poised to take historic action to protect America's lands and waters, making good on one of President Joe Biden's earliest commitments. With global crises hammering Earth's climate and biodiversity, President Biden pledged in January 2021 to dramatically increase the pace at which America protects treasured lands and waters. Through his America the Beautiful initiative, President Biden is charting a conservation agenda that also aims to support resilient local economies and address inequities that have left historically marginalized communities with less access to nature's benefits.<sup>1</sup>

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The Biden administration's Public Lands Rule, which would guide conservation of U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, is a lynchpin in this strategy. More than 213 million acres of BLM lands lack durable protection against extractive development<sup>2</sup>—an area larger than the states of Colorado, Arizona, and Nevada combined.<sup>3</sup> These areas represent America's most vulnerable public lands and President Biden's greatest single opportunity to secure an outdoor legacy for future generations.



“America’s natural wonders are our nation’s heart and soul ... They unite us. They inspire us. A birthright we pass down from generation to generation.”

– President Joe Biden

The proposed Public Lands Rule, released in March 2023, would not protect all of these lands. But finalizing and implementing a strong rule would help conserve and restore the very best lands for the long-term benefit of the United States, including families and individuals seeking places to camp, bike, hunt, climb, paddle, ski, walk, or otherwise recreate in nature. Meanwhile, a deliberate focus by the BLM on meeting growing outdoor recreation demand, including for communities underserved by access to parks and protected lands, could boost the public benefits of the agency’s conservation measures.

Drawing on new analysis conducted for the Center for American Progress by Conservation Science Partners, this report illustrates how conserving and investing in BLM lands could help substantially meet America’s growing outdoor recreation needs, relieve pressure on overcrowded parks, and close the nature gap for underserved communities.

## **America’s growing outdoor recreation needs and long-standing inequities**

The demand for outdoor recreation has seen unprecedented growth in recent years, with record numbers of people wanting to get outside and experience the country’s natural treasures.<sup>4</sup> At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the outdoors also served as an important refuge for people who sought the mental and physical health benefits of outdoor recreation.<sup>5</sup> Nationwide, outdoor recreation has grown almost 7 percent annually over the past five years.<sup>6</sup> BLM lands alone saw a 35 percent increase in visitation from 2015 to 2022, with more than two-thirds of that demand increase coming before the pandemic.

As outdoor recreation has grown, many visitors have found themselves unable to escape the overcrowding that has plagued some of America’s most popular and scenic places—affecting the visitor experience, damaging vulnerable ecosystems, and testing federal land management agencies’ financial capacity to upkeep highly trafficked landscapes. The high demand for accessing public lands has been evident to visitors in overflowing parking lots, timed trail passes, and long wait lines to get that perfect Instagram photo.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, campsites have been nearly impossible to snag, and those seeking serene oases have been met with densely packed trails. Moreover, overuse of lands is resulting in damaging biological impacts such as higher volumes of litter, hazardous offseason campfires, off-trail trampled vegetation, and more.<sup>8</sup>



Skyrocketing demand, overcrowding, and persistent inequities in nature access point to the need for the United States to secure and expand opportunities for all people to recreate outside.

Meanwhile, access to nature and outdoor recreation opportunities continue to be inequitably distributed. A 2020 report by CAP and the Hispanic Access Foundation found that 74 percent of communities of color in the contiguous United States live in nature-deprived areas—defined as areas experiencing above-average natural area loss—compared with just 23 percent of white communities.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, 70 percent of low-income communities across the country live in nature-deprived areas. Research on national park visitation also found evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing racial disparities in visitation, worsening underrepresentation, particularly for more distant national parks.<sup>10</sup>

#### OUTDOOR RECREATION: BY THE NUMBERS

**7%**

Annual growth of outdoor recreation over the past five years

**35%**

Increase in visitation to BLM lands from 2015 to 2022

**74%**

Share of communities of color in the contiguous United States living in areas experiencing above-average nature loss, compared with 23 percent of white communities

**70%**

Share of low-income communities across the country living in areas experiencing above-average nature loss

The inequitable access to natural places that marginalized communities experience—often due to historical discrimination, dispossession, and segregation—is sometimes referred to as the “nature gap.” Access to nature has well-documented, positive impacts, including reduced rates of chronic illness and mental health disorders and greater ability to mitigate the impacts of climate change, such as extreme heat. Yet these benefits are not being equitably shared by all communities as a result of the nature gap.<sup>11</sup>

## Conserved BLM public lands can help meet the growing need for outdoor access

Skyrocketing demand, overcrowding, and persistent inequities in nature access point to the need for the United States to secure and expand opportunities for all people to recreate outside. Currently unprotected public lands can be part of that solution.

Although less widely known than the agencies responsible for America’s national parks, wildlife refuges, or forests,<sup>12</sup> the Bureau of Land Management nonetheless oversees more land than any other public land manager. Approximately 245 million acres of BLM lands and waters, primarily in western



states and Alaska, cover a vast array of landscapes, from red rock canyons and sagebrush-covered plateaus to coastal bluffs and rivers teeming with salmon.

