



Parks for All

Building a More Inclusive System of Parks and Public Lands
for the National Park Service's Centennial

By Jenny Rowland August 2016

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

In the 100th year of the National Park Service, or NPS, America's parks and public lands are more popular than ever. Visits to national parks have reached record-breaking levels, with more than 307 million visitors in 2015.¹ That number is expected to grow substantially this year, as NPS puts its centennial celebration at the forefront of an aggressive advertising and outreach campaign. But the national parks are not alone—nearly all public lands, including national forests and lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management—have also seen their visitation numbers reach new highs in recent years.²

Parks and public lands are also incredibly popular even among those who do not visit regularly. A poll conducted in January 2016 by Hart Research Associates for the Center for American Progress found that 77 percent of Americans believe that the United States benefits a great deal or fair amount from national parks. This number is consistent regardless of political affiliation. Furthermore, 55 percent of voters believe they personally benefit a great deal or fair amount from the country's parks and public lands.³ These levels of public support for a federal government program are remarkable at a time when only 19 percent of Americans say they trust the government.⁴

With U.S. demographics rapidly changing, it is more important than ever to develop and advance a forward-thinking and inclusive centennial policy agenda for the nation's public lands. The viability and relevance of America's national parks depend on the ability to connect more Americans to their public lands. Land management agencies have not kept pace in reflecting America's diverse population or in engaging new generations to visit and explore the historic, cultural, and environmental resources available through public lands. The parks need the buy-in of all Americans to continue to grow and stay relevant.

Challenges for the future of public lands

Despite overwhelming public support, recent years have seen a disintegration of the historically bipartisan nature of conservation and public land policy in Congress. A recent CAP report illustrated the emergence of a powerful congressional anti-parks caucus, which has put many of the country's foundational conservation laws at risk. The caucus has filed at least 44 bills or amendments that attempted to remove or undercut protections for parks and public lands in the past three years alone.⁵

Recent years have also borne witness to a string of anti-government extremist events on public lands, such as the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge takeover in Oregon earlier this year and the 2014 Bunkerville standoff at the Cliven Bundy ranch.⁶ Extremists at these standoffs have demanded that the U.S. government relinquish control of national public lands to the states.

In addition to these challenges, the nation's public lands also face the effects of climate change, increased pressure to develop, and a need to engage the next generation of visitors and conservationists.

In a speech given earlier this year, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell called for a “course correction” in the management of America's public lands:

*Let us use this special year of the National Park Service's Centennial to set a new path for conservation in the 21st century. One that celebrates the diversity of public lands. One that relies on science and collaboration to chart a sustainable future for entire landscapes and ecosystems. One that invests the necessary resources into these incredible places. And one that welcomes all Americans to help care for our most treasured assets as though they were their own—because they are!*⁷

A new CAP and Conservation Science Partners study, however, finds that communities of color and low income communities in the West have disproportionately less open space and natural areas nearby than does the overall population in their states. Nearly 84 percent of communities of color and 80 percent of low-income communities in the West live in areas where the proportion of remaining natural area is lower than the state average.⁸ Correcting for these types of inequities should be a priority when considering designating new public lands or expanding existing boundaries.

This report considers how to prioritize inclusivity in and access to national parks and public lands over the next 100 years. It looks at current visitation numbers and barriers to access and discusses the impact of disappearing western lands on low-income communities and communities of color. Specific policy recommendations include:

1. Create more parks and monuments that tell the story of all Americans.
2. Increase opportunities for frontcountry recreation and preserve lands for underserved communities.
3. Engage underserved communities in decisions about development conservation, and the expansion of outdoor recreation opportunities.

Congress and the president should take advantage of the NPS' centennial anniversary to begin to build a more inclusive and better-protected system of parks and public lands. Doing so will deliver a bright start to America's next century of conservation. The agenda should be a vision not only for NPS but also for all of the country's public parks and lands, be they national forests, wildlife refuges, national monuments, or national parks.

Prioritizing inclusivity and access during the next 100 years of the NPS

Visitation and barriers to accessing U.S. public lands

The National Park Service is endowed with the responsibility of preserving the national parks “for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.”⁹ But although visitation to national parks and other public lands has skyrocketed in recent years, these numbers are not consistent among all groups. There are deep economic, racial, and ethnic disparities in who is visiting and using the national parks.

