



Fulfilling the Promise of Public Lands

Pisgah National Forest, North Carolina

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The science is clear. We have less than 10 years to stop the worst impacts of climate change and avoid irreversible declines in wildlife populations and biodiversity.

The urgency of these crises, and the fact that the benefits of public lands are not equitably shared by all, inspired The Wilderness Society to develop a new strategic plan that will inform and guide our work for years to come.

We have a proud history of securing enduring victories—the Wilderness Act, the Roadless Rule and the permanent reauthorization and funding of the Land and Water Conservation Fund. These accomplishments and so many others were made possible by equitably and meaningfully engaging local communities in concert with national support.

Our new plan stays true to our roots as a land conservation organization, while evolving and adapting our work to meet today's challenges:



Climate change and species loss are accelerating.



Resource extraction—oil, gas and coal—remains the dominant use of public lands.



Public lands do not equitably benefit everyone.

Early on in this process of re-imagining The Wilderness Society, we established a vision of the better world we aim to create: **A future where people and wild nature flourish together, meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing planet.**

This new vision and our mission—**Uniting people to protect America's wild places**—will guide us as we work to make public lands a solution to the existential threats we face.

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Dear Public Lands Champion,

Fulfilling the potential of public lands to reduce the impacts of climate change and species loss will require a powerful movement that engages people from all walks of life, races, ethnicities and generations from rural, suburban and urban areas. But, one of the challenges we must face if we are to build a more inclusive conservation movement, is the systemic racism and history of exclusion that exists in our work.

Our public lands are rooted in inequity. They were taken by force from Indigenous people and managed in ways to make it difficult for many communities to gain access to nature. Today, people of color are disproportionately harmed by pollution from mining and drilling on public lands and from the impacts of climate change. And all too often, the communities most affected by development of public lands are not at the table when critical decisions are being made. Our movement also struggles with a lack of ethnic and racial representation.

Inequities and injustices like these are wrong, and The Wilderness Society accepts our responsibility to address them. That is why we choose to focus on equity—in how we do our work, the partners we work with and the decisions we make every day to ensure that public lands truly benefit us all. To do so, we need to work effectively and authentically with communities that have been left out of the decision-making process and those that have been denied the benefits of these lands.

We have also realized that placing equity at the heart of our work is the best way—likely the only way—we can achieve our vision, mission and fulfill the promise of public lands to play a major role in restoring ecological balance.

You have had the foresight to protect wildlands for future generations. I trust you will embrace The Wilderness Society’s commitment to ensure equitable access to public lands and the myriad benefits they provide to all people, now and in the decades to come.

Thank you for your commitment to a better world.

Jamie Williams
President

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© Ken Conger, National Park Service Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska



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To begin, we are focusing on two priorities:



Make public lands a solution to the climate and extinction crises by eliminating harmful emissions and protecting a network of landscapes to ensure

that critical ecosystems can be resilient in the face of a changing climate and other threats.



Transform conservation policy and practice so all people benefit equitably from public lands.

Inequities are a major challenge on public lands. People of color and frontline communities rarely have a voice in decisions about resource extraction on public lands, even though they will suffer more than their fair share from the pollution it causes. And tens of millions of people who rely on public transportation or can't afford to travel have no way to get to places where they can experience being in wild nature.

By combining forces with these communities, we will help them achieve their priorities to the benefit of all.

We will collaborate with many other organizations from the local to the national levels to achieve five key results by 2030:

- 1. 30% of U.S. lands and waters protected;**
- 2. Net zero fossil fuel emissions from federal public lands;**
- 3. A critical mass of people reflecting America's diversity taking action to protect wilderness and public lands;**
- 4. All people in the U.S. benefit equitably from public lands;**
- 5. Full funding for the conservation, restoration and protection of public lands at all levels.**

The Wilderness Society has embraced a bold plan for collective impact that centers our work on the biggest challenges of our time. Succeeding will demand that we continue building meaningful relationships that transcend politics. In addition, we will broaden our geographic focus from individual parcels of public land to whole landscapes comprised of both public and private lands.

Demanding a Voice for All: The Fight for Chaco Canyon



Greater Chaco Region, New Mexico

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While people across the nation were dealing with extraordinary concerns about their health and livelihoods at the height of the COVID-19 crisis, attacks escalated against public lands. Using the pandemic for cover, the **Trump administration shamelessly rolled back pollution and safety enforcement, plowed ahead with oil and gas leasing on public lands, and limited community input on decisions affecting public health.**

Apparently, the administration thinks we're not paying attention. But thanks to you, they're wrong. Your support has enabled our staff to remain vigilant, strategic, determined and effective. Working alongside our

partners, we have been continuously monitoring and countering dozens of assaults on public lands and environmental safeguards, and we will continue to do so.

Among the many brazen attempts to undercut public oversight during the pandemic, one of the most callous was aimed at the tribal communities who are fighting to protect the lands surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park in northwest New Mexico.

Although there has been broad, deep and sustained support for protecting a 10-mile buffer around the park, the Bureau of Land Management issued a proposal in late February to open those lands to oil and gas

development—a move that would negatively impact the health of surrounding communities and threaten the sensitive and unique cultural resources of the Chaco Canyon region.