As outdoor recreation has increased nationally, recreation use on BLM public lands has also been on a growth trajectory. Figure 1 shows more than two decades of steady growth in popular recreation activities

—including hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, biking, and boating—on BLM lands. In fiscal year 2021, the BLM recorded more than 80 million visits to its lands nationwide, contributing an estimated \$11.4 billion in economic activity.<sup>13</sup> And given limitations in data collection, including the fact that almost no BLM units charge fees for recreation use,<sup>14</sup> these statistics significantly underestimate current visitation and recreation on BLM lands.

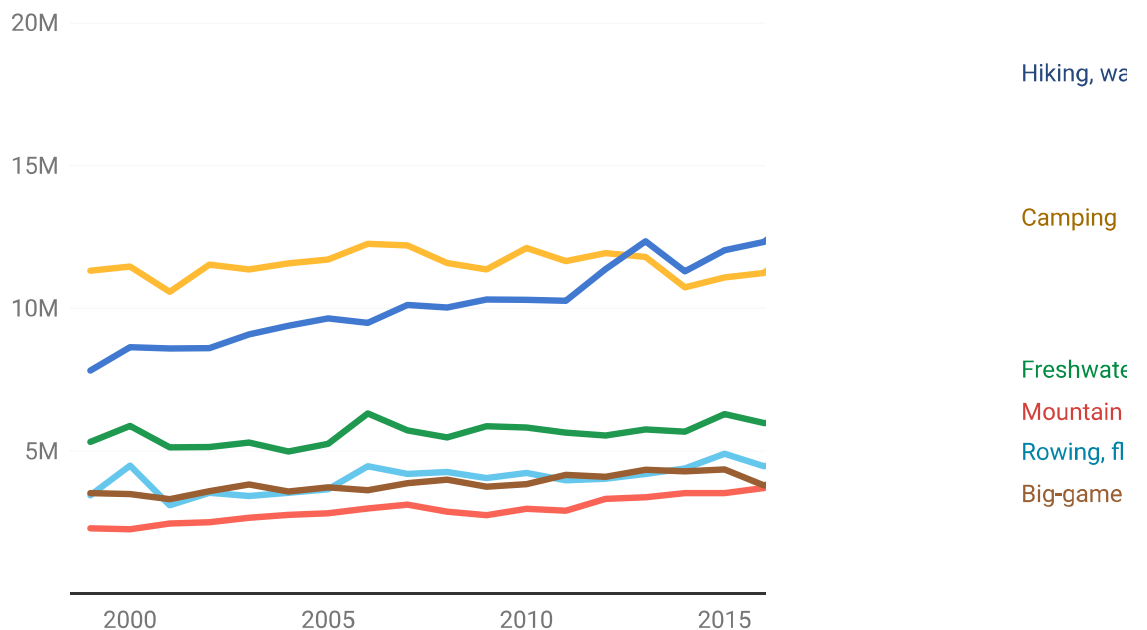
Outdoor recreation contributes three times more to the U.S. economy than oil, gas, and coal production.



Figure 1

## Outdoor recreation on U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands and waters is growing steadily

Total participants in popular outdoor recreation activities by fiscal year, 1999–2022



Hover or click to show values.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Land Management, "Report 19: 1999-2022, Activity Participants" (Washington: 2023), on file with author. Note that FY 2020 and FY 2021 were substantially affected by COVID-19 pandemic-related site closures and demand spikes.

Chart: Center for American Progress

BLM lands are already serving as an outlet for national parks overflowing with visitors, and this need is likely to grow as park visitation continues to grow nationwide.<sup>15</sup> For example, when Arches National Park was overloaded by pandemic-related spikes in visitors, families turned to nearby BLM lands in Utah for recreation and camping opportunities.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, BLM lands can offer visitors unique experiences that complement those of more developed national parks, such as more rugged and remote experiences and relative freedom to access and explore nature.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, unlike national parks or wildlife refuges, many already-popular destinations on BLM lands lack permanent protections that guarantee they will be available into the future. For example, just outside Cortez in southwest Colorado, an extensive network of trails known as Phil's World—mostly on BLM land—draws local mountain bikers and visitors from around the world for renowned single track and slickrock riding.<sup>18</sup> The 12 Hours of Mesa Verde endurance mountain bike race alone draws roughly 800 visitors to Phil's World every spring.<sup>19</sup> Yet despite the area's popularity, its economic benefits for the community, and efforts by the local county to limit future oil and gas development,<sup>20</sup> Phil's World is not protected from leasing and other competing uses that could imperil this world-class recreation asset.

Phil's World trail system in Colorado. Photo credit: Leslie Kehmeier

Harnessing the opportunity of public lands for recreation and tourism can also boost local economies. Nationally, the outdoor recreation economy is responsible for 4.5 million jobs and contributes three times more to the U.S. economy (measured as gross domestic product) than oil, gas, and coal development.<sup>21</sup> In 2022, national park visitors alone spent an estimated \$24 billion in communities surrounding the parks, supporting approximately 314,600 jobs in those gateway communities.<sup>22</sup>

### **The BLM's Public Lands Rule: An opportunity for the Biden administration to protect America's most vulnerable public lands**

The BLM was tasked by Congress to manage public lands for multiple uses, including for recreation. In practice, however, the BLM's current regulations and practices favor oil and gas drilling, mining, and other short-term resource exploitation over other uses, including conservation and recreation.<sup>23</sup> In fact, 86 percent of BLM lands lack durable conservation protection against drilling, mining, or other extractive development.<sup>24</sup>