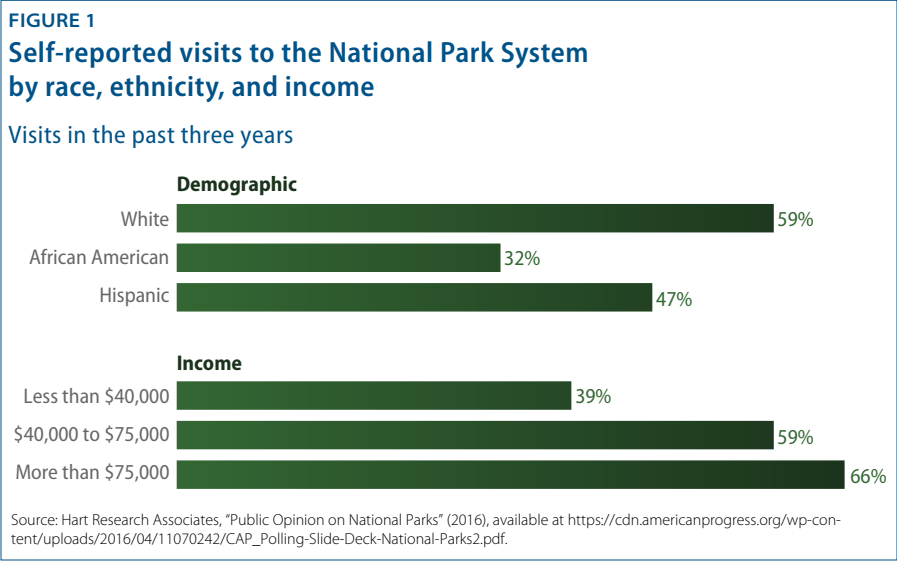
Some of these disparities may stem from the grim history of racial segregation and exclusion in the National Park System and many of America’s public lands. Up through the beginning of World War II, Jim Crow-era laws enforced segregation in many parks; in many cases, these laws made parks entirely off limits to African Americans.¹⁰ While today the parks welcome all guests, the majority of visitors are still white, aging, and fairly affluent.¹¹ NPS and other public lands agencies have struggled to bring in diverse visitors. Reasons for these disparities range from a lack of diverse employees—even today, nearly 80 percent of NPS employees are white—history, and heritage reflected in the parks, to feelings of exclusion, lack of information or gear, or a geographical or economic lack of access.¹²

In the January 2016 Hart Research poll, 55 percent of all respondents self-reported that they had visited a national park, monument, or other area in the past three years, but only 32 percent of African American respondents and 47 percent of Hispanic respondents said the same thing.¹³ Fifty-nine percent of white respondents, meanwhile, said they had visited the National Park System in the past three years.

NPS’ most recent visitation survey on racial and ethnic diversity, taken in 2009, shows similar discrepancies. The survey found that 78 percent of park visitors were white, while only 9 percent were Hispanic, 7 percent were African American, 3 percent were Asian, and 1 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native, well below their representation in the U.S. population.¹⁴

Despite these deep disparities in who is visiting national parks, Americans of all backgrounds seem to share a high degree of appreciation for their value. According to the Hart Research study, 77 percent of all Americans believe that the United States benefits a great deal or fair amount from the National Park System, including 70 percent of the African American population and 67 percent of the Hispanic population.¹⁵ Disparities in visitation, therefore, seem to be not a consequence of differing values but rather a possible repercussion of barriers to access or feelings of exclusion.¹⁶

These barriers also highlight the disparities found when examining the economic situations of visitors to parks and public lands. According to the Hart Research poll, only 39 percent of Americans with incomes below \$40,000 reported visiting the National Park System in the past three years.¹⁷ However, that number shoots up to 59 percent and 66 percent for those with incomes from \$40,000 to \$75,000 and more than \$75,000, respectively.¹⁸ These numbers correspond closely with inequalities in broader recreation rates by income.¹⁹ It is worth noting that a 2013 survey of visitors to national forests found that there were not large differences in the number of visitors from different income levels.²⁰ This may have to do with accessibility of national forest locations compared with those of national parks.



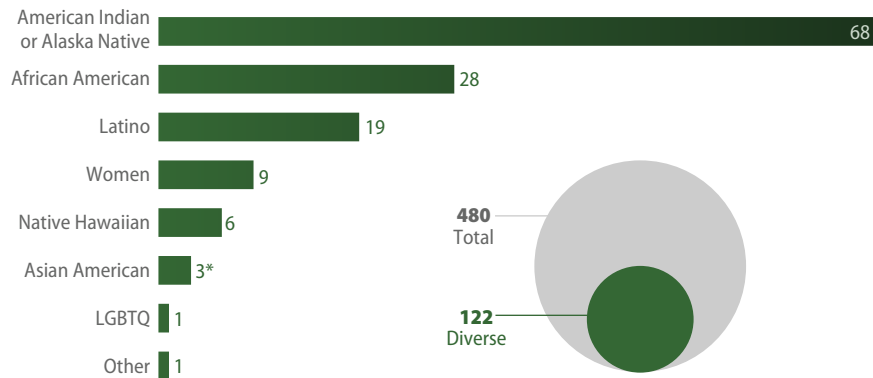
Park inclusivity should mirror the country's diversity

