

CONSERVING AMERICA'S NATURAL TREASURES

The U.S. has set aside lands for protection at least since the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872. With the establishment of the National Park System and the National Wilderness Preservation System, some of America's most precious landscapes enjoy an incomparable level of permanent protection. In addition, millions of additional acres are also conserved through a number of administrative processes overseen primarily by the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Wildlife Refuge System. But many worthy and sensitive wildlands remain unprotected.

I. PRIMARY STATUTES

A number of statutes lay out the procedures for setting aside lands and for governing activities on federal lands, including those that are open to multiple uses:

- Forest Service Organic Administration Act of 1897
- The National Park Service Act of 1916
- The Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964
- The Land and Water Conservation Act of 1965
- National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997
- Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976
- The National Forest Management Act of 1976

II. BENEFITS & MAJOR CONCERNS

- Our nation's public lands are home to countless wildlife species and provide recreation for enthusiasts from all over the world. A recently released study by the Outdoor Industry Association noted that outdoor recreation supported 6.1 million jobs and generated \$646 billion in sales and services in 2011.
- Despite millions of acres of protected lands, many of the most important public lands in the nation remain under threat due to emerging issues associated with unchecked energy development, climate change, mining, and logging. To compound matters, the 112th Congress was the first Congress since 1966 to not designate any acres for protection under the Wilderness Act even though a number of proposed wilderness packages enjoyed broad bipartisan support.



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■ UTAH'S RED ROCK WILDERNESS

Utah's Red rock region is an exceptional ecological, archeological and recreational treasure defined by its unique geological features including natural stone arches and vast canyonlands. The region is also a recreational magnet for millions of Americans who travel there for its world class mountain biking, rock climbing, hiking, bird watching, and river rafting. Despite the fact that millions of acres of the Red rock qualify for wilderness designation under the Wilderness Act, the region's wild character is jeopardized by a host of issues that are unresolved due to the lack of legislative protection. Oil and gas drilling has boomed in the region, and such operations are encroaching into wild areas that are inappropriate for development. Air quality in the region experiences some of the nation's worst wintertime ozone levels—rivaling cities like Los Angeles and Houston, primarily attributable to oil and gas operations.

A bill to protect the area, America's Red rock Wilderness Act, has been introduced in the House of Representatives in every Congress since 1989. The bill would protect the most valuable wilderness lands in the region, and has had as many as 170 cosponsors in the House and 23 in the Senate. It is expected that a version of the Red rock Wilderness Act will be introduced this year as well.

■ ALASKA'S TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

The Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska lies at the heart of the world's largest remaining temperate rainforest, home to towering groves of ancient trees and vibrant populations of eagles, grizzlies, wolves and salmon. But the history of the Tongass is a checkered one. Until recently, indiscriminate logging operations in the Tongass scarred the landscape. In addition, the logging was heavily subsidized by the Forest Service, costing the U.S. taxpayer a billion dollars since 1982. Finally, much of that unsustainable logging was suspended under the Forest Service Roadless Rule on the Tongass, adding protections to nine million acres of its unroaded wildlands.

Today, America's Rainforest is on the doorstep of an economically and environmentally sustainable future. The Forest Service has announced an intended transition out of its remaining old growth logging program there. That would take the major, long-standing conflict over Tongass timber sales off the table, and set the region on a path to a more stable and diversified economy. To facilitate that, the Obama administration needs help reprogramming federal investment in the region into new business activity that is compatible with conserving the ancient groves.

III. UPCOMING ISSUES

NRDC supports protection of sensitive and iconic landscapes. The following are a few of the special places where additional protections are needed:

■ THE BRISTOL BAY REGION OF ALASKA

The waters of Bristol Bay in southwestern Alaska provide ideal conditions for the world's largest sockeye salmon run, along with Alaska's largest Chinook salmon run. These salmon runs are the linchpin of this wilderness, supporting a \$480-million annual commercial fishery that employs 14,000 full and part-time workers. The salmon also sustain native communities that have relied on subsistence fishing for thousands of years, and are food for a vast array of wildlife including bears, eagles, seals, and whales. The Obama administration recognized the area's importance when it barred offshore oil and gas exploration and development activities in Bristol Bay, committing to "protecting ocean areas that are simply too special to drill, such as Alaska's Bristol Bay." But foreign mining companies want to build a colossal gold and copper mine at the headwaters of Bristol Bay's famed salmon runs. Over its life, the Pebble Mine would produce an estimated 10 billion tons of contaminated waste—3,000 pounds for every man, woman and child on Earth. Immense earthen dams, some taller than the Three Gorges Dam in China, would be constructed to attempt to hold back that waste forever—in an active earthquake zone. A giant pit two miles wide by 2,000 feet deep and an underground mine a mile deep would be gouged from the earth. It's no wonder the Pebble Mine is opposed by eighty percent of Bristol Bay residents.

Last May, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released in draft form an extensive scientific assessment of the Bristol Bay watershed, undertaken to determine the potential impacts of large-scale mining on salmon and other fish populations, wildlife, development, and Alaska Native communities in the region. The draft Watershed Assessment concludes that Pebble Mine would have "significant impacts" on fish populations and streams surrounding the mine site. EPA is now deciding whether to use its authority under the Clean Water Act to rule out industrial development of this area before there is further investment by the Pebble Mine companies.