While BLM lands hold tremendous potential to meet growing demand for outdoor recreation, reckless leasing and extractive development on currently unprotected lands could preclude those opportunities, displace ongoing recreation use, and affect visitation to neighboring parks and other popular destinations. Unfortunately, as evidenced by BLM proposals to lease lands on the doorstep of Zion National Park and in other popular recreation areas,<sup>25</sup> these are more than abstract threats. The BLM even proposed allowing oil and gas companies to drill one of the world's most popular mountain biking destinations, Utah's Slickrock Trail, before public outcry forced them to back off that plan in 2020.<sup>26</sup>

Fortunately, the BLM's Public Lands Rule,<sup>27</sup> proposed in late March 2023, would help balance this distorted system and put conservation on an even playing field with drilling and mining. Among other things, the rule would give the BLM commonsense direction to manage for the long-term health of public lands, conserve and restore lands with the highest ecological value, incorporate Indigenous knowledge and consult with Tribes in public land management, and consider Tribally and community-led proposals to protect special places. In addition, proposals to permanently conserve special public lands as national monuments offer tangible opportunities for President Biden to protect vulnerable places for their recreation and cultural, historic, and ecological benefits.

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Jun 14, 2023

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## **New analysis underscores the potential of currently unprotected BLM lands**

A new analysis conducted for CAP by Conservation Science Partners looks at the potential recreation benefits that the public could experience through enhanced conservation, protection, and restoration of BLM lands.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, the analysis examined the proximity of unprotected BLM lands to potential hubs for outdoor recreation demand or outdoor access needs in the contiguous United States.<sup>29</sup> Those hubs include national parks and state parks, which already attract substantial visitation, as well as census tracts identified as potential priorities for addressing inequitable access to nature based on an absence of nearby protected lands and selected measures of “social vulnerability.”

Although the analysis is coarse in scale, it gives a sense of the very substantial opportunity to help fill growing and unmet demand for outdoor recreation access. The results could also serve as a launching point for deeper analyses of unprotected BLM lands with high potential for recreation, access, and equity-related benefits.

### **Nature gap hotspots and unprotected BLM lands**

To identify priority areas of inequitable nature access, the analysis focused on those census tracts that scored highly on measures of social vulnerability and their lack of nearby protected lands.<sup>30</sup> For purposes of the analysis, nature deprivation was evaluated based on the proximity of census tracts to publicly accessible federal protected lands. Social vulnerability was determined through an index, similar to many used in the social science community, that incorporates health, income, education levels, employment status, and more demographic identifiers linked to lack of community power and resources.

Across the country, the analysis identified more than 20 million acres of unprotected BLM land within 10 miles of the nation's most socially vulnerable

and nature-deprived census tracts. As shown in Table 1, these lands are concentrated in New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, and Utah, suggesting particularly significant opportunities for BLM action to help address the nature gap in these four states.



Table 1

## Top 10 states with unprotected Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land that could help close the nature gap

Total acreage of unprotected BLM lands within buffer distances of all nationally identified socially vulnerable and nature-deprived census tracts

	10-mile radius	25-mile radius	50-mile radius
<b>New Mexico</b>	7,284,500	10,369,500	11,568,000
<b>Nevada</b>	6,895,700	8,877,600	12,545,800
<b>Arizona</b>	3,111,700	4,276,300	6,607,900
<b>Utah</b>	1,444,200	2,272,600	5,392,500
<b>Montana</b>	455,700	1,235,800	3,309,000
<b>Colorado</b>	325,700	1,044,100	2,782,700
<b>California</b>	240,300	792,600	1,819,100
<b>Washington</b>	172,800	319,200	405,800
<b>Wyoming</b>	87,900	504,000	2,159,300
<b>Oregon</b>	2,600	10,600	78,700

*Note: This analysis was conducted prior to the August 2023 designation of Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni – Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument, and this table does not reflect those additional protections.*

Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Final Report: Quantifying the recreation value of unprotected BLM lands in response to a proposed plan for balanced public land management" (Truckee, CA: 2023), available at <https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CAP-BLM-Recreation-TechnicalReport.pdf>.



Table: Center for American Progress

New Mexico alone holds more than 7 million acres of unprotected BLM land near census tracts identified as nature gap priorities, while Nevada contains almost 7 million acres. Meanwhile, Arizona holds more than 3 million unprotected BLM acres, and Utah has nearly 1.5 million acres that could potentially increase access to nature for these communities. However, if left unprotected, these community-adjacent lands could become sources of air and water pollution from oil and gas development and other extractive industries in the future.

While data limitations made it impossible to evaluate the recreation potential of BLM lands in this nationwide analysis,<sup>31</sup> available trails data, anecdotal evidence (see examples below), and the sheer scale of available land suggest a massive opportunity for BLM lands to address the demand for outdoor recreation around these areas. As noted above, this analysis could also serve as a jumping-off point for more detailed looks at specific BLM lands.

## **Esmeralda County, Nevada, and Otero County, New Mexico**

Looking beyond the nationwide results, specific examples in Nevada and New Mexico reveal how new protections for BLM lands can help secure or expand outdoor recreation access for communities with the greatest needs.