Creating a system of protected lands and historic sites that more accurately documents the diversity of the people, cultures, and beliefs responsible for shaping American history is one way that U.S. national parks and public lands are working to become more inclusive. By 2043, the majority of the country's residents will be people of color, and as the demographics of the nation continue to change the effort to create greater inclusivity in the National Park System will be all the more vital. Not only will it allow the NPS to properly record and honor the country's history, but it will also better engage all Americans in the enjoyment and stewardship of their parks and monuments.²¹

Currently, two-thirds of America's more than 400 national park sites are dedicated to preserving places of cultural and historic significance. A 2014 CAP analysis examined the number of national park units and national monuments that told the story of traditionally underrepresented groups in American history, including communities of color, women, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, community.²² The analysis found that only 112 of the 460 designated national monuments and national park units managed by the NPS, or 24.3 percent, in the United States have a focus on diverse groups.²³

Since the 2014 analysis, President Barack Obama has established 14 additional national monuments; with the passage of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act, Congress also added six new units to the National Park System.²⁴ Of these 20 additions, 10 have a primary focus on diverse peoples and cultures, meaning that 122, or 25.4 percent, of national park units in the United States now focus on preserving the history of diverse groups, a 1.5 percent increase since 2014.

Although it will take a dedicated effort to substantially increase the percentage of parks and monuments that focus on traditionally underrepresented communities, President Obama has served as a leader on the issue. Half of his national monument designations have focused on underrepresented groups, showcasing his emphasis on preserving diverse histories and cultures.²⁵

FIGURE 2**National parks and monuments with a focus on diverse groups**

Note: The numbers do not add up to 122 because some areas recognize more than one group.

Source: CAP analysis of Interior Department and Forest Service websites, statutory authorizations, and presidential proclamations.

*Correction, September 6, 2016: This figure has been updated to correctly reflect the number of national parks and monuments focused on Asian American history and culture.

These monuments include the Belmont-Paul Women’s Equality National Monument; the Honouliuli National Monument, designated to preserve the history of a Japanese-American internment camp; and the César E. Chávez National Monument, which commemorates the work of the important Latino civil rights activist, among others.²⁶ Most recently, President Obama designated the Stonewall Inn National Monument in New York City—the site of the Stonewall riots, often considered to be the most important event sparking the modern fight for LGBT rights—as the first park or monument to commemorate the ongoing struggle for LGBT equality.²⁷

In at least some examples where data are available, parks aimed at preserving traditionally underrepresented histories and stories do in fact attract higher visitation rates than the national average from the groups that they aim to honor. A study by Nicodemus National Historical Site, a park dedicated to preserving a western town established by African Americans during Reconstruction, found that 37 percent of visitors in 2005 were African American—much higher than the national average of 7 percent in 2009.²⁸ Similar results were found at the Manzanar Historic Site, a former Japanese American internment camp. In 2004, the park recorded 12 percent of its visitors as Asian American, the highest of any national park unit in the United States at the time.²⁹ Chickasaw National Recreation Area—sold to the federal government by the relocated Chickasaw Indian Nation in 1902—documented 12 percent of its visitors as American Indian/Alaska Native in 2005.³⁰

While these data represent the successes of only a few national park areas, they are perhaps indicative of a larger trend: Increased representation of underrepresented histories encourages increased representation of underrepresented visitors.

Policy priorities for an inclusive park system

The centennial of the National Park System is not only a chance to reflect on the nation’s success in conserving America’s public lands over the past 100 years but also an opportunity to look forward to conservation policies and priorities in the next century. To this end, the 2016 Hart Research Associates survey, commissioned by the Center for American Progress asked respondents to assess a wide range of potential policy proposals for the centennial.

TABLE 1
Centennial policy proposals that are supported by diverse groups

Poll's policy proposals	Total support	African American support	Hispanic support
Create more parks, open spaces, trails, and playgrounds in cities so it is easier for kids to get active outdoors and stay healthy	87%	91%	96%
Update the National Park Service's exhibits and displays to better reflect the contributions of traditionally under-represented communities to our nation's history, culture, and society	83%	90%	89%
Ensure that park rangers, scientists, and people working in our system of parks and public lands reflect the diversity of American society	76%	93%	84%
Create new national park sites that focus on contributions of Americans that are currently under-represented in our park system, including Latinos, African Americans, LGBT Americans, women, Native Americans, and Asian Americans	67%	85%	69%

Note: Those polled were given several policy proposals and asked to rate their support of them. The numbers in Table 1 show those who “strongly support” or “somewhat support” these proposals.
Source: Hart Research Associates and Center for American Progress, “Public Opinion on National Parks” (2016), available at https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/11070242/CAP_Polling-Slide-Deck-National-Parks2.pdf.

The responses to the survey (see Figure 3) indicate that Americans have some overlapping priorities for the future of public lands, as well as some starkly different ones. Because these priorities vary among racial and ethnic groups, policy-makers must seek to understand and respond to commonalities and differences if they are to succeed in engaging a broader section of the American population in the outdoors.

