



New Interior Secretary Deb Haaland is a Proven Champion for Public Lands

U.S. Capitol, Washington, DC
Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

At a critical moment in the stewardship of public lands and the people and communities that rely on them, a visionary leader is now at the helm of the Department of the Interior.

With bipartisan support, Deb Haaland was confirmed as the 54th Secretary of the Interior on March 15. She is bringing her extensive credentials on climate, conservation and energy issues as a member of Congress to the agency that has authority over so much of the nation's public lands and waters. Secretary Haaland is a passionate advocate for climate solutions, environmental justice, Indigenous Peoples' rights, access to the outdoors and the protection of public lands.

Secretary Haaland was a strong and effective champion of our highest priorities during her tenure as Vice

Chair of the House Natural Resources Committee and Chair of the National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands subcommittee. That is why The Wilderness Society and many other groups strongly advocated for her confirmation in the Senate.

The Interior Department manages roughly 500 million acres of public lands. It also oversees U.S. relations with federally recognized tribes and is responsible for guaranteeing the protection and safety of tribal lands and resources. Unfortunately, countless examples demonstrate that the agency has often failed in this duty and bears responsibility for exploiting and mistreating Indigenous peoples and their lands.

Secretary Haaland's appointment signals a new day. She is a member of the Laguna Pueblo Nation and traces

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Dear Conservation Champion,

Your commitment has brought us to a moment when the opportunities to fulfill the promise of public lands—for everyone—are greater than ever before.

The Biden-Harris administration has taken important steps to help address the climate crisis. It is exciting to see the White House enacting climate-focused policies and ideas we have been putting forward for years.

But even conservation-minded leaders need support and encouragement to do their best. We must stand strong and press the new administration, as well as public lands champions in Congress, to take swift, bold action to transform how public lands are managed. In doing so, we can fulfill the promise of public lands to help us tackle the climate, nature and inequity crises.

And that's where you come in. The Biden-Harris administration has highlighted the importance of public lands for everyone. Now is the time for all of us to speak up about the many ways the places we share and treasure can help answer the tough challenges facing our nation.

Thank you for your wonderful commitment to public lands, to nature and to future generations.

Jamie Williams
President



Nantahala National Forest, North Carolina
Mason Cummings

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The Wilderness Society recognizes Native Americans and Indigenous peoples as the longest serving stewards of the land.

**To learn more visit:
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her roots back 35 generations to land that is now in the state of New Mexico. She is the first Native American Cabinet Secretary in U.S. history, taking office 229 years after George Washington established the first Presidential Cabinet.

Given the Interior Department's historic injustices to tribal nations, Secretary Haaland's leadership is long overdue and a much-needed step toward reckoning with a long and troubling legacy. As an outspoken voice for Indigenous communities in places impacted by the Trump administration—including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, Bears Ears National Monument in Utah and Chaco Canyon in New Mexico—she is uniquely equipped to help the agency turn the corner on its history of discrimination against Native Americans and seize new opportunities to build a more equitable and just future.

Secretary Haaland steps into this role at the exact moment we need bold, sweeping action on climate. Because the Interior Department has authority over much of the nation's public lands, there is enormous opportunity for us to work with the Secretary to make public lands a major part of the solution to the climate crisis over the next four years.

Her record clearly demonstrates that she is up to the task. She has been a leader in pushing the U.S. to

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embrace a national goal of protecting 30 percent of lands and waters by the year 2030, which scientists say will help us stem the worst impacts of climate change. And she has expressed a commitment to undo public lands policies that have led to a shortsighted focus on fossil fuel development. Fossil fuels drilled and mined on public lands account for nearly one-quarter of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, and experts say addressing such development is an important step in confronting climate change.

The Wilderness Society looks forward to working with Secretary Haaland and the Interior Department to solve the climate crisis, improve protections for our shared lands and waters, and ensure everyone benefits from and has access to public lands.



King County, Washington
Mason Cummings

Advocates for Wilderness

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Protect the Tongass to Protect the Climate



The Tongass National Forest is a unique and threatened national treasure. Located in southeast Alaska, it is one of the last and largest remaining temperate rainforests in the world. Here, centuries-old Sitka spruce, western hemlock and western red cedar, some soaring over 200 feet tall, shelter a teeming ecosystem where grizzly bear, moose and river otter roam and salmon surge upstream. This old-growth forest absorbs and stores more heat-trapping carbon pollution than any other national forest, making it one of the best solutions to the climate crisis—if we simply let the trees stand.

