The Protecting America's Wilderness Act (H.R. 2546) and the coetaneous PUBLIC Lands Act (S. 3288), will help restore 729,000 acres of previously logged federal land, discourage illegal marijuana farms, and protect 630,000 acres for wilderness and 684 miles of streams to be designated as Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Just as importantly, these pending bills will help in the fight against climate change. This factsheet explains how protected lands can serve as an important tool in climate education.

Key Takeaways

- Nature is the best teacher. Studies indicate that the public better comprehends climate data when presented in natural settings.
- The Protecting America’s Wilderness Act authorizes the creation of visitor centers, as well as the direct experience of nature, along with interpretive displays that will help Californians more fully understand the urgent science underlying climate change.
- The legislation would protect wild landscapes adjacent to the urban centers of Los Angeles and Ventura Counties, providing much needed ‘outdoor classroom’ space to hundreds of thousands of students in Southern California.
The reach of climate change spans decades, industries, and demographic groups. People of all backgrounds need to do their part to continuously push our society and economy toward sustainability, collectively and in their own lives. Two of the greatest barriers preventing widespread and timely action among the public on climate change are lack of understanding of the threat posed and underestimation of the value of a healthy environment.\(^1\) Put another way, most people fail to act on climate change because they do not fully understand its implications, including on their own lives. Effectively educating the public about what a hotter, more unstable planet means for them is essential to sparking action across society.\(^2\)

There is encouraging news. Recent studies show that experiences in nature can lead people to form a more “eco-centric” worldview; when people visit and connect with wilderness areas, they become far more concerned with threats to their ecosystems. As a result, lessons about climate change taught in such places are more likely to influence behavior. Time spent in nature provides prime opportunities to engage in pro-environmental actions, such as identifying and measuring climate change indicators, and being on-site increases interest in these actions and understanding of what they accomplish.\(^3\) Research suggests that inclination toward the environment and environmentally conscious behaviors continue well after having educational experiences in nature.\(^4\)

So, it stands to reason that improving access to nature must be considered an integral component of educating the public about climate change in a meaningful way, and thus climate action altogether.

\(^1\) Allred, S.B.; Schneider, R.L.; Reeder, J.G. The Role of Natural Resource Professionals in Addressing Climate Change. Climate 2016, 4, 38.
\(^3\) Landon et. al. (2019) Understanding and Modifying.
\(^4\) Ibid.
At the heart of the Protecting America’s Wilderness Act is a commitment to bring Californians closer to their environment. This is accomplished in two major ways: restricting development and engaging in restoration within the protected areas, and improving public access, including authorizing construction of new visitors’ centers. The bill also calls for feasibility studies for hundreds of miles of new trails that would be restricted for natural uses. Additional access will give visitors greater opportunity to experience nature, thereby deepening a commitment to preserving nature. Moreover, the new projects will entail agencies hosting public meetings, which will be other venues, implicitly or explicitly, for climate education.

Essentially the two prongs of this approach are preservation of natural spaces and expanded public access to enjoy them in non-damaging, ecologically healthy ways. The following is a list of provisions that directly pertain to improving public access to the areas protected and restored by the legislation:

- Authorize a visitors’ center for public lands in Trinity County
- Authorize a visitors’ center for public lands in Del Norte County
- Establish the Elk Camp Ridge Recreation Trail in the Smith River National Recreation Area
- Ensure that federal land managers can partner with qualified organizations to help maintain trails and campgrounds, staff visitor centers and to conduct public education and outreach
- Require the study of the feasibility of establishing a 360-mile long “Bigfoot National Recreation Trail” that would run from the Mendocino National Forest to Redwood National Park
- Require a study of the possibilities for developing more overnight accommodations near Redwood National and State Parks.
- Require the study of the feasibility and public interest in building a roughly 115-mile trail for hiking, horseback riding, and mountain biking around Trinity Lake in Trinity County.
- Require federal officials to study options for improving access to trails in non-wilderness areas in the North Coast for hikers, horseback riders, mountain bikers, and off-highway vehicle enthusiasts.
- Require a study of the feasibility of constructing several non-motorized trails in Del Norte County’s Smith River National Recreation Area.
- Require federal agencies to study the feasibility and public interest involved in the establishment of a 400-mile long trail that would run the length of the Los Padres National Forest to be known as the “Condor National Scenic Trail”.
- Require the Forest Service to study the feasibility of building a new off-highway vehicle route in the Los Padres National Forest.
- Require a study of the feasibility of establishing new non-motorized trails for hikers, equestrians, and bicyclists in the Los Padres National Forest outside of protected wilderness areas.
CLIMATE CHANGE CAN BE TAUGHT IN MANY WAYS ON THE PROPOSED PROTECTED LANDS

