

What do we mean by public lands?

Main Takeaways

Federal public lands belong to everyone.

United States public lands are managed under many different departments within the federal government.

Lands can be under different designations and managed according to different goals and objectives.

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What are public lands?

Public lands are areas of land and water that today are owned collectively by U.S. citizens and managed by government agencies. Public lands are different from private lands, which are owned by an individual, a business or another type of non-governmental organization. Although public lands are now considered to be owned collectively by United States citizens, these lands include ancestral homelands, migration routes, ceremonial grounds, and hunting and harvesting places for Indigenous Peoples who have been forcibly removed. We specify “United States citizens” in the definition of public lands because although undocumented people living in the U.S. and non-citizens have a connection to land and use public lands, because of their citizenship status, they are not included in the formal decision-making process through their right to vote. Certainly, non-citizen advocates in the NGO or academic sectors can be influential in the public lands conversation.

Most public lands are managed by the federal government, by a state or local government, or by a sovereign tribal nation. Other lands open for public use include conservation easements on private land that are managed by nonprofit land trusts and private lands that are accessible via special hunting and fishing permits. This curriculum will focus primarily on public lands managed by the United States government. Not all federally-managed lands are public; for example, access is tightly restricted on military bases. However, across the country, there are more than 640 million acres of parks, forests, preserves, and historic sites that are open to the public.

Who manages public lands?

Federal public lands are primarily managed within four executive departments of the federal government: the Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of Defense.

Most federal lands are managed by these four agencies:

National Park Service (NPS)

MISSION: To preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.

Forest Service (USFS)

MISSION: To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

MISSION: To work with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

MISSION: To sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of America's public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

These agencies also manage federal land:

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)

MISSION: To enhance the quality of life, to promote economic opportunity, and to carry out the responsibility to protect and improve the trust assets of American Indians, Indian tribes, and Alaska Natives.

Bureau of Reclamation (BoR)

MISSION: To manage, develop, and protect water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner in the interest of the American public.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

MISSION: To conserve and manage coastal and marine ecosystems and resources.

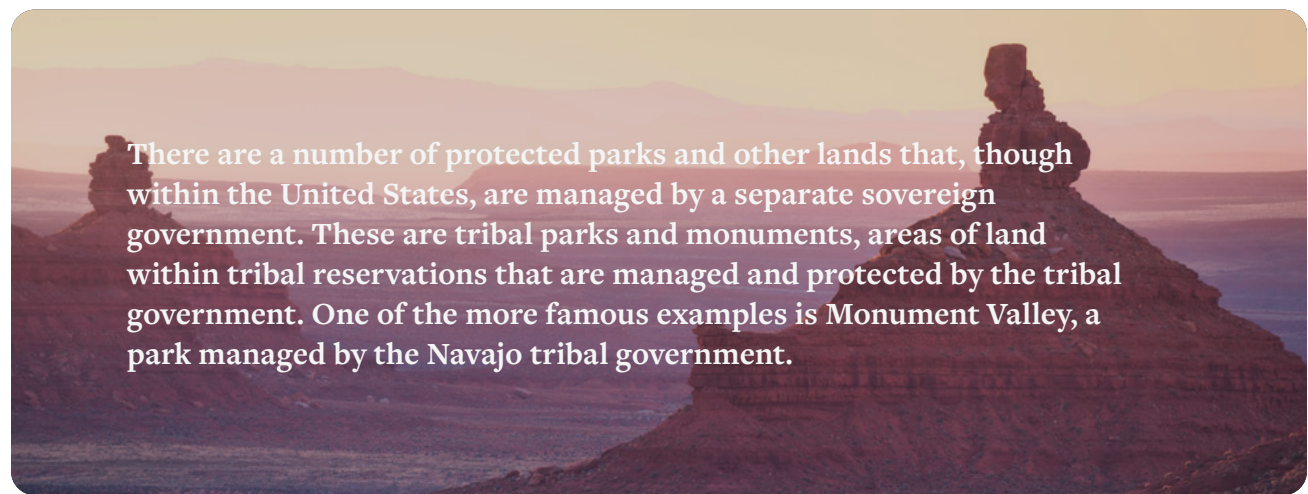
Army Corps of Engineers (ACoE)

MISSION: To deliver vital public and military engineering services; partnering in peace and war to strengthen our Nation's security, energize the economy and reduce risks from disasters.

How are public lands managed?

