

READING THE WEST

read-ing [from ME *reden*, to explain, hence to read] – vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

WESTERN ROAD TO 30

The Biden administration has established a goal to conserve 30% of the nation’s lands and waters by 2030 for the benefit of all Americans. This goal, known as “30x30,” has been recommended by scientists in order to prevent the collapse of the planet’s natural systems while supporting communities across the country.

Based in Denver, Colorado, the Center for Western Priorities, a watchdog group focused on public lands in the American West, is a project of the Resources Legacy Fund, a team of about 50 people based in California and Montana. In April, it issued a report, “The Western Road to 30,” in which it observed that 77% of Westerners strongly or somewhat support setting a national goal of protecting America’s lands and waters by 2030. The conclusion to the report is this:

The moment has arrived to confront the climate and nature crises by working to protect 30% of America by 2030. The natural landscapes of the Western United States provide a unique opportunity to preserve our natural heritage while supporting local communities. Western states have starkly different cultures and challenges, but all have a strong conservation legacy.

The West is positioned well to lead the way in a new era of conservation. By continuing and expanding innovative work already happening on the ground, states can contribute to the bold 30x30 goal while promoting locally-led efforts and driving a wide range of benefits for taxpayers and communities. Moving forward, conservation efforts should prioritize equitable access to the outdoors, tribal sovereignty, and functional ecosystems.

Source: <https://medium.com/westwise/the-western-road-to-30-696927ba0285>

STATE PARKS

One of the areas focused in the above report as part of land protection mechanisms was state conservation areas, including state parks. Utah has 42 state parks managed by the Utah Department of Natural Resources. The state legislature recently appropriated money to establish two additional parks: Utahraptor State Park, located roughly 15 miles northwest of Moab, and Lost Creek State Park, located just outside Croydon in Morgan County.

In 2020, visitation to state parks soared in almost every state in the West. Colorado and Utah had the highest state park visitation, with 18.3 million and 10.6 million visitors respectively. . . .

State parks are an important tool in closing the “nature gap” – the unequal distribution of nature in the U.S. based on racial and socioeconomic factors. Strategically-planned state parks can work to close that gap, especially if states prioritize proximity to communities that have traditionally lacked adequate access to the outdoors.

Sources: <https://www.westernroadto30.org/state-conservation-areas> and <https://stateparks.utah.gov/2021/07/08/investing-in-the-future-of-outdoor-recreation-exciting-changes-coming-to-utah-state-parks/>

WINNING THE WEST

The Center for Western Priorities also issued a poll – conducted in Arizona, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, and Nevada – which examined the importance of outdoor lifestyles to Westerners in the wake of COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. The poll

... shows heightened support for public lands and conservation policies among the growing “outdoor voting bloc” that is critical to winning competitive elections in Mountain West swing states.

With nearly all voters affirming they enjoyed open spaces as a respite during the pandemic, the outdoors are taking on an even deeper meaning for many. To the point, the importance of public lands issues increased during the COVID-19 pandemic for 34 percent of voters, while remaining durable for the rest. Overall, 81 percent of voters say national public lands, parks, and wildlife issues are important to them in deciding which candidate to vote for in Presidential and Congressional elections. . . .

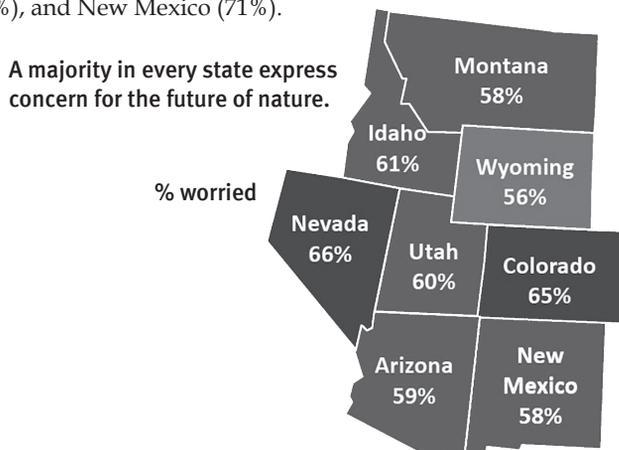
Thinking about a post-pandemic economic recovery, voters in majorities upwards of two-thirds back federal government stimulus support for the outdoor recreation industry and the types of small businesses impacted by vacation and travel cancellations to outdoor destinations. By contrast, support for stimulus payments to oil, gas, mining, and coal industries is low, ranging between 32 and 36 percent.

Source: <https://westernpriorities.org/2020/06/24/new-poll-shows-importance-of-the-outdoors-to-voters-remains-strong-and-intensified-during-covid-19/>

STATE OF THE ROCKIES

For the last eleven years, Colorado College has surveyed registered voters in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. The poll found that 61% of those surveyed were concerned about the future of air, land, water, and wildlife.

The poll found overwhelming support for several conservation-focused proposals. More than 9 in 10 respondents said that states should still find money to protect nature despite budget problems. Of those surveyed, 66% support having all energy be produced by “clean, renewable sources such as solar, wind and hydropower over the next ten to fifteen years.” Support for this energy transition was even higher in Colorado (72%), Idaho (68%), Nevada (71%), and New Mexico (71%).