To its credit, the NPS has launched programs—such as Every Kid in a Park—which seek to make parks more accessible and inclusive, catering to different visitor needs and desires.³¹ The NPS is also in the midst of conducting the 2016 Centennial National Household Survey to understand the values and perceptions of both visitors and nonvisitors. The goal of the survey is to “enhance the relevancy of the national park system in an increasingly multicultural society.”³²

These measures are only first steps, however. “The park service should use its resources and partnerships to execute an all-out effort to promote diversity within its ranks and its parks,” said Glenn Nelson, founder of The Trail Posse, in a *New York Times* op-ed. “Its outreach should be tailored to minorities and delivered where they log in, follow, Tweet, view or listen. The park service needs to shout to minorities from its iconic mountaintops, ‘We want you here!’”³³

As the U.S. population becomes increasingly more diverse, it is imperative that national public lands grow to reflect the histories in which they are embedded. Preserving these places not only will allow future generations to have access to them but also will instill the idea that these histories are valid, important, and worth sharing. Public land management agencies must also pay due attention to the priorities of diverse groups and the implications they have for current access barriers. As the National Parks Conservation Association’s Second Century Commission has pointed out, demographic change will affect how parks are visited, and thus how the National Park System is valued, what kinds of development are appropriate, and who votes for politicians who institute policies on behalf of the parks.³⁴

The effect of the disappearing West on low-income communities and communities of color

For the past century, American conservation has been driven by the ambition to preserve lands, wildlife, resources, and outdoor experiences for future generations. Although the government has made progress in saving some species from extinction, setting aside irreplaceable wild areas, and slowing the loss of wetlands, a growing population is putting more and more pressure on remaining natural areas.³⁵

In the Western United States, the problem of natural area loss is particularly acute. According to a study released earlier this year by Conservation Science Partners and CAP, the West lost a football field's worth of natural area every 2.5 minutes between 2001 and 2011. The study, which analyzed nearly three dozen datasets, a dozen types of human activities, and more than a decade of satellite imagery, provides the first comprehensive understanding of how fast—and where—the United States is losing natural areas in the West. The combination of the human activities—including development from urban sprawl, agriculture, logging, energy development, and transportation—eats up the equivalent of a Los Angeles-sized amount of open space each year.³⁶

The continued disappearance of natural areas in the West has far-reaching consequences. Wildlife are losing habitat; hikers, campers, and hunters are losing recreation space; and the average American is moving further from the expansive places that are so cherished in the West.

The next century of conservation will need to drastically slow the rate of the disappearing West and save the best and most accessible large areas before it is too late.

Environmental justice concerns raised by the disappearing West

The continued disappearance of natural areas in the West has human effects as well as ecological ones. A deeper analysis of the data from the Disappearing West project reveals, in particular, that of the amount of natural area lost to development in the region disproportionately affects communities of color and low-income communities.

This environmental justice analysis seeks to understand the uneven way that environmental risks and benefits are distributed among people. Specifically, are traditionally disadvantaged groups bearing the burden of environmental or health hazards? In the past, environmental justice advocacy has focused on the location of environmental hazards such as toxic waste facilities, landfills, and power plants, but it can also include the distribution of and access to environmental amenities, such as parks and public lands.³⁷

The equitable distribution of parks and public lands is especially important considering the multitude of benefits that they provide. Studies have found that parks and green spaces can improve air quality, encourage recreation, foster social interaction, regulate temperatures, provide wildlife habitat, create jobs, provide mental health benefits, improve concentration, and reduce stress.³⁸ The inequitable distribution of natural areas can lead to an inequitable distribution of environmental, social, and health strains.

New parks, monuments, forests, and wilderness areas can also have important economic benefits. The recreation economy generates \$646 billion in consumer spending each year and supports 6.1 million direct jobs—that is more jobs than the mining, oil and gas drilling, and logging industries support combined.³⁹ In 2014, Headwaters Economics found that the economies of communities adjacent to national monuments expanded after the monuments' creation.⁴⁰ It also found that national park gateway communities benefited from the parks in ways beyond tourism—including attracting and retaining residents, entrepreneurs, and businesses.⁴¹ Suburban sprawl and other drivers of development add another barrier to access of public lands. Increased development pushes public lands further out of reach for the urban core, which contains high concentrations of people of color and low-income communities. As a result, the majority of these groups may find it more difficult to obtain the economic benefits that public lands generate.

Environmental justice analysis methodology

The environmental justice analysis conducted by Conservation Science Partners and CAP uses data from the Disappearing West project and 2007–2011 U.S. Census Bureau data that uses geographic information systems to determine if communities of color and low-income communities in the West have disproportionately less natural area than other western communities.