Some lands have special designations that protect them for recreation and conservation. Others are preserved for wildlife and the intrinsic value of the ecosystem. Others are managed for more intensive commercial uses such as mining, logging, grazing, and energy development. Still others are preserved for their cultural significance.

Different designations and agencies have different management mandates, which determine the specific approaches to administering and regulating public lands.



Land designations include:

National Parks: managed by NPS to preserve the natural and cultural resources of an area and to provide for the enjoyment of the area and its resources for future generations.

National Forests and Grasslands: managed by USFS to provide for multiple uses and sustained yield of products and services, including timber, recreation, range, watersheds, and fish and wildlife.

National Wildlife Refuges: managed by USFWS for the conservation, management, and restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats. Wildlife-dependent recreation in refuges is facilitated where compatible.

National Conservation Lands: managed by BLM and designated to conserve, protect, enhance, and manage public lands for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

National Historic Sites and Parks: managed by NPS to recognize an area of national historic significance.

National Marine Sanctuaries: managed by NOAA for the nation's system of marine protected areas, to conserve, protect, and enhance their biodiversity, ecological integrity, and cultural legacy.

National Monuments: managed by NPS, USFWS, BLM, and/or USFS (in some cases, may be managed jointly). Designated by Congress or the President to protect objects or areas of natural, historic, or scientific interest.

National Recreation Areas: managed by NPS, BLM, or USFS for conservation and recreation purposes; designated for a specific purpose and may have other values that contribute to public enjoyment.

National Scenic and Historic Trails: managed by BLM, NPS, and USFS as part of the National Trails System; National Historic Trails trace the routes of historically significant events, while National Scenic Trails are longer trails managed for recreation that pass through especially scenic and significant areas.

Wild and Scenic Rivers: managed by NPS, USFWS, BLM, or USFS to preserve outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational values; protected in a free-flowing condition for the enjoyment of present and future generations.

Wilderness: managed by NPS, USFWS, BLM, or USFS based on the lack of noticeable human impact, outstanding recreation opportunities, and other historic, ecological, scientific, and education value of the land. Wilderness is designated by Congress and limits commercial activity, motorized equipment, and mechanized travel or tools, making it the most protective designation.

Wilderness Study Areas: land set aside for wilderness designation; managed to ensure the land is unimpaired for preservation until Congress designates it as wilderness or releases the land for other uses.

What can you do on public lands?



The status and management designation of a particular area of public lands or waters determines the kinds of activities that are permissible in those areas. Some activities are generally permissible on all public lands, including designated Wilderness. However, they may be subject to limitations imposed by land managers in specific locations, during specific times of year, and during ceremonial use by Indigenous Peoples.

Other activities are only permissible in areas outside designated wilderness. Mining, logging, road building and energy development are generally only allowed in undesignated areas of the National Forests and Bureau of Land Management lands, although some exceptions exist. In general:

- **Hiking, fishing, ceremony and prayer, hunting, rock climbing, wildlife viewing, photography, horseback riding, kayaking, canoeing, rafting** are generally allowed on all public lands and waters, including Wilderness. As noted above, these activities may be limited in specific locations and at specific times.

Livestock grazing can occur on all public lands, including Wilderness, subject to location-specific limitations.

- All activities allowed in Wilderness, plus **mountain biking, off-road vehicles, RVs, motor boats, and scenic driving** are generally allowed on public lands outside designated Wilderness, subject to location-specific limitations. Motorized and mechanized travel are prohibited in designated Wilderness.

- **Construction and road building, mining, logging, and energy development** also occur on public lands. However, they are generally limited to undesignated areas of the National Forests and BLM lands.

In addition to these general rules, Congress sometimes grandfathered in non-conforming uses when designating a specific area. For example, a limited quantity of motorboats are allowed in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, and aircraft are allowed in certain Wilderness areas in the west. Always check local rules and respect closures when visiting an area.

Generally allowed on all public lands and waters, including Wilderness:

Hiking
Fishing
Ceremony and prayer
Hunting
Rock climbing
Wildlife viewing
Photography
Horseback riding
Kayaking
Canoeing
Rafting
Livestock grazing

Generally allowed on public lands outside designated Wilderness:

All Wilderness activities

+

Mountain biking
Off-road vehicles
RVs
Motor boats
Scenic driving

Generally limited to undesignated National Forests and BLM lands:

Construction
Road building
Mining
Logging
Energy Development