Unprotected BLM lands in Esmeralda County, Nevada. Photo credit: Kirk A. Peterson

Among the census tracts identified as nature gap priorities, Esmeralda County, Nevada, contains the greatest amount of unprotected BLM land—nearly 3 million acres—within a 10-mile radius of the census tract boundaries. Esmeralda County is particularly rural, with one of the lowest population densities in the country and higher-than-average poverty rates.<sup>32</sup> BLM public lands in the county—especially its northern parts—are home to stunning landscapes, important wildlife habitat, and outstanding recreation potential. These include places such as Lone Mountain, Monte Cristo Range, and the Sump. Just steps away from U.S. Highway 6/95, Lone Mountain sits at 9,100 feet and offers tremendous hiking opportunities.<sup>33</sup> The Monte Cristo Range is laden with sagebrush and desert bighorn sheep, diverse ecology, and great ecosystem diversity, while the Sump hosts ancient geological formations similar to those found in Cathedral Gorge State Park, including slot canyons and semipetrified trees.<sup>34</sup>

Esmeralda County also hosts numerous scenic byways that allow easy access to what are some of the most striking and intact landscapes in the county. But despite the well-recognized outdoor recreation value that could benefit local communities, these lands lack protection from threats of development and are not managed to preserve recreation opportunities or harness related community benefits. These places are ripe for BLM conservation action and could bridge the nature gap for rural and underserved communities in southwestern Nevada.

Otero Mesa, New Mexico. Photo credit: Mason Cummings, The Wilderness Society

Otero County, New Mexico, also stands out in the analysis as a nature gap priority with significant nearby public lands lacking protection. These BLM lands include Otero Mesa, an area of Chihuahuan Desert considered one of the

country's most endangered and biodiverse ecosystems.<sup>35</sup> Against long-standing conservation efforts of the local community, the BLM has tried—without success—to lease much of this land to oil and gas drilling.<sup>36</sup> Not only are the black grama grasslands of Otero Mesa rare and sensitive, the area also ranks in the 98th percentile for ecological connectivity across all BLM lands in the West, making them incredibly valuable for wildlife conservation of keystone and imperiled species.<sup>37</sup> In addition to being critical for wildlife, Otero Mesa houses sacred and culturally important places for the Mescalero Apache and Tigua Tribe of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo.<sup>38</sup>

More than 1.6 million acres of unprotected BLM lands lie within 10 miles of Otero County, according to the new analysis. Communities there lack access to protected lands that could provide reliable recreation and related benefits into the future. The county—the third-largest in New Mexico—sits on the Texas state line, and almost 40 percent of its residents are Latino, with poverty rates at almost twice the national average.<sup>39</sup> Social vulnerability measures in the county are high, but the unprotected public lands boast some of the best recreational potential for hunting, hiking, camping, birdwatching, and backpacking. With strong local support for conservation, this area stands out as an opportunity to bridge the nature gap by securing the future of these valued lands.

## **National and state parks and unprotected BLM lands**

To investigate the potential for BLM lands to alleviate pressure on overcrowded parks and to meet demand in areas already attracting park visitors, the new analysis also mapped and analyzed unprotected BLM lands near national and state parks.

Overall, the analysis found large amounts of unprotected BLM lands in close proximity to both national and state parks:

- Nearly **35 million acres** of unprotected BLM lands are within 50 miles of a national park.
- Nearly **50 million acres** of unprotected BLM lands are within 25 miles of either a national or state park, and that number roughly doubles with a 50-mile radius.

Those BLM lands with existing or potential recreation assets—such as trails and places to camp—could provide expanded opportunities for outdoor recreation, helping reduce pressure on crowded parks. Additionally, protected lands surrounding popular parks can enhance the park visitor experience by preserving scenic landscapes and expansive wildlife habitat, preventing pollution from reaching park lands and waters, and protecting larger historic and culturally significant landscapes. Even where park boundaries were originally drawn to protect the “best” of certain natural and historic resources, the wildlife, scenic beauty, cultural artifacts, and history rarely end at these arbitrary map lines. Yet, as noted above, oil and gas leasing and other industrial development continue to threaten the visitor experiences and resources of popular national parks.

## **Most-visited national parks**

Table 2 focuses on the 10 most-visited national parks in the western United States<sup>40</sup> and nearby unprotected BLM lands. Among the most popular parks, Joshua Tree, Grand Canyon, Zion, and Bryce Canyon stand out as having substantial nearby BLM lands that lack permanent protection.