Outrageously, instead of responding to the avalanche of requests to postpone the 90-day comment period on the proposal, the agency decided that it would conduct virtual public meetings to “reduce our carbon footprint.” **That's hardly an equitable solution in a state that ranks 49th in broadband internet access.**

This insensitive decision hit the affected communities while they were down. At that time, **Native**

Americans around Chaco were among the hardest hit by the coronavirus. Tribal leaders were focused on saving the lives of their people, who already suffer from high rates of pre-existing conditions and a lack of access to adequate medical care.

With your help, we fought to extend the comment period deadline. Finally, a week before the May 28 deadline, after urging from The Wilderness Society, our partners, the Governor, tribal leaders and the entire New Mexico Congressional delegation, Interior Secretary David Bernhardt announced a 120-day extension of the comment period. But our work is not done. We will continue to push for the 10-mile buffer and to support our tribal partners as they weigh in on this federal plan that puts drilling on the doorstep of this sacred place.

Chaco Canyon is just one example of how the Trump administration is **using the coronavirus crisis to keep communities—especially communities of color—out of public lands decision-making.** To prevent this from happening elsewhere, we are working to ensure review periods are extended and asking lawmakers in Congress to remedy long-standing inequities as they develop proposals to provide relief from the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures should include investing more in programs that address outdoor access problems, and passing legislation that ensures healthier, more livable communities nationwide.



Between 850 and 1250, Chaco Canyon—a portion of which is now designated as the Chaco Culture National Historical Park and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site—was the center of a thriving civilization that flourished in the Four Corners region. This society left behind majestic public and ceremonial buildings that are among America’s most significant intact examples of pre-Columbian culture. Believed to have once been a gathering place for different clans to meet, this cultural landscape remains a hallowed landmark today and plays an integral role in the collective and living identity of the Pueblos and Tribes whose ancestors inhabited the region.

Unfortunately, more than 90 percent of public lands within Greater Chaco are already leased for oil and gas drilling, endangering the health of local communities and the unique cultural history of this sacred, sensitive landscape.

If this crisis has shown us anything, it is that our ability to enjoy public lands and have a say in how they are managed is more important than ever. Because of your voice, The Wilderness Society is ready to support our partners at the front

lines in our communities—so that all people, regardless of skin color or zip code, can harness the healing power of wild places, stand up to proposals that will destroy them for short-term gain, and find hope for the future.



Your Support in Action

Access to Nature is a Basic Right

Eaton Canyon Natural Area, California

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At The Wilderness Society, we believe that access to nature is a basic right. However, we know that many communities have little access to any greenspace, much less our nation's magnificent wildlands.

That is why one of our two priorities is to “Transform conservation policy and practice so all people benefit equitably from public lands.”

The highest concentrations of people who lack access to nature are found in cities. A century or more of discriminatory urban planning and development policies have placed most of the parks and open spaces in moderate and higher-income neighborhoods, leaving people who already live in areas with the fewest resources starved for public green space.

Through our Urban to Wild program, The Wilderness Society is addressing this stark inequity in access to parks and open spaces.

Our greatest achievements have come from building partnerships with local communities that have the most

at stake to drive policy change at the national level. That is how we have protected millions of acres of federal lands for more than 80 years.

“Urban to Wild takes the same approach,” says its director, Yvette Lopez-Ledesma. “We support organizations located in the areas of highest need, listen to them and trust them to know what is best for their communities, and work alongside them to achieve big policy wins. Urban to Wild just aims at a different target—state, county or local governments. We’re winning policy changes that set precedents and can be replicated across the nation.”

Working at a county level doesn't mean having a small impact. For instance, California's Los Angeles County, where Urban to Wild began, is home to 10 million people, a larger population than 40 states.

“In LA County, we worked in partnership with many others to gain new funding for parks,” Yvette explains. “Then, we made the case to the County Board of Supervisors to direct funding to communities with the greatest need for green space. Now, we’re working with



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—Yvette Lopez-Ledesma, Director, Urban to Wild

our partners and the county to make sure the funds are invested in these communities as intended.”

One of those partners is Promesa Boyle Heights, a non-profit organization dedicated to transforming conditions and improving opportunities for students and families. Located in LA County, 18 miles inland from the ocean, Boyle Heights is home to more than 90,000 residents, the majority of whom are of Mexican descent.

Francisco Romero, Promesa’s Manager of Community Transformation, explains that **“Parks are essential spaces playing multiple roles: that of local gym, social hub and backyard,** as most Eastsiders are renters living in dense multi-unit properties, where every inch of greenspace on site has been cemented over to make way to stack another rental unit. In fact, many of the señoras line up dozens upon dozens of planters in their cemented yards to create green mini-jungles to block the scorching hot sun and reduce the heat-island effect.”

However, there are only 12 parks in Boyle Heights for its 90,000 residents. Ten of the 12 parks are within 1,000 feet of freeways, where the poor air quality is harmful to people’s health. An elevated section of Interstate 10 cuts right over 20-acre Hollenbeck Park, the largest in the community. The smallest park comes in at one-tenth of an acre.

“Urban to Wild and Promesa Boyle Heights are working together to achieve a common vision of increasing access to parks where they are most needed,” explains Yvette. “Over the past three years we have worked on policy and lent programming support to one another and it’s made a transformational impact in the lives of community members, myself included.”

To learn more about ensuring equitable access to nature, visit wilderness.org/access-to-nature.

Robert Marshall Council

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