



# 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

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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!<sup>7</sup>*

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

---

## Our Mission

The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

## Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

## Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