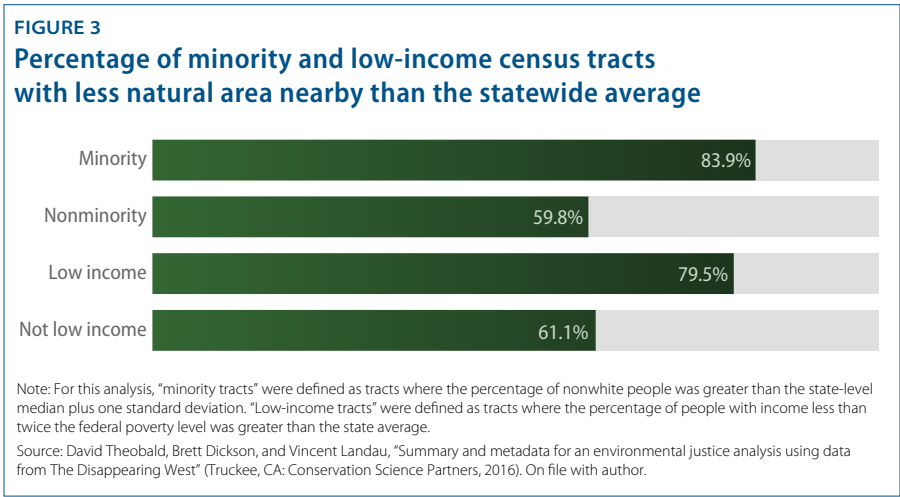
Using environmental justice demographic indicators from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA, the study first identified census tracts with potential environmental justice communities in the West.⁴² The EPA looks at environmental justice at the census tract level and identifies census tracts that are at risk of experiencing environmental injustices as those with high nonwhite populations or low-income populations. These tracts are then overlaid with environmental indicators, such as natural area loss, to determine tracts where environmental injustices are likely to occur.⁴³

For our analysis, “minority tracts” were defined as tracts where the percentage of nonwhite people was greater than the state-level median plus one standard deviation. “Low-income tracts” were defined as tracts where the percentage of people with income less than twice the federal poverty level was greater than the state average. The mean degree of development for each tract was also calculated to identify which tracts experienced disproportionate natural area loss and to determine the tracts with environmental justice concerns. This kind of analysis can help policymakers make informed decisions to ensure that communities are just when planning for new parks and public lands.

Results and findings

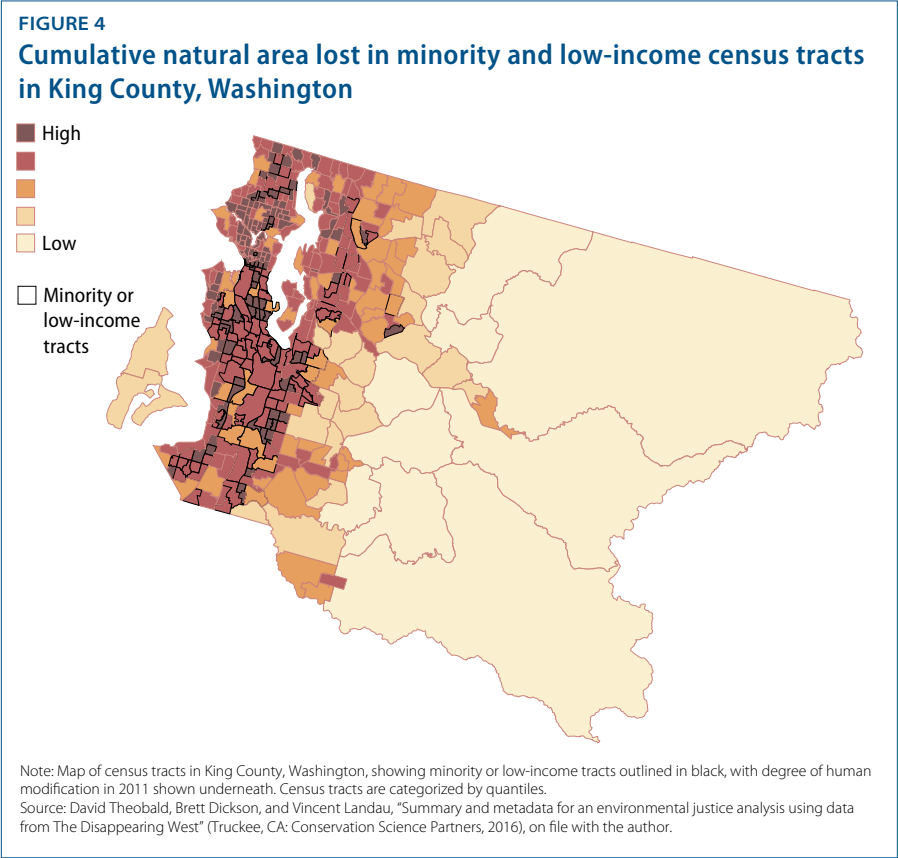
Of the 15,561 census tracts in the Western United States, the analysis found that 3,362, or 21.6 percent, could be classified as minority and that 3,283, or 21.1 percent, could be classified as low-income. When compared with the degree of human development in the tract, the study found that both low-income and minority tracts had higher levels of human modification, and thus lower amounts of natural area. Many of these tracts are associated with urban areas where urban sprawl and transportation development has been the most intensive. These areas often have high concentrations of communities of color and low income communities.

