



PARTNERSHIP PRIORITIES FOR AMERICA'S PUBLIC LANDS


THE VALUE OF PUBLIC LANDS PARTNERSHIPS

America's public lands preserve many of the world's most important natural and historical sites. They stand as harbingers of and bulwarks against climate change. Public use of these lands creates countless recreation opportunities, contributes greatly to the nation's \$862 billion outdoor recreation economy, and adds to the social and economic vitality of the diverse communities which they serve. More than 630 million acres of land managed by the federal government attracts nearly 1 billion annual visitors annually from across all racial, ethnic, social, and political boundaries.

Nonprofit partner organizations are essential to the public's continued access to and enjoyment of these lands. Partner groups know firsthand the opportunities presented by keeping the lands they support public, as well as the unique challenges inherent in sustaining each site. Furthermore, they provide critical funding and private sector expertise beyond what tightly compartmentalized government resources alone can provide.



Great Smoky Mountains National Park



PLA members serve more than 600 public lands, contributing more than \$250 million annually to their preservation and enrichment.

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC LANDS ALLIANCE

The Public Lands Alliance (PLA) is the national voice for the nonprofit partners of America's public lands. Its members are nonprofit organizations that have a formal partnership with a land management agency to support parks, forests, wildlife refuges, conservation areas and other public lands sites. Today, PLA members directly serve more than 650 public lands, contributing more than \$250 million annually to their preservation and enrichment.

PLA actively engages with federal land management agencies to advance the nonprofit public lands partner community. We provide support and counsel to partners that advocate directly with state and local governments and their land management agencies.

PLA seeks to strengthen policies and legislation that enhance public lands partnerships in order to protect America's natural and cultural heritage. PLA accomplishes this by:

- Engaging PLA members in educating elected leaders and policy makers about the value of public lands and public land partnerships.
- Informing PLA members about relevant policy and legislative issues in Washington D.C.
- Listening to the concerns and opportunities identified by PLA members and, when appropriate, advocating on those issues.
- Supporting PLA members and other regional, state, and local-level partner organizations to advocate powerfully for their own important regional, state, or local or regional issues.

PLA is nonpartisan in its education and advocacy. It endeavors to share the significance and value of public lands with elected leaders and policy makers no matter their political inclination.

Acadia National Park

CRITICAL PUBLIC LANDS ISSUES

Given its position within the conservation community, PLA focuses its advocacy efforts to affect change within these critical issues facing public lands and their nonprofit partners:

STRENGTHENING PUBLIC LANDS PARTNERSHIPS

PLA advocates for government actions that recognize and leverage the resources, expertise and skills of nonprofit partner organizations. PLA works with land management agencies to streamline effective partnership agreements, adapt beneficial policies and procedures, and promote the development and long-term success of nonprofit – public partnerships. PLA also encourages opportunities authorizing nonprofit partners to leverage and expand upon public funding to achieve their shared missions.

FUNDING AND STEWARDING PUBLIC LANDS

Public lands belong to the American people. PLA believes the government must responsibly fund the land management agencies that administer them, ensuring sufficient funds to address critical operations, staffing, and infrastructure. Nonprofit partners are essential to helping public lands adapt to the effects of climate change, ensuring public lands are models for environmental sustainability, and providing stewardship opportunities for the American people.

EQUITABLE ACCESS TO PUBLIC LANDS

Public lands should be accessible to the entire American public, regardless of age, background, or circumstance. PLA supports policies and programs that empower diverse communities to enter and feel welcome in the public lands of which they are part owners. PLA applauds efforts to engage partners, including tribal partners, in the stewardship of America's public lands.

2023-2024 PRIORITIES

The Government Relations Committee has identified specific priority action items to address these critical public lands issues.

PLA is eager to work with the Administration and the 118th Congress to advance legislation and policies that improve public lands and support the work of public land nonprofit partners.

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Lake Meredith National Recreation Area
Photo by Sara Owen

MULTI-AGENCY PRIORITIES

Cabrillo National Monument



BUILDING RESILIENCY FOR PUBLIC LANDS PARTNERS

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the operations and visitation of many of America's public lands, straining the resources of many nonprofit partners. On hundreds of public lands, partner retail stores have remained shuttered for more than two years. Residential learning centers have been unable to host youth.

PLA will continue to press land management agencies to take actions and provide guidance that recognize the intrinsic value and importance of nonprofit partners. PLA encourages land management agencies to be creative in permitting modifications to nonprofit operations or practices to meet public health requirements and offer visitors valuable services.

ENSURE AMERICA'S PUBLIC LANDS ARE MODELS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUTAINABILITY

PLA lends its voice to many initiatives aimed at supporting public lands as they adapt and transition to a new climate reality. PLA applauds Congress for its recent funding of high-priority projects across public lands that are designed to add resilience, adaptation, and protection for the most vulnerable natural and cultural resources. PLA will monitor the implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act, alerting member organizations to its opportunities as regulations are issued.