## Unprotected Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands surrounding the most-visited Western national parks

The total acreage unprotected BLM lands within buffer lengths of the 10 national parks, with their 2022 total visitation count

	10-mile radius	25-mile radius	50-mile radius
<b>Grand Canyon</b> ( <i>Arizona</i> ) 4,732,101 visitors in 2022	122,800	736,400	2,494,500
<b>Zion</b> ( <i>Utah</i> ) 4,692,417 visitors in 2022	211,200	771,000	2,715,300
<b>Rocky Mountain</b> ( <i>Colorado</i> ) 4,300,424 visitors in 2022	12,900	127,400	425,400
<b>Yosemite</b> ( <i>California</i> ) 3,667,550 visitors in 2022	27,900	240,300	857,800
<b>Yellowstone</b> ( <i>Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming</i> ) 3,290,242 visitors in 2022	2,200	35,000	709,800
<b>Joshua Tree</b> ( <i>California</i> ) 3,058,294 visitors in 2022	409,400	923,100	2,190,200
<b>Glacier</b> ( <i>Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming</i> )	0	600	15,000

2,908,458 visitors in 2022			
<b>Grand Teton</b> (Wyoming) 2,806,223 visitors in 2022	7,900	15,300	170,800
<b>Olympic</b> (Washington) 2,432,972 visitors in 2022	800	800	1,000
<b>Bryce Canyon</b> (Utah) 2,354,660 visitors in 2022	32,400	258,000	1,116,500

Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Data Update: Quantifying the recreation value of unprotected BLM lands in response to a proposed plan for balanced public land management" (Truckee, CA: 2023), available at <https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CAP-BLM-Recreation-DataAddendum.pdf> (data updated September 19, 2023, for this project).

Table: Center for American Progress

Figure 2 highlights the area near Grand Canyon, Zion, and Bryce Canyon National Parks. Clustered together in southwest Utah and northwest Arizona, these three parks together accommodate more than 10 million visits each year, and nearly 1.7 million acres of unprotected BLM lands fall within just a 25-mile buffer of one of these parks.<sup>41</sup> Several national monuments and national recreation areas in this region also provide options for visitors and ecological connectivity for wildlife.

Conserving the most important unprotected BLM lands in this area could help secure additional and unique recreation opportunities near some of America's most popular destinations for outdoor tourism, maintain a visitor experience that draws people from all over the world, preserve invaluable cultural and historic resources, and provide ecological connectivity between protected reserves for wildlife. On the flip side, allowing unmanaged mining, drilling, and other development of these vulnerable lands could fragment and degrade an incredible national asset.

Figure 2



## Unprotected Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands within 25



# miles of Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, and Zion national parks



Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Final Report: Quantifying the recreation value of unprotected BLM lands in response to a proposed plan for balanced public land management" (Truckee, CA: 2023), available at <https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CAP-BLM-Recreation-TechnicalReport.pdf>.

Map: Center for American Progress

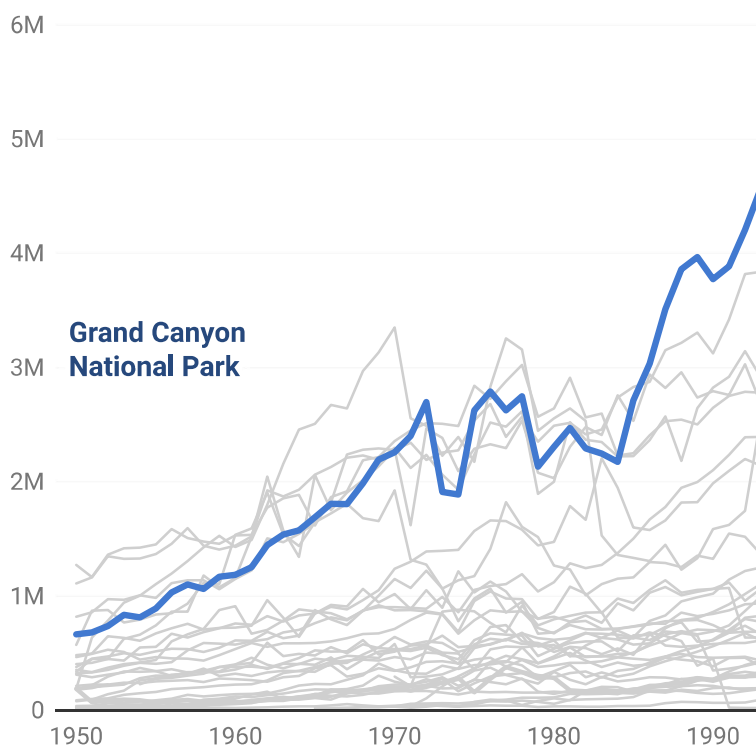
The newly designated Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni—Ancestral Footprints of Grand Canyon National Monument represented a major step toward conserving this greater landscape. On August 8, 2023, President Biden acted on a request from 12 Tribes, Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) and Sen. Krysten Sinema (I-AZ)<sup>42</sup> to designate nearly 1 million acres of BLM and U.S. Forest Service lands as a national monument to permanently protect these ancestral homelands and their natural and cultural resources.<sup>43</sup>

Figure 3



## Grand Canyon National Park leads a trend of increasing visitation to U.S. national parks

Visitation counts for all Western U.S. national parks, 1950–2022



*Hover or click to see values.*

Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Final Report: Quantifying the recreation value of unprotected BLM lands in response to a proposed plan for balanced public land management" (Truckee, CA: 2023), available at <https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CAP-BLM-Recreation-TechnicalReport.pdf>.

Chart: Center for American Progress

As Figure 3 demonstrates, Grand Canyon National Park has led a clear and steady trend of growing visitation to America's national parks, with recent data showing visitation rebounding quickly after COVID-19 pandemic-related drops. Enhancing nearby opportunities to visit and explore BLM lands could help reduce overcrowding and its impacts on park resources, improve overall visitor experiences, and further support local economies.