Source: <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2021/2021-State-of-the-Rockies-D2a1.pdf>

A number of environmental problems we tracked from 2011 have increased as “very serious problems,” especially climate change.

<i>% Extremely/Very Serious</i>	2011	2021	% Increase
Climate change	27%	➡ 54%	+27%
Loss of habitat for fish and wildlife	38%	➡ 55%	+17%
Pollution of rivers, lakes, and streams	42%	➡ 55%	+13%
Inadequate water supplies	40%	➡ 51%	+11%
Loss of family farms and ranches	50%	➡ 56%	+6%
The impact of oil and gas drilling on our land, air and water	31%	➡ 37%	+6%
Air pollution and smog	40%	➡ 43%	+3%

Source: <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/stateoftherockies/conservationinthewest/2021/index.html>

TRASHING OUR TREASURES

Environment America, located in Denver, Colorado, is part of The Public Interest Network, also located in Denver, which operates and supports organizations committed to a strategic approach to social change. In July, they released a report, “Trashing Our Treasures: Congressional Assault on the Best of America,” which observes that, despite public lands being protected by cornerstone environmental laws, several Congressional leaders have been working to open them up to resource exploitation and development.

National parks, forests, and public lands are essential for maintaining healthy ecosystems, safeguarding our waterways, cleaning up the air we breathe, protecting wildlife habitat, and providing opportunities for Americans to connect with the outdoors. Recreation and tourism on public lands also contributes to a \$646 billion outdoor industry economy that supports 6.1 million jobs. . . .

Representative Henry Waxman, who co-released a report detailing the anti-environmental track record of the current Congress, commented that “the House Republican assault on the environment has been reckless and relentless. In bill after bill, for one industry after another, the House has been voting to roll back environmental laws and endanger public health. The Republican anti-environment agenda is completely out-of-touch with what the American public wants.”

The report reveals some startling numbers: in the first session, House Republicans voted 191 times to weaken environmental protections; by the end of end of 2011, there were 47 votes to weaken land and coastal protections. These votes were largely driven by powerful oil and mining industry lobbyists, large-scale developers and corporate interests. Representative Howard Berman, who released the report with Representative Waxman, said, “sadly, many Republicans in the House of Representatives have shown a clear pattern of putting business interests ahead of human interest—of protecting corporate polluters over constituents.” If this trend persists, we will only continue to see bills that threaten to harm our beloved public lands.

Source: <https://environmentamerica.org/sites/environment/files/reports/Trashing%20our%20Treasures%20report.pdf>

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

The Bill Lane Center for the American West is based at Stanford University. Recently, researchers there issued a report, “Conservation Easements Redraw the Western Landscape,” explaining that conservation easements are less common in the western United States than in the East. However, with its higher percentage of privately held land and less open space, conservation easements may become a tool for western landowners to block mining and energy exploration under their land.

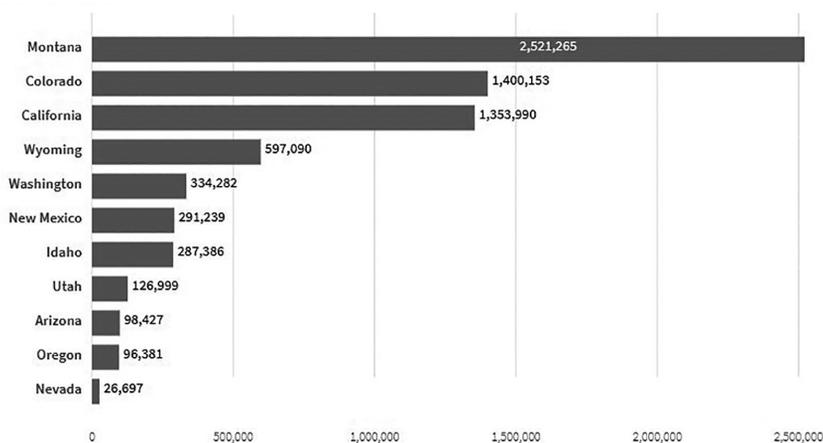
For most of the last half-century, landowners in every state have been able to use conservation easements to protect their holdings from development in perpetuity. In keeping lands free of everything from homes to factories to airports, conservation easements help to preserve wildlife habitats and rural landscapes.

But the same easy conservation option is usually precluded when the subsurface mineral rights are owned by someone else. The legal term for this mixed ownership is “split estate”; it is a common occurrence in the mineral and energy-rich lands of the American West.

A new kind of easement might change the situation. A Stanford professor of Earth Sciences, Rob Jackson, teamed up with two law professors, James Salzman from the University of California, Los Angeles, and Jessica Owley from the University of Buffalo, to propose conservation easements for subsurface areas.

“We propose a novel tool, the Mineral Estate Conservation Easement, to provide landowners with the ability to restrict hydraulic fracturing and other oil and gas subsurface activities in areas of particular social or ecological vulnerability.”

Western State Conservation Easements, in Acres



Source: <https://west.stanford.edu/news/blogs/and-the-west-blog/2017/conservation-easements-map>

EDITORIAL MATTER

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