Nearly 84 percent of communities of color and 80 percent of low-income communities in the West live in areas where the level of development is greater than the state average, compared with nearly 60 percent of nonminority and 61 percent of non-low-income tracts. Additionally, on average, minority tracts are 17.3 percent more developed than non-minority tracts, and low-income tracts are 13.5 percent more developed than non-low-income tracts.

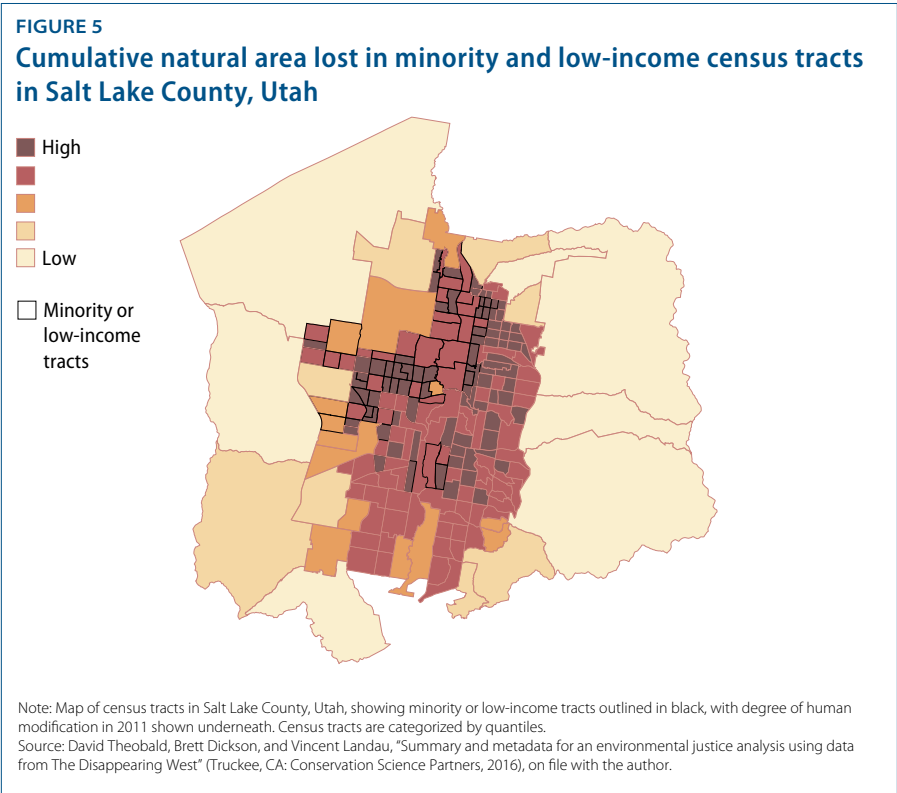


These findings indicate that there are indeed environmental justice concerns with the distribution of natural areas among communities of color and low-income communities. It may also be true that natural areas are becoming harder to access for these communities. Many large and growing cities where tracts with environmental justice concerns were found also have fast rates of natural area loss due to urban and suburban areas sprawling further from the city center, where environmental justice problems are highest.⁴⁴

For example, Washington’s King County—where Seattle and the majority of the state’s environmental justice tracts are located—experienced rapid urban sprawl between 2001 and 2011. The proportion of natural areas lost in this time frame in King County is 105.6 percent higher than the annual rate of loss in Washington and 311.7 percent higher than the annual rate of loss in the West over the same years.



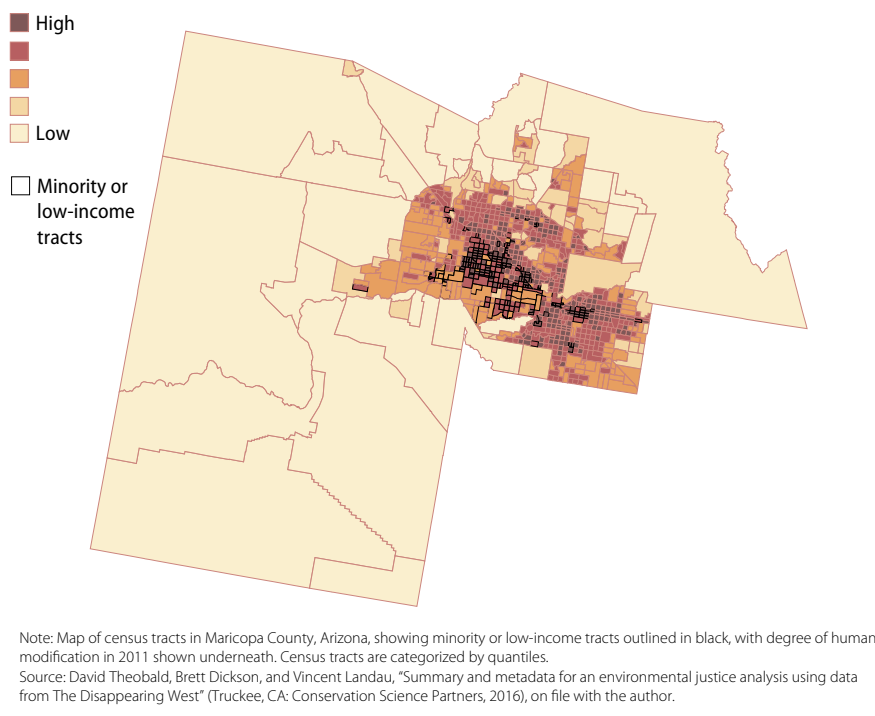
Like Seattle, Salt Lake City is a place where rapid development raises environmental justice concerns. In fact, Salt Lake County is losing natural area at the second highest rate in the state of Utah. The proportion of natural area lost each year in Salt Lake County between 2001 and 2011 was 335.7 percent higher than the annual rate of loss in Utah and 430.8 percent higher than the rate of loss in the West as a whole.