Unprotected BLM lands surrounding Capitol Reef, Canyonlands, and Arches national parks in Utah provide similar opportunities for conserving a larger, intact landscape around popular and ecologically important parks. The new analysis found a total of more than 3.5 million acres of unprotected BLM lands within 25 miles of one or more of those three national parks, which could help provide important connectivity between protected areas for wildlife, expand

recreation opportunities for visitors, and otherwise preserve the experience of families who come from across the world to experience these iconic parks.

State parks

Similarly, protected BLM lands can complement neighboring state parks by offering additional recreation opportunities, trail and wildlife connectivity, and development buffers that improve visitation. While consistent visitation data were not available for all state parks, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada each had multiple state parks with substantial amounts of unprotected BLM lands surrounding them. (see Table 3)

Table 3



State parks with the most nearby unprotected Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land

The top 10 state parks with the greatest amount of BLM land within 10, 25, and 50 miles, in acres

	10-mile radius	25-mile radius	50-mile radius
Arkansas Headwaters (Colorado)	285,300	527,700	1,100,100
Navajo Lake (New Mexico)	263,900	695,100	1,209,200
Valley of Fire (Nevada)	248,200	801,700	2,043,400
Seminoe (Wyoming)	239,600	913,500	2,753,800
Anza-Borrego Desert (California)	233,300	497,300	994,000
Caballo Lake (New Mexico)	231,900	724,500	1,334,600
Red Rock Canyon (California)	228,100	578,100	1,212,100

<b>Colorado River</b> (Colorado)	222,900	957,100	2,917,500
<b>Cathedral Gorge</b> (Nevada)	221,300	1,257,300	3,894,600
<b>Echo Canyon</b> (Nevada)	215,800	1,115,500	3,912,900

*Note: This analysis was conducted prior to the August 2023 designation of Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni – Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument, and this table does not reflect those additional protections.*

Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Final Report: Quantifying the recreation value of unprotected BLM lands in response to a proposed plan for balanced public land management" (Truckee, CA: 2023), available at <https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CAP-BLM-Recreation-TechnicalReport.pdf>.

Table: Center for American Progress

Buffington Pockets, unprotected BLM lands near Valley of Fire State Park, Nevada. Photo credit: Kirk A. Peterson

For example, Valley of Fire State Park is a popular destination for Las Vegas area residents, drawing more than 760,000 visitors in 2021 for hiking, picnicking, and camping amid bright red sandstone formations,<sup>44</sup> as well as observing ancient petrified trees and 2,000-year-old petroglyphs.<sup>45</sup> As the map in Figure 4 shows, the park is nearly surrounded by BLM lands. These lands currently lack conservation protection, yet they share many of the scenic and recreation values of Valley of Fire.

Buffington Pockets, just southwest of the state park, is an area of unprotected BLM land marked by strikingly colorful, striped sandstone; a knife-edge ridge line; steep canyons; and expansive views uninterrupted by roads for nearly 35,000 acres.<sup>46</sup> Named for depressions that collect water, Buffington Pockets offers extensive opportunities for hiking, rock scrambling, horseback riding, geologic and archaeological sightseeing, and more.<sup>47</sup>

Figure 4



# Conservation potential surrounds Nevada's Valley of Fire State Park

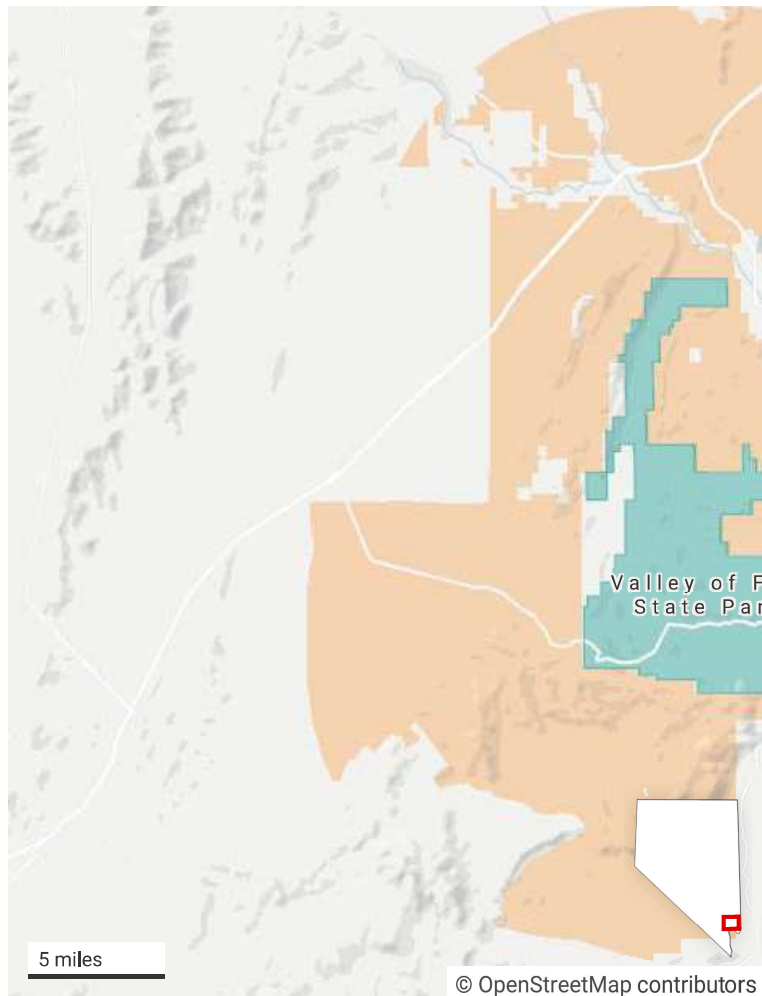
Valley of Fire State Park and unprotected Bureau of Land Management land within a 10-mile buffer of the park's boundary