The Tongass' wildest and most sensitive stretches of old-growth forest were protected from road-building and other industrial development for more than 20 years thanks in large part to the work of conservationists like you. But the Trump administration removed those protections from 9.4 million acres of the Tongass in late 2020, jeopardizing Alaska Native and other local communities, wildlife habitat, clean water and more.

Tongass National Forest, Alaska
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We have been fighting to restore those protections—and make them permanent—alongside communities that share a deep connection to and reliance on a healthy, thriving temperate rainforest.

Indigenous people are leading this fight to protect the forest that has been their home since time immemorial. The untamed Tongass remains vital to the spiritual lives and livelihoods of tens of thousands of Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian peoples.

In June, the Biden-Harris administration announced its plans to undertake a formal process aimed at restoring protections. But the campaign to make them permanent must go on.

This vast temperate rainforest in southeastern Alaska may seem distant to many of us, but we will all be affected by its fate. The waterways of the Tongass produce roughly 25 percent of the West Coast's commercial salmon harvest, feeding people around the world and supporting fishing communities.



The Tongass National Forest pulls more carbon from the atmosphere than any other forest in our country.

The Tongass National Forest is exceptional for many reasons. It is the largest national forest, includes 30 percent of the remaining temperate rainforest in the world, and pulls more carbon from the atmosphere than any other forest in our country. But we need to recognize that all the national forests are a part of the climate solution. Forests are the lungs of the planet, and therefore, it's vital to protect all of our nation's undeveloped national forests for the benefit of healthy communities and a healthy planet. Sometimes the simplest answer is the best: **Let the trees stand.**



Seizing This Moment to Fulfill the Promise of Public Lands

Weminuche Wilderness, Colorado
Mason Cummings

The Biden-Harris administration has acted on many of its campaign commitments to tackle climate change, including the priorities advanced by The Wilderness Society and our partners. But much work remains to transform how our nation views, values and uses public lands.

Priorities and progress thus far in the Biden-Harris administration

Our emphasis with the Biden-Harris administration in its first 100 days was on seizing the best opportunities to secure lasting gains that support our highest priorities to: protect 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030; reduce climate emissions from public lands to net zero by 2030; and ensure equitable access to public lands and decision-making affecting these lands.

President Biden enacted many of our top priorities during his first 100 days in office. Key actions included establishing a national goal to protect 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030, placing a moratorium on issuing new oil and gas leases for public lands and coastal waters, and reviewing more than 100 policies that damage public lands issued by the Trump administration.

Then in March, President Biden's \$2.25 trillion infrastructure and jobs plan revealed several important initiatives on public lands. These initiatives are vital to a future that is both sustainable and equitable, such as creating a Civilian Climate Corps to conserve public lands and waters, bolstering community resilience to climate change, advancing environmental justice and investing in community led efforts to protect and restore the lands, forests, waters and wetlands that sustain life and on which communities rely.



Molalla Wild and Scenic River, Oregon
Bob Wick/BLM

Next steps for the Biden-Harris administration’s first year

We and our partners are working with the administration, as well as with allies in Congress, to gain durable protections for the Tongass National Forest in Alaska and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota. Going forward, we will be pressing the administration to manage public lands to advance the bold climate, equity and 30x30 commitments we share. Our focus will be on systemic solutions, such as:



Enacting Major Energy and Climate Policy Reforms:

Transforming the federal oil and gas program to prioritize the benefits of intact ecosystems over resource extraction; reversing Trump-era “drill everywhere” decisions; and setting bold goals for responsible renewable energy deployment on federal lands.



Expanding Equitable Access to the Outdoors:

Dismantling barriers that block access to nature for people of color and other systematically and deliberately overlooked populations, and targeting funding to serve communities with the greatest need for safe and welcoming outdoor spaces.



Giving the Public a Voice:

Reversing Trump administration rules that exempted most projects on federal lands from basic safeguards—including giving the public a voice in decisions about what happens on public lands.



New Conservation Designations:

Designating and expanding new national monuments, national wildlife refuges and marine sanctuaries, and prohibiting mining on sensitive wildlands.



Tribal Co-Management:

Supporting tribal co-management of federal lands and advocating for more conservation programs and funding to Tribal nations.



Protecting Forests:

Halting old-growth timber sales and protecting wild national forests for their climate mitigation value and ecological importance.



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Santa Fe National Forest, New Mexico
Mason Cummings