

# The ecological value of public lands

BY REBECCA LEXA

Public lands make up nearly 40% of the United States, managed at the federal, state and county levels. Ideally, these reserves are created to benefit local residents and wildlife. In practice, however, private interests such as logging and mining often put pressure on governmental entities to allow extractive activities that can have detrimental effects on local ecosystems.

Many public lands were taken violently from Indigenous people, who often remain prohibited from exercising ancestral fishing, hunting, and other activities at these places. Because of this history, conversations around these sites can be complex, but these places are invaluable for their ecological preservation.

While not all public lands are wilderness areas, most limit the amount of development allowed within their boundaries. National wildlife refuges, for example, are managed specifically for the benefit of wildlife. Other national parks also feature wildlife and other natural wonders as a large part of their attraction.

However, many national and state forests, as well as Bureau of Land Management lands, are multiple use lands that allow for extractive activities like mining and logging, yet are large enough that they do still offer some ecological value.

Habitat loss is the number one cause of species endangerment and extinction. Every acre of land that is developed into homes and lawns, businesses, industrial buildings or conventional agricultural fields, is one less acre of land suitable for most animals, plants and fungi. While some birds or insects may be spotted in suburbs or crossing farms and fields, these species are a tiny minority of the whole, undamaged ecosystem that used to be there. And the fewer species an ecosystem has, the fewer complex interrelationships it has. That makes the ecosystem much more vulnerable to the possibility of collapsing entirely.

Public lands, especially those managed primarily as wilderness and nat-

ural areas, are oases for many species. Many animals are intolerant of humans and need to have a lot of space, while others need large territories. A lot of native plants are reliant on healthy ecosystems with interrelationships, and can't survive in isolation amid a sea of manicured, chemical sprayed lawns. But on large areas of these lands they can thrive, and often these are the only places they can do so.

Some park areas even boast few remaining remnants of old-growth forests and other intact, ancient ecosystems. They allow us a glimpse of what once was, what we've lost in all the places torn apart and changed. For those involved in habitat restoration, these are irreplaceable records of what we're trying to recreate, however imperfectly. They also offer populations of species with unique genes that often differ from the genetic makeup of the same species in a different location, and if those two populations are still able to find each other they can enhance their overall species through the blending of genetic diversity.

But even public lands are becoming increasingly fragmented. Some pieces of land are auctioned off to private bidders, who will often harvest its natural resources or strip it down to create housing. Sometimes land remains in public hands, but ecosystems are degraded or destroyed through clear cutting, strip mining and other harmful activities. And so less of these oases remain, threatening the biodiversity that hasn't already been exterminated.

One way to help preserve public land ecosystems is through contacting federal, state and local officials. Push for protection of these valuable places. Numerous nonprofits exist to help amplify the voices of people in this regard. As I dive back into my column series on native and invasive species, I'll touch on some ways to fill in ecological gaps in the areas between public lands.

*Rebecca Lexa is an Oregon Master Naturalist, nature educator, tour guide, and writer living on the Long Beach Peninsula. More about her work may be found at [RebeccaLexa.com](http://RebeccaLexa.com).*



Photos by Lissa Brewer

**TOP: Lewis and Clark National Historical Park is home to many wetland and marsh ecosystems. ABOVE: Wetland grasses sprout from the river's edge at Netul Landing. RIGHT: A sign lets visitors know that vegetative restoration is in progress near Fort Clatsop.**