Hands-on education about climate change is the starting point on the way to the transformational change necessary to meet the threat. Informed and engaged citizens pressure policymakers to make bold changes and form the workforce who will lead the transition to a sustainable economy. 5

So how can the protected lands be best used for educational purposes? A 2017 report titled "Addressing Climate Change Through Education" 6 argues that:

"Active learning should be connected to local problem solving... Problem solving-based education can increase the degree to which students behave in a sustainable manner if learners are presented with information and behavior change options whereby concrete gains can be made to reduce individual footprints... It is important therefore to include measurement tools, such as carbon and ecological footprint calculators, with climate change education so that learners can track the changes they can make/are making/will make over time."

Another research report compiled by the Institute at the Golden Gate studied climate education and training programs at 13 different protected areas across the globe. 7 They found a variety of approaches that were successful at increasing the relevance of climate change to park visitors, especially having students and other visitors learn to measure climate indicators and discuss their significance. They also discovered that it is important to properly educate park officials about their protected areas’ connection to climate change so that they could pass on the lessons to visitors. The report emphasizes that environmental education is very impactful when protected areas worked with schools and other educational programs as a complement rather than a substitute. Likewise, it recommended that schools include nature-based experiences in their curricula as part of a complete education in climate and sustainability.

5. Ledley, et. al. (2017, June 28). Addressing Climate Change Through Education. 
6. Ibid. 
8. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/climatechange/cfpprogram.htm 
Finally, there is a model for how the proposed protected lands could become centers for climate education. The Climate Friendly Parks program, launched nearly 20 years ago, sets standards for federally protected lands to lower their own carbon footprints, provide shining examples of sustainability, and educate both visitors and the nearby communities about climate change. Additionally, in 2015, the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA) served over 13,200 students from schools throughout Los Angeles and Ventura County through its “Parks as Classrooms” programs. The Protecting America’s Wilderness Act would expand the SMMNRA and could reach a larger population of students in urban southern California.

To be sure, each protected area in California will have its own unique lessons about the causes and effects of climate change. The lands preserved and restored by the Protecting America’s Wilderness Act will serve as wonderful venues for connection between people and nature and serve as living laboratories for climate studies at the same time.

**OUTDOOR EDUCATION IS MORE IMPORTANT NOW THAN EVER**

We know that climate change is an immediate threat and that we must take action in every way as soon as possible. On top of that, the recent pandemic has challenged our educational infrastructure at its very core, making classroom learning all but impossible, and funding hardly available. One possible solution to these two problems is to rethink climate learning: conduct education outdoors, where physical distancing is more possible, and the lessons will have a greater impact. Also, while many sectors of our nation’s economy have been crippled, and some might possibly disappear forever, careers in climate and sustainability are in good shape to employ current students when they graduate. Training youth in climate-related fields will be essential to making sure they have good employment prospects, and for businesses, NGOs, and government agencies to have the workforce they need to be successful.

The Protecting America’s Wilderness Act, if passed, will give the opportunity for millions of Californians and visitors to connect with the unique and beautiful lands that this great state holds. By doing so, it will open up one of the greatest venues for learning about climate change in a holistic, empathetic way. With improved access, construction of visitors’ centers, and new trails, California’s public lands may become the ultimate classrooms for climate change studies.

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8. https://www.nps.gov/subjects/climatechange/cfpprogram.htm
Take action: visit www.climateresolve.org to contact legislators on the Protecting America’s Wilderness Act and on other climate change matters of importance.

California-based Climate Resolve advocates for equitable climate solutions. The organization organizes numerous programs that reduce climate pollution as well as prepare Californians for the impacts of climate change. Climate Resolve is located at the LA Cleantech Incubator.