

PUBLIC LANDS

Does Biden's '30x30' plan trade science for popularity?

Jennifer Yachnin, E&E News reporter • Published: Wednesday, June 2, 2021



The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail in California. Bob Wick/Bureau of Land Management/Flickr

Some proponents of a concerted push to protect large swaths of natural spaces across the country are raising concerns that the Biden administration's new conservation proposal is too timid, failing to lay out a plan to truly preserve vulnerable lands and waters.

As the White House Council on Environmental Quality, the Interior Department and other agencies begin figuring out the details of the effort — rolled out earlier this month as the "America the Beautiful" initiative — these environmentalists argue that in trying to build consensus around the idea of ramping up conservation, the administration is essentially trading away scientific integrity.

"It's a very big deal that we have a president that recognizes and is willing to take action to preserve nature and address the catastrophic extinction crisis. I don't want to gloss over that. That is huge," said Randi Spivak, director of the Center for Biological Diversity's Public Lands Program.

But she continued: "This America the Beautiful report is a pivot. It's not '30x30,' and I am concerned."

President Biden's new initiative is a rebranding of the "30x30" campaign, which aimed to set aside 30% of the nation's land and water by 2030. When it was unveiled in early May — touted as the federal government's first national conservation goal — it drew immediate accolades from a plethora of environmental groups.

A day later, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland urged supporters of many of those same organizations to go out and sell the proposal to the public, counter misinformation and "fight climate change together" ([E&E News PM](#), May 7).

Critics of the outline released by the Biden administration point to the inclusion of urban and suburban parks and working lands like cattle ranches as counterintuitive to the goals of 30x30, which aimed to mitigate the impacts of climate change while also safeguarding biodiversity.

"It's not what the scientists have called for," Spivak said. "Is it better to have ranches instead of strip malls and condos? Yes. But that is different than qualifying for a scientifically based 30x30."

The Interior Department declined to comment for this article. But a Biden administration spokesperson, who spoke on background, defended the program's rollout.

"America the Beautiful is the start, not the end, of this collaborative opportunity," the spokesperson said. "It is a road map to initiate conversations. We look forward to continuing to work with diverse groups about how we can collectively conserve America's lands and waters."

The report issued by the Biden administration lacked many key details, such as a plan to pay for an ambitious new conservation campaign. One key next step is to establish a baseline of the land and water already under conservation and how the government will conduct its tally over the next decade. That effort will play an important role in determining how flexible — or not — the administration is in determining what qualifies as part of the plan.

Spivak argued that the Biden administration should model its as yet unpublished "American Conservation and Stewardship Atlas" on targets like those laid out by researchers in a 2019 [paper](#).

"Protected areas are the cornerstone of biodiversity conservation, and studies document that well-managed reserves are far more effective in safeguarding biodiversity than are other forms of land use," researchers wrote in the paper, published in *Science Advances*. They suggested that 30% of land and waters across the globe be "formally protected," along with another 20% designated as "climate stabilization areas."

That push is a way station en route to protecting 50% of the planet, an idea first promoted by biologist E.O. Wilson in his 2016 book "Half Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life."

According to the U.S. Geological Survey's Protected Areas Database of the United States, only 12% of the nation's lands are permanently protected in a natural state, as are about 23% of its oceans.

But those figures do not include multiple-use lands already under agencies like the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service, or tribal lands ([Greenwire](#), April 16).

Some conservation groups — like the Western Landowners Alliance — have pressed the administration to be pragmatic. They have argued that focusing the 30x30 plan on buying up and safeguarding land would cut out many potential allies and actually not conserve spaces like farmland that might otherwise be developed ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 17).

Administration officials have indicated that they agree, at least to some extent, suggesting there are lands not under strict protected status, along with working lands like ranches, that could be included when the first conservation atlas report is published later this year.

"We realized over the last couple months that we don't have the right tools right now to account for and honor the great work that you are doing," Interior Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy Kate Kelly [told](#) the Western Landowners Alliance recently.

She pointed to information currently in the federal database, adding: "That's not the whole story about what conservation is and what conservation should look like."

Nada Culver, the Bureau of Land Management's deputy director of policy and programs and its acting director, emphasized that same message in remarks to the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable's annual conference yesterday.

"This commitment is a recognition that large-scale conservation of ecosystems is nothing less than the protection of critical life support systems. At the same time, the success of this initiative depends on engagement across landownerships and across the country," Culver said. "This is broader than the approach used in other countries, focused on conservation and restoration, with a flexible definition of conservation as opposed to looking to just preservation and protection, as well as looking at access."

What counts as protected?



The sun rises over the Gulf of Maine in Deer Isle, Maine. Joe Raedle/Getty Images

When it comes to figuring out what land counts toward meeting the 30% goal, Spivak said the Biden administration should adhere firmly to the existing land categories — technically known as Gap Analysis Project status codes.

There are four definitions, with the strictest, or GAP 1, counting only those lands with permanent protections and management plans that maintain a "natural state." The second level, GAP 2, likewise requires a natural state but allows activities or management that might suppress a natural disturbance like wildfire or flooding.

These two categories make up the 12% of permanent protected lands in the current USGS database tally.

It's the third category, GAP 3, that could boost the Biden administration's early 30x30 achievements. Those lands are open to both "broad, low-intensity" extractive industry like logging or activities including off-highway vehicle recreation and "localized, intensive" activity like mining.

