

## The Link: Public Lands and Water

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Last year, Colorado made history as the first state to declare a day designated to the celebration of its public lands. To those of us in the conservation community, this makes sense—with over 24 million acres of public lands, Colorado has one of the best track records in the United States for ensuring its citizens have access to some of our country's most beautiful wild places. Our public parks, rivers, and mountains are world-famous, with visitors coming from across the globe to take advantage of our outdoor recreation opportunities. This has been a boon for Colorado—over 90 percent of Coloradans participate in some form of outdoor recreation every year, and the outdoor industry contributes \$13.2 billion each year to Colorado's economy.

The fight to preserve these public lands has recently come to the forefront of national attention. There is an extremist-driven movement to transfer our public lands to state control, putting them at risk for mining, drilling, or being sold off to the highest bidder. These activities not only damage the wild nature of these lands, but would also limit public access for hiking, fishing, hunting, cycling, kayaking, and other outdoor activities. Luckily, Coloradans recognize the important role that public lands play in preserving our environment, contributing to our economy, and improving our quality of life. Colorado businesses do too, and in 2016 we formed the Colorado Outdoor Business Alliance. This coalition now counts over 130 members - manufacturers, retailers, startups, marketing firms, ranches, outfitters, technology companies, and more - all committed to advocating for our public lands.

Protecting our public lands is particularly important when it comes to water. Each year, millions of people are drawn to our rivers and lakes for world-class fishing, rafting, kayaking and swimming. What visitors may not realize is that the natural surroundings are keeping our rivers and streams clean, making Colorado's water some of the best in the country. Healthy forests, wetlands, and riparian zones can act as a natural filter, purifying water from pollutants such as metals, viruses, oils, excess nutrients, and sediment. Because of this, our public lands help keep Colorado's water clean for use, whether for homes and neighborhoods, agriculture, or businesses.

Along with having a positive impact on water quality, public lands are a critical part of maintaining access to Colorado's best waterways. The best stretches of river in Colorado to raft, fish, or hike along are those that have enough water running through them to keep fish and wildlife flourishing, and boats moving. It takes the foresight of protecting public lands, and the implementation of smart water management to keep Colorado's rivers healthy, flowing, and viable for recreation.

Colorado's public lands are a vital component our state's image as a national leader in conservation, outdoor recreation, and commitment to our natural resources. Our stunning landscapes, habitats, and waterways are gifts we cannot afford to lose. These lands belong to all Americans, and we must preserve and protect them for ourselves and future generations. We can do just that by celebrating Colorado Public Lands Day on May 20th, 2017.

Learn more about the [Colorado Outdoor Business Alliance](#) and [Colorado Public Lands Day](#).

*About the author:* Gabe grew up exploring the landscapes of northern California, traveling throughout the state to backpack, hike, paddle, and climb. After studying Environmental Science at UCLA, he pursued his passion for connecting people with nature as an outdoor educator, before heading back to school for an MA in International Environmental Policy at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies (Monterey).

Following various conservation (and climbing) adventures with The Nature Conservancy, National Audubon Society, and IUCN throughout California, Chile, and Jordan, Gabe has landed in a part of the American West he has always been inspired to explore and protect. He is excited to build relationships within the outdoor recreation and technology industries and works to connect these communities with the public lands that make this state unique and its economy strong. When he's not working on public lands protection, Gabe is likely off seeking Type 2 fun in the mountains or teaching for the National Outdoor Leadership School.