Phoenix is another city where sprawl is pushing natural areas further and further away from low-income communities and communities of color. In Maricopa County, where Phoenix is located, lands are being developed at a rate faster than anywhere else in the state. The county's annual rate of natural area loss between 2001 and 2011 is 336.6 percent higher than in Arizona and 121.2 percent higher than in the West.

FIGURE 6

Cumulative natural area lost in minority and low-income census tracts in Maricopa County, Arizona



The loss of natural area not only affects communities in that particular place, but it affects those who live in areas closer to an urban center by forcing natural areas further away.

Therefore, as the country continues to develop, it is important to carefully consider where development happens and where it is critical to conserve natural areas, so that the disproportionate effect on communities of color and low income communities is not multiplied. Our analytical findings highlight the importance of not only seeking opportunities for small natural areas such as urban neighborhood parks, but also making sure large natural areas that are accessible to underserved communities are protected and maintained.

Policy recommendations

Create more parks and monuments that tell the story of all Americans

Both Congress and the president should create more parks and monuments that make American public lands decisively more inclusive. Congress should pass legislation to create a system of protected lands and historic places that reflects the contributions of all Americans. President Obama and future presidents should continue to use their executive authority under the Antiquities Act of 1906 to create new national monuments that reflect historic figures, cultures, and events that tell the full American story.

The president should also work to combine NPS' natural and cultural heritage missions by protecting landscapes that are of particular importance to underrepresented communities. For example, the 1.9 million acre Bears Ears area proposed by a Native American inter-tribal coalition should be declared a national monument.⁴⁵ The area is estimated to contain more than 100,000 cultural and archaeological sites and is a hotbed for grave robbing, looting, and other destructive activities.⁴⁶

Similarly, more than 20 Native American tribal nations have called on President Obama to designate the proposed Greater Grand Canyon Heritage National Monument to protect additional public lands around the Grand Canyon.⁴⁷ The proposed monument would help protect sacred sites and cultural resources and would preserve and restore the surrounding ecosystems upon which tribes and local communities depend.⁴⁸

Increase opportunities for frontcountry recreation and preserve lands for underserved communities

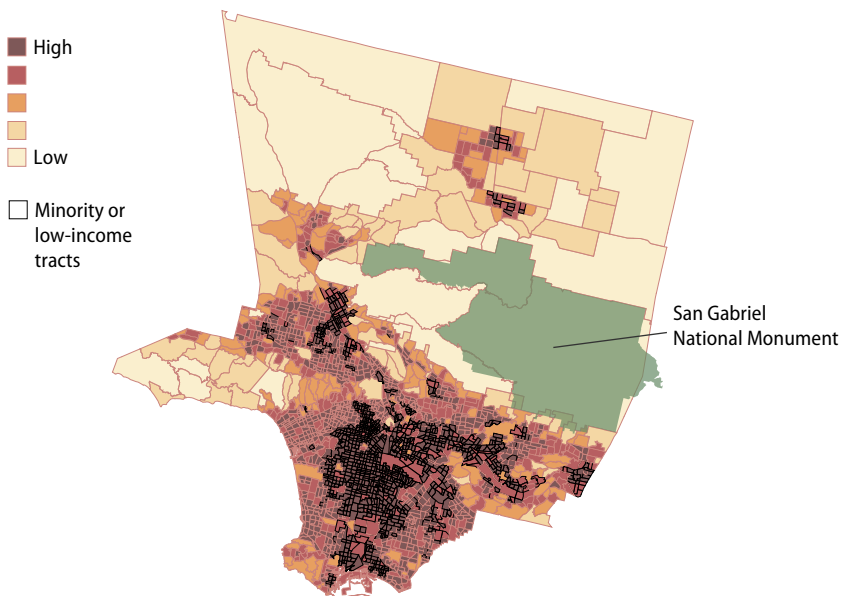
Congress, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the president should create and enhance public lands in accessible places—so-called frontcountry recreation areas. Frontcountry areas offer close-to-home natural settings and outdoor experiences, which allow people to experience nature without needing to travel to a far-off destination.⁴⁹

This type of accessible area is important not only because communities with environmental justice concerns are more likely to be in urban areas without a lot of natural area but also because 85 percent of all outdoor recreation takes place within areas easily accessible from a road.⁵⁰ Emphasis should be placed on accessible frontcountry parks near communities of color, low income communities, and urban areas.