USGS notes that these lands often include national and state forests, BLM lands and some state parks.

A Defenders of Wildlife white paper on 30x30 [published](#) last year suggests that emphasizing biodiversity protection in GAP 3 areas, as opposed to other uses, could increase protected lands to nearly 30%, along with nearly 74% of marine habitat.

Still, Oregon-based conservation lobbyist Andy Kerr also criticized the idea of including areas dedicated to outdoor recreation or urban or suburban parks that are largely manicured lawns and not natural areas.

"Nature is not going to care that we're calling a bunch of urban parklands 30x30," Kerr lamented, and later added: "The Biden administration is trying to redefine what conservation means so they can easily get to 30%."

Kerr noted that the "America the Beautiful" report issued earlier this month echoes a 2019 report from the Center for American Progress. At the time, the liberal think tank employed both CEQ chief of staff Matt Lee-Ashley and Interior's Kelly.

That document recommended expanding the 30x30 definition of conservation beyond the stringent GAP 1 and GAP 2 standards to include lands where "some sustainable and traditional land uses are still allowed."

"Common sense, not dogma, should inform a determination of which lands and waters qualify as protected under a 30x30 goal," the report stated ([Greenwire](#), Aug. 6, 2019).

Kerr asserted: "They're basically throwing nature under the bus for a broader Democratic agenda ... but it's not going to contribute to having functional ecosystems across the landscape and over time."

While Kerr acknowledged that holding the conservation plan to stricter standards would be an uphill climb for the Biden administration, he said it should nonetheless be the priority.

"We need to do 1.3 times as much preservation of nature in 10 years as we have done since 1872," Kerr said, referring to the creation of the United States' first national park. "It's an aggressive goal and equally necessary. It doesn't mean it's easy."

'The judge on this has to be science'



A desert smoke tree illuminated by moonlight in the Trilobite Wilderness region of Mojave Trails National Monument near Essex, Calif. David McNew/Getty Images

The Biden plan also puts a heavy emphasis on locally driven conservation and voluntary efforts, in an apparent bid to counter Western lawmakers and elected officials who fear that 30x30 could prompt the conversion of millions of acres of public lands into official "wilderness." That designation is the most restrictive of any public lands classification, prohibiting extractive industry and grazing, as well as motorized vehicles.

But Rick Steiner, a retired marine conservation professor at the University of Alaska, said that vow of inclusion could undermine the goals of the conservation pledge.

"The question that they're going to have to wrestle with down the line is: What happens when science and national interest say one thing and the local interests say another?" Steiner asked, adding that he had hoped to see a "more methodical, comprehensive plan."

"These are federal land and federal waters, meaning they're owned and managed on behalf of all American citizens. Those of us here in Alaska have a say over what happens in the Everglades, and the people in Miami should have a say in what happens in the Bering Sea and Arctic Ocean," he said.

In an op-ed published in several Alaska newspapers, Steiner asserted that the America the Beautiful plan "cedes federal responsibility on this issue to local, parochial politics."

"Indeed, local conservation efforts are an essential part of the overall puzzle, but alone will not protect the large ecosystems necessary for habitat and biodiversity conservation," Steiner wrote, calling instead for the creation of new national parks, wildlife refuges, and both onshore and offshore monuments.

Steiner argued to E&E News that major conservation efforts — pointing to the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, signed by President Carter in 1980, or the creation of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument by President Clinton in 1996 — are not possible without opposition.

By lowering the bar on what qualifies as conserved lands, Steiner said, the Biden administration is making a "veiled concession to Republicans and industry and states."

Still, Steiner and others suggested that CEQ and Interior officials could use both the atlas and an annual report on conservation to rethink their approach to the 30x30 initiative.

That process should include federal scientists as well as independent researchers at universities and other organizations, Steiner said, in order to have a "strong consultation with the scientific community throughout the nation about what conservation's threats are, what the mitigation measures could be."

"Some of it might take money to buy people out of certain activities," he continued, pointing to efforts funded by the \$1 billion Exxon Valdez restoration program as an example. "It may be having a few billion dollars of financial component to this to pay ranchers to stay off federal lands for 10 to 20 years and pay fishermen to stay out of certain areas."

Brian O'Donnell, director of the Campaign for Nature, offered a more optimistic view, while acknowledging the questions others have raised.

"The report is a good step. There's still a lot of questions that people have," O'Donnell said.

The Campaign for Nature — a partnership of the Wyss Campaign for Nature and the National Geographic Society, along with a coalition of other conservation organizations — heads a global 30x30 campaign.

Philanthropist Hansjörg Wyss **announced** in a *New York Times* op-ed in late 2018 that he would donate \$1 billion over 10 years in an attempt to achieve the 30x30 goals.

"Right now, the definitions of what counts globally is under discussion, and what the U.S. puts forward will certainly influence that," O'Donnell said. "The United States traditionally has been a leader in major conservation, and I would hope that our proposal for 30x30 meets or exceeds standards the rest of the world picks up."

But that doesn't mean that sites like urban parks or private land should be excluded, O'Donnell said, explaining that the focus should be on whether those lands have a "nature-positive outcome."

"The idea is to conserve against industrial development, not to promote it and somehow call it conservation," he said. "This is still very new. Ultimately, the judge on this has to be science. We know that we're in an ecological emergency, and scientists will have to determine whether our standards are adequate."

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