Unprotected BLM Land







Source: Conservation Science Partners, "Final Report: Quantifying the recreation value of unprotected BLM lands in response to a proposed plan for balanced public land management" (Truckee, CA: 2023), available at <https://www.csp-inc.org/public/CAP-BLM-Recreation-TechnicalReport.pdf>.

Map: Center for American Progress

## Policy recommendations

President Biden and his administration have an opportunity to conserve the best and most vulnerable of America's public lands. As CAP's new analysis demonstrates, conserving more unprotected lands can help secure access to high-quality outdoor recreation where it is most needed, benefiting current and future generations.

To maximize this opportunity, the administration should take the following measures.

### Finalize a strong BLM Public Lands Rule

In late March 2023, the BLM proposed its Public Lands Rule<sup>48</sup>—long-overdue regulations to guide the conservation and restoration of public lands managed by the agency. This proposal received substantial public input, with early analysis showing that more than 90 percent of commenters expressed support for the rule.<sup>49</sup> Based on its potential to conserve unique recreation opportunities on public lands, the Public Lands Rule also garnered strong

support from more than 100 businesses<sup>50</sup> and from major associations representing outdoor recreation industries and user groups.<sup>51</sup>

The BLM should promptly finalize and implement a strong Public Lands Rule that provides more balanced, far-sighted management of America's public lands, prioritizes conservation and restoration of the most ecologically important lands, and enhances tools for the agency to act on Tribally and community-led conservation proposals. Recognizing that the process for updating specific land management blueprints—known as resource management plans—has historically been slow and that this pace does not match the urgent need to conserve vulnerable public resources,<sup>52</sup> the BLM should also evaluate opportunities to accelerate action to achieve the Public Lands Rule's goals. This should include considering mechanisms in the final rule to ensure the BLM acts promptly on conservation proposals and moves as rapidly as possible to identify priority intact landscapes and priority ecosystem resilience areas for conservation.

### **Prioritize conservation action that achieves multiple public benefits**

Conservation and recreation should go hand in hand. With limited time and resources, the BLM should prioritize actions that achieve multiple benefits, including ecological health, outdoor recreation, cultural resource protection, and sustainable economies. While the proposed Public Lands Rule focuses on ecosystem health and resilience, the BLM should consider ways for a final rule and subsequent implementation to ensure agency decisions also weigh factors related to potential visitation and recreation benefits. Among other factors, these could include considering: 1) proximity to socially vulnerable and nature-deprived communities; 2) proximity to national and state parks with spillover visitation potential; 3) opportunities to preserve a larger public lands visitation experience, larger cultural and ecological landscapes, or recreation connectivity across lands managed by multiple agencies; and 4) existing or potential future outdoor recreation assets that are vulnerable to destructive development.

### **Act on community proposals to protect high-value outdoor recreation assets**

Even with a strong Public Lands Rule in place nationally, the BLM would need to enshrine conservation management prescriptions and land-use designations that provide long-term protection for specific public lands and waters. Many community and Tribal proposals for conservation await action by the agency, including several profiled in CAP's recent report "What Biden's Proposed Conservation Rule Would Mean for America's Most Vulnerable Public Lands."<sup>53</sup> For example, northern California's English Ridge is an area of ancient forest, scenic meadows, and steep slopes intersected by a popular whitewater river and wild creeks, which could finally see protection when the BLM updates its management plan for the region.

Additionally, President Biden himself should use presidential authority under the Antiquities Act to permanently protect the most significant BLM lands as national monuments, as he recently did for Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni—Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument in Arizona and Avi Kwa Ame National Monument in Nevada. For example, awaiting presidential action are community-led proposals to expand Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument, adding neighboring BLM lands known as Molok Luyuk,<sup>54</sup> and to designate a new national monument protecting Dolores River Canyon Country in western Colorado, conserving world-class whitewater boating and other recreation opportunities.<sup>55</sup>

## Strengthen safeguards to limit oil and gas development impacts on important recreation areas

Despite the well-recognized recreation value of many BLM lands, related community and economic benefits, and the growing numbers of visitors to these places, recreation assets on BLM lands face continued threat from oil and gas drilling and related development. As profiled in a recent report by the Outdoor Alliance and Public Lands Solutions,<sup>56</sup> reckless oil and gas leasing by the BLM negatively affects recreation experiences and limits the potential of local economies to benefit from outdoor recreation and visitation. Proposed oil and gas leasing has been a recurring threat to iconic recreation destinations, notoriously around Zion National Park in 2015 but also more recently in other parts of Utah prized for their canyoneering, boating, and mountain biking. Meanwhile, a budding outdoor destination, Caliente, Nevada, had been working to develop and market the area's mountain biking trails in 2019 only to see the BLM propose those very lands for oil and gas leasing.