MULTI-AGENCY PRIORITIES

Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve

ENSURE AMERICA'S PUBLIC LANDS ARE MODELS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY (CONT.)

PLA will convene land management agency leaders with its nonprofit members and corporate partners to advance partnership policies and guidance that empowers nonprofit operations to reduce waste on public lands and pivot towards eco-friendly products and services.

PLA will also encourage the Administration and the Congress to focus on existing conservation corps as it shapes its vision for a Civilian Climate Corps. Conservation corps provide invaluable training and skill building opportunities to youth and veterans, tackling infrastructure challenges on public lands while saving tax dollars. This proven model should be foundational to a Civilian Climate Corps, offering adjustments to current requirements to ensure it can be scaled effectively and efficiently to meet the significant challenges presented by climate change.

ENCOURAGE EQUITY AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC LANDS

Congress passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, addressing major surface transportation funding and infrastructure issues. The Act funds transformative public lands initiatives, from advancing alternative transportation systems to remaking railroads and recreational trails.

PLA will monitor the implementation of this legislation, providing resources to member organizations as available. PLA applauds the Administration's efforts to advance programs that specifically help BIPOC communities to have regular, affordable access to visit and recreate on public lands. Congress should expand transportation grants to help implement the promise of legislation like the Every Kid Outdoors Act to help fourth graders and their families to experience their public lands.



MULTI-AGENCY PRIORITIES

PRIORITIZE ROBUST FUNDING FOR LAND MANAGEMENT AGENCY OPERATIONS

The success of nonprofit support and operations on America's public lands is inextricably tied to the investments made by our elected representatives in their management. In recent decades, the operational budgets of federal public land management agencies have been steadily reduced when controlled for inflation. Staffing has decreased, often as visitation increases. These reductions have impacted not only what agencies can do to best protect and conserve the resources they steward, but have constrained their capacity to partner with mission-aligned organizations.

PLA asks Congress to increase the operational budgets of its land management agencies to counteract the impacts of inflation, cost of living increases, and flat budgets that have reduced the number of staff dedicated to conservation, community engagement, and the visitor experience.

IMPLEMENT THE GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT

PLA will work with land management agencies to fully engage nonprofit partners in the implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA). Specific to the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund, PLA will encourage agencies to include nonprofit partners in the development of project lists to best leverage their ability to provide construction funding, project management capacity, and / or ongoing support to maintain restored facilities.

Niobrara National Scenic River



MULTI-AGENCY PRIORITIES

IMPLEMENT THE GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT (CONT.)

PLA will work with its members to celebrate projects funded by the GAOA across the nation and to share those stories with elected officials. PLA also champions legislation and administrative efforts to permit a land management agency and nonprofit partner to combine their funding and for that partner to construct mission-supporting facilities on public lands. Providing these opportunities will help prevent inefficiencies and greater costs to taxpayers.

INVEST IN PUBLIC LANDS EMPLOYEES

PLA will continue to urge the Administration and Congress to robustly fund land management agencies. Congress must consistently provide significant annual appropriations that enable land management agencies to fund and hire the staff necessary to not only properly maintain America's public lands, but to welcome and engage visitors and recreators.

Today, public lands do not have the adequately infrastructure to safely house current employees of both land management agencies and their operational partners. PLA encourages Congress and the Administration to work together, and with public lands partners, to develop multiple strategies that ensure safe, affordable housing is available for all employees necessary to steward our public lands.

EXPAND OPPORTUNITIES FOR NONPROFIT PARTNERS TO LEVERAGE FEDERAL FUNDS

PLA strongly encourages Congress to incentivize private support for public lands through challenge cost-share opportunities. A key example is the National Park Centennial Act of 2016, which established a permanent matching fund for partner of the National Park Service to create impact. Unfortunately, the bill provided minimal funding.

PLA continues to encourage discretionary appropriations for the NPS Centennial Challenge to ensure a minimum of \$15 million in annual matching funds available to NPS partners. PLA also will encourage elected officials to replicate this successful program with other land management agencies, encouraging a culture of philanthropy across all federal public lands.

ENCOURAGE ADVOCACY WITH STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

PLA recognizes the critical importance of advancing partnerships at the state and local level. Although its staff resources are dedicated primarily to advocacy aimed at the federal government, PLA understands partners of state and local land management agencies require the same support from their government counterparts as federal partners do. The principles and initiatives that PLA advocates often apply directly to state and local land management agencies, and several initiatives advanced by PLA at the federal level, including implementation of the Great American Outdoors Act, may only be fulfilled through the cooperation of state and local governments.

PLA specifically partners with the California League of Park Associations (CALPA), coordinating and sharing strategies to promote effective partnerships in the State of California. CALPA and PLA encourage similar efforts across the nation.



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

EMPOWERING A CULTURE OF PHILANTHROPY

The BLM adopted its first-ever donations and philanthropy policy in November 2019 and published a new toolkit for BLM partnership in February 2020, at the same time that the employees responsible for these programs left the agency as part of the mass relocation. With new leadership in place, PLA is committed to collaborating with BLM to disseminate this guidance throughout the partner community and the BLM field.



