

Public lands improve public health

Our public lands are uniquely American. They sustain us, as individuals and communities. The data makes it clear: our public lands provide a space for outdoor recreation, safe drinking water, and peace of mind that all improve public health. While public lands and their related health benefits are widely available, more work is needed to make sure everyone has access to these vital public resources regardless of who they are or where they live. The significant health benefits of public lands, when paired with the related improvements in local economic development, make it clear that conserving our public lands is a sound investment in our country's well-being.

Public lands play a critical role in improving health outcomes.

Public lands play an important role in improving Americans' physical and mental health. The Economic Research Service ([ERS](#)) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that recreation and tourism boost local economies while reducing poverty and improving education and [health outcomes](#). Three-quarters of Americans get less than the recommended amount of physical activity, and proximity to public lands and parks have a critical role in encouraging healthy movement. A recent study estimated that the benefit of protected public lands for visitors' mental health was conservatively [\\$6 trillion dollars](#) per year globally.

These health benefits and associated economic impacts strongly motivate continued efforts to get kids outdoors, improve access to parks for economically disadvantaged people, and encourage [veteran access](#) to parks, which can be particularly beneficial for those recovering from traumatic brain injuries and PTSD. The [Every Kid Outdoors](#) (EKO) program provides free access for all fourth graders and their families to American public lands or water sites, including national parks – the program began in 2015 for the National Park Service centennial and transitioned to EKO with authorization through 2026 under the bipartisan [Every Kid Outdoors Act](#), led by Joint Economic Committee Chairman Martin Heinrich. Between September 2021 and August 2022, more than 185,000 children participated, and research on EKO participants has shown that [without the free access](#) most (73%) would never have visited a public park.

Public lands provide [additional health benefits](#) by protecting drinking water sources. These natural spaces store precipitation, reduce stormwater management costs, and maintain surface and groundwater resources. For example, national forests provide [one-third of the water](#) in the West for [60 million people](#) in 3,400 communities worth [\\$7.2 billion annually](#).

Ensuring equitable access to public lands and their benefits is essential.

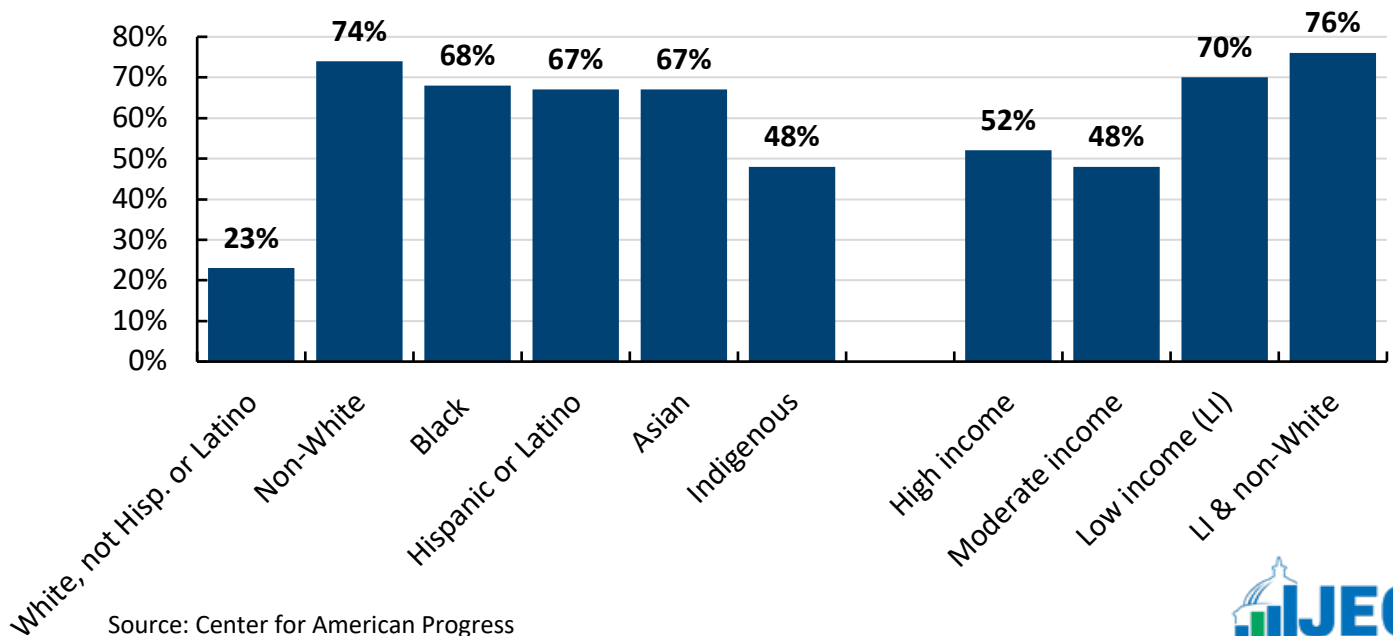
Because Tribal Nations have important values, interests, and input for public land stewardship, it is vital to explore ways to increase the involvement of Indian tribes in the management of public lands so that traditional cultural practices can continue and important cultural sites and sacred