New regulations for the BLM's onshore oil and gas leasing program, released on July 20, 2023, would take important steps to avoid leasing areas with sensitive recreation, cultural, and wildlife resources.<sup>57</sup> The BLM should finalize these proposed criteria, which would require the agency to evaluate and avoid impairment of important recreation resources, and should make any other needed programmatic changes to ensure the agency's leasing avoids these areas. This should include prioritizing public engagement from recreation users and historically marginalized groups that could be disproportionately affected by leasing.

The Biden administration should also address the threat of oil and gas drilling to specific lands of extraordinary recreation value through targeted mineral "withdrawals" that prevent future leasing. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) and Sen. Jacky Rosen (D-NV) recently called on the Biden administration to administratively protect the threatened Ruby Mountains in Elk County, Nevada.<sup>58</sup> The ancestral homeland of the Te-Moak Tribe of the Western Shoshone Indians of Nevada, the Ruby Mountains are also a beloved destination for outdoor recreation and vital for migrating wildlife.<sup>59</sup>

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### SEE ALSO

#### ARTICLE

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Mar 10, 2022

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## Invest in recreation management and infrastructure

Protecting high-value lands and waters is a critical building block to secure outdoor recreation opportunities for current and future generations. But conservation must be followed by stewardship and an intentional commitment to connect people to the recreation opportunities those places offer. Yet even as more and more people have discovered BLM lands as a destination to recreate—with a 40 percent increase in recorded visitation between 2012 and 2022—the BLM's budget to manage that recreation has been cut.<sup>60</sup>

To achieve the potential benefits discussed in this report, the BLM will need to prioritize outdoor recreation in its management planning, its infrastructure investments, and its staffing. New infrastructure and restoration funding

through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act could open near-term opportunities. But Congress and future administrations will need to allocate funding so that the BLM can serve the broader public's interests in public lands and not just the narrow requests of the oil, gas, and mining industries that have dominated the agency's attention for decades.

## **Comprehensively address barriers to equitable nature access**

Prioritizing conservation action and recreation investments that could serve communities most in need of nature access—such as the census tracts described in this report—is an important step the BLM should take to help close the inequitable nature gap. But those actions should be accompanied by a robust effort by the BLM and the U.S. Department of the Interior to address other barriers that prevent communities of color and other historically underrepresented communities from equitably sharing in the benefits of U.S. public lands.<sup>61</sup>

A newly released strategy, “The Bureau of Land Management’s Blueprint for 21st Century Outdoor Recreation,”<sup>62</sup> names expanding outreach and establishing a culture of inclusion as core priorities for the agency. The blueprint also outlines several important actions—such as building and retaining a more representative workforce and improving programming, exhibits, and more—to better reflect the nation’s diversity and engage underrepresented groups. But more concrete follow-up action will be needed to, among other things, ensure that BLM offices actively engage communities to better understand and connect with underrepresented groups, identify barriers, and pursue locally tailored approaches.

Additional commitments from the Department of the Interior’s Equity Action Plan,<sup>63</sup> released in April 2022 after extensive public listening sessions, as well as the White House-convened interagency Nature in Communities Committee,<sup>64</sup> could also help provide a framework to guide the BLM’s work to improve equitable access to public lands and its benefits.

## **Seek inclusive community input and coordinate across borders**

To inform conservation and recreation priorities, as well as decisions on public land uses such as oil and gas that could affect outdoor recreation, the BLM must robustly gather input through early and meaningful consultation with affected communities and Tribes. This should include current recreation users and those communities traditionally underserved by the benefits of public lands or otherwise marginalized.

President Biden has demonstrated a commitment to prioritizing underserved communities and must continue to ensure that all American communities have a say in the protection, use, and management of their public lands. Tribal consultation will be especially important to prevent increased recreation from affecting or conflicting with subsistence, ceremonial, and cultural activities or resources. Given the important contributions of public lands recreation for local economies, the BLM should also seek opportunities to align management planning with community plans for recreation-related economic development.

Finally, the BLM should look beyond its own lands in evaluating recreation-related management and conservation. As noted in this report, nearby and adjacent public lands can offer unique opportunities to connect trails, other



recreation infrastructure, and ecologically intact corridors; to better manage the benefits and impacts of visitation; and to improve overall visitor experiences. Steps to align recreation investments, share data, or even coordinate public engagement among nearby land managers could present opportunities to more efficiently utilize taxpayer resources and improve outcomes for visitors and natural resources. The BLM should look for ways to embed this type of coordination as more common practice, particularly in regions with a significant diversity of land managers.

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**SEE ALSO****REPORT****Executive Action vs. the Nature Crisis: Top 8 Opportunities President Biden Should Pursue To Meet His America the Beautiful Commitment**

Nov 22, 2022

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## Conclusion

Before signing the proclamation creating America’s newest national monument this August, President Biden said, “America’s natural wonders are our nation’s heart and soul ... They unite us. They inspire us. A birthright we pass down from generation to generation.”<sup>65</sup> With focused action to conserve at-risk public lands and to connect more people with those lands, the president and his administration can make that vision of “America the Beautiful” a lasting reality.

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**Expand** 

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