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ADVANCING PARTNERSHIP POLICIES

PLA has been actively working with the NPS through several public comment periods on critical policies and guidance related to partners. PLA is asking NPS to permit nonprofit partners to implement the Checkout Counter Donation Program, created by Director's Order 21 in December 2016. This program, which has been unavailable to many PLA members, should empower round up programs at cooperating association registers and friends-led educational programs. It should also permit any park-specific nonprofit partner to receive funds collected by a park concessioner and deploy them in partnership with their Superintendent to benefit the NPS mission.

PLA will also continue to advocate for intellectual property provisions of NPS partnership agreements that respect and clarify the rights of nonprofit partners. These provisions should also be effective in the field, empowering NPS and nonprofit leaders to make decisions and create impact without constant recourse to paperwork and legal counsel.



U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

FULL PARTICIPATION IN THE FEDERAL LANDS RECREATION ENHANCEMENT ACT (FLREA)

FLREA has not been revised in more than 15 years and its modernization is a priority for many agencies and elected officials. PLA urges Congress to fully include USACE in the benefits and opportunities of FLREA. Currently, USACE lakes and projects may be accessed with the America the Beautiful Pass, but the USACE does not have the authority to retain recreation fees collected at USACE sites. The other four major federal land management agencies have this authority. This modification would increase funds available to improve the USACE visitor experience by tens of millions of dollars annually.



Photo by Stacey Reese

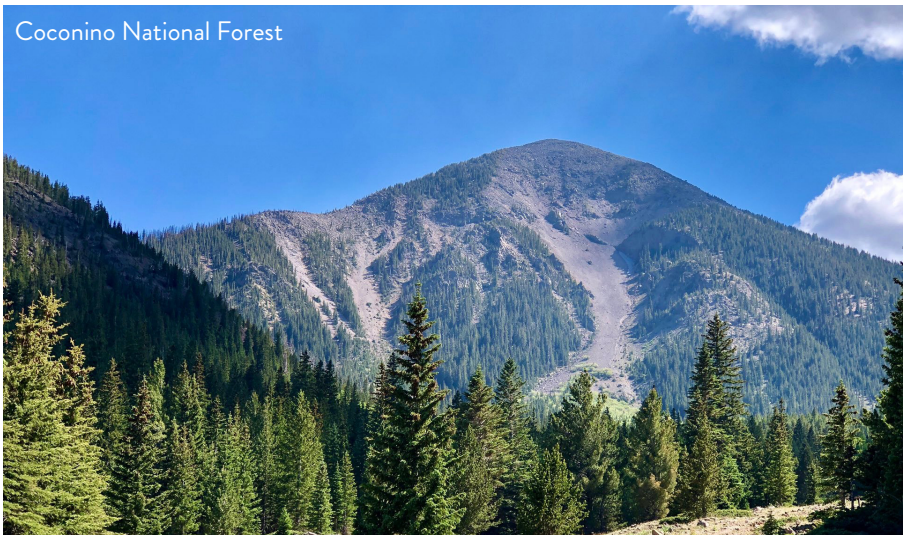
U.S.D.A. FOREST SERVICE

ENSURE THE CONTINUITY OF EXTENDED PARTNERSHIP AUTHORITIES

In 2014, Congress passed new authorities permitting USFS to partner with cooperating associations to cooperatively manage and operate visitor facilities and provide them with health and safety items. PLA has worked with the USFS to provide educational opportunities that help both cooperating associations and USFS staff use the agreement authorized by the extended partnership authorities. The authorities are not permanent and are currently extended by Congress on an annual basis.

PLA will work closely with the USFS to track the successes and visitor experience enhancements that have resulted from this agreement in order to pursue a permanent authorization and ensure stability for associations.

Coconino National Forest



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

ADVANCE COOPERATIVE PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM (NWRS)

PLA was selected by the NWRS as its national cooperative fundraising and marketing partner in October 2020. The purposes of the partnership include strengthening nonprofit partners of the NWRS and expanding their capacity for support and mission impact. The partnership will also endeavor to build awareness of the NWRS, activate the next generation of conservation stewards, and attract new corporate and community partnerships to ensure these are among the best places where wildlife and people can thrive.

IMPROVE PARTNERSHIP POLICIES AND AGREEMENTS

In 2014, FWS adopted a friends policy that placed restrictions on its nonprofit partners outside experiences of any other federal land management agency. For example, the FWS asserts that friends groups are required to turn over the proceeds of fundraising events on wildlife refuges to the FWS to be deposited in a federal Treasury account. PLA will continue its efforts to revise the current Friends Policy and Agreement to encourage increased philanthropy and greater capacity within friends groups to support the FWS while ensuring the independence of nonprofit partner organizations.



Photo by Diana Robinson
"Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge



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Be a voice for our public lands.
For more information, visit publiclandsalliance.org.

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