A prime example of such a frontcountry recreation area is the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument, which was designated by President Obama in 2014 and just a 90-minute drive from 15 million people in Los Angeles.⁵¹

FIGURE 7

Cumulative natural area lost in minority and low-income census tracts in Los Angeles County, California



Note: Map of census tracts in Los Angeles County, California, showing minority or low-income tracts outlined in black, with degree of human modification in 2011 shown underneath. Census tracts are categorized by quantiles.
Source: David Theobald, Brett Dickson, and Vincent Landau, "Summary and metadata for an environmental justice analysis using data from The Disappearing West" (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2016), on file with the author.

The San Gabriel Valley lines the urban area just south of the San Gabriel Mountains and is 44.7 percent Latino, 25.7 percent Asian, 24.8 percent white, 2.4 percent black, and 2.4 percent other.⁵² Its designation was touted as an expansion of the protection of accessible open space and outdoor recreation for a largely Latino community and as a way to counter the shortage of open space in Los Angeles.⁵³

Underserved communities in El Paso, Texas would benefit from better access to nearby public lands through the designation of Castner Range as a national monument. Supporters say that a designation is likely to attract people of color and other underserved Americans because the surrounding community is 80 percent Hispanic and is the fourth-poorest metropolitan area in the United States.⁵⁴

Opening a park near low income communities or communities of color is of course only one step toward expanding and broadening access to the outdoors. For example, although Saguaro National Park is less than 20 miles from anywhere in Tucson, which is 44 percent Hispanic, less than 2 percent of visitors self-identify as Hispanic.⁵⁵ Land management agencies therefore need to redouble their efforts to attract and engage visitors through outreach programs, improved programming, and services that fit the needs and interests of a broad range of communities.

A 1994 executive order from President Bill Clinton required all federal agencies to make achieving environmental justice part of their mission.⁵⁶ And the Department of the Interior recently released its 2016–2020 draft *Environmental Justice Strategic Plan*.⁵⁷ Although the report includes important policy directives, such as including underserved groups in the decisionmaking process and monitoring disproportionate health effects on people of color, it should more explicitly prioritize land disappearance and access to public lands for communities of color and low income communities.

Engage underserved communities in decisions about development, conservation, and the expansion of outdoor recreation opportunities

Including underserved groups in the decisionmaking process allows people on the ground to get involved and gives all people a voice in their public lands and in environmental decision making.⁵⁸ The involvement of underserved community members and groups often helps uncover disparities in park availability, access, features, or quality.⁵⁹

Earlier this year, the Next 100 Coalition—a coalition of civil rights, environmental justice, and conservation groups—called on President Obama to prioritize inclusion and increase the racial and ethnic diversity of visitors to America’s national parks and public lands during the centennial year. The group, which is made up of national and grassroots groups including Hispanic Access Foundation, Outdoor Afro, Green Latinos, and the Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, put forward a vision document, a petition, and a policy brief.⁶⁰ The policy brief brings together the group’s 64 recommendations. Some of these recommendations include: increasing diverse stakeholder engagement; encouraging land management agencies to recruit and hire staff with more diverse backgrounds; providing free recreation passes to members of federally recognized tribes; and increasing funding for the Historic Preservation Fund to identify aspects of the American story absent from the parks.

Congress and the president should use these and similarly created policy documents to help guide their decision making and policy priorities for the next 100 years of conservation.

Conclusion

The next century of the National Park Service—and the next century of all of America’s public lands—must put inclusivity, access, and diversity at the top of the agenda. Embracing the idea that all histories are valid, important, and worth preserving sends a message: The National Park System is for everyone, and it embraces the changing demographics of the nation.

Creating a system of public lands that are welcoming and accessible to everyone, however, does not mean merely advertising that public lands exist—it also requires recognizing differences in accessibility, embracing a shift in policy priorities, and listening to the needs of communities that can and should be more engaged. Continuing to progress toward meeting these goals is vital to the future of our national public lands for the next 100 years.

About the author

Jenny Rowland is the Research and Advocacy Associate for the Public Lands Project at Center for American Progress. She was previously a fellow at the National Wildlife Federation, focusing on climate change and energy policy issues. Jenny holds a master's degree in geography from The George Washington University and a bachelor's degree in geography from the University of Delaware.

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