landscapes are protected for generations to come. Two bills introduced by Chairman Heinrich in the 117th Congress address tribal interests in the [disposal and management](#) of public land and provide for the preservation of [tribal cultural sites](#) on public land. In the current 118th Congress, Chairman Heinrich and Senator Cramer introduced the bipartisan [Lake Access Keeping Economies Strong Act](#) to make it possible for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to enter joint management partnerships with Tribes and nonprofits to ensure that recreation fees from Army Corps lakes stay in the community and improve these facilities.

Additionally, policymakers have taken concrete steps to begin to address the “nature gap” that [excludes](#) many Americans from enjoying the benefits of public lands, with people of color and lower-income families particularly likely to live in nature deprived areas. Much of this is due to how discrimination and racism in the United States have created patterns of racial and economic segregation that reduce access to public lands and other natural places. Programs exist to address this gap, such as the EKO program discussed above. Research has shown that most participants in the EKO program would not have visited a park without this free access. Studies have also shown that participants are [more likely to visit](#) parks for the rest of their lives if they experience these public lands at age ten.

People of Color and Low-Income Communities are More Likely to Experience Nature Deprivation

Percent of People Living in a Nature-Deprived Area by Census Tract Demographics in the United States, 2017



The Land and Water Conservation Fund was fully and permanently funded in the [Great American Outdoors Act](#), which was enacted in 2020 and championed by Joint Economic Committee Chairman Martin Heinrich. This increased investment has already begun to be [distributed to all](#)

[50 states](#), U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. Recent changes to the funding guidelines call for integrating more work with Tribal Nations and underserved communities and clarifying eligibility to ensure that all federally recognized Tribes can take part in and support future public outdoor recreation and conservation projects. These LWCF changes also prioritize the creation of parks in underserved communities. Efforts such as the proposed [Transit to Trails Act](#) would fund projects to make transportation to public lands and waters more accessible for underserved communities.

Thinking beyond the issue of access, there have also been notable instances of people of color being [intimidated](#), [threatened](#), and at times the subject of violence while experiencing natural areas. There is also insufficient federal funding to ensure safety on federal lands. This contributes to the [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives](#) (MMIR) epidemic. Federal laws, such as the reauthorization of the [Violence Against Women Act](#) in March 2022 and [Savanna's Act](#) in October 2020, are improving law enforcement, justice protocols, and coordination efforts to better respond to MMIR. The bipartisan [Not Invisible Act](#) led by Senators Murkowski, Cortez Masto, and Tester became law in 2020 alongside Savanna's Act and established a commission to amplify work on the MMIR epidemic and was [extended](#) in 2023. Chairman Heinrich and Senator Luján have [secured funding](#) in fiscal year 2023 to directly address these issues in New Mexico, as Albuquerque and Gallup, New Mexico are among the top ten cities in the United States for the [highest numbers of MMIR](#) cases in 2017 and more work is urgently needed.

The lack of personnel on public lands also results in the desecration of sacred sites. For example a New Mexico site with 8,000 year old petroglyphs or rock carvings, [La Cieneguilla](#), was [vandalized](#) last year with swastikas and racial slurs. More funding, monitoring, guides, and enforcement would help to mitigate this vandalism.

While preventing these sorts of incidents requires broader societal change, efforts to better integrate natural spaces are essential and can also provide work opportunities. For example, [Service Corps](#), which engages diverse youth and young adults as they explore future outdoor careers, or [the Indian Youth Service Corps](#), which was expanded this year with Inflation Reduction Act funding, can help make more people feel safe and welcome in the outdoors.

Climate change poses a risk to continued health of US public lands and the health and mental health benefits they provide.

Climate change threatens the health of U.S. public lands and the health benefits they provide to Americans. Extreme events exacerbated by climate change, like increasingly severe fires and hurricanes, pose risks to the physical infrastructure and integrity of public lands and the ecosystem services they provide. For example, climate-fueled fires cause [closures](#) of public lands, such as [Yosemite Valley](#) during peak tourism season. Hotter temperatures and smoky skies also limit the quantity of days when outdoor recreation is feasible and healthy. Disasters can also hinder access to public lands by compromising transportation options. Efforts to address

climate change will, therefore, have the added benefit of protecting public lands and their associated health and mental health benefits.

The economy, labor market, and health are inextricably linked, so the JEC Democratic staff has also provided a companion piece that discusses the economic benefits from public lands. These economic benefits from public lands can also further reduce poverty and improve public health.