

Four Steps President Biden Can Take to Ease the Extinction Crisis

Conservationists want the administration to do more to tackle biodiversity loss

<https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/four-steps-president-biden-can-take-ease-extinction-crisis>

By [Lindsey Botts](#) | Feb 17 2021

During his first week in office, President Biden issued a slew of [executive orders](#) directed at fulfilling some of the most ambitious goals in his [climate plan](#). Among other things, the Biden executive orders pause all new oil and gas leases on public lands, commit to electrifying government vehicles, and promise to create jobs in the clean energy sector. The orders are all part of a [\\$1.7 trillion campaign](#) pledge to make the United States carbon neutral by 2050.

While environmentalists welcomed these bold actions, some conservation groups feel there's still something missing: an articulated agenda and a similar set of actions for halting human-caused biodiversity loss.

According to [a biannual analysis put out by the Wildlife Fund](#), the global population of invertebrates has dropped by nearly 70 percent over the past 50 years. Last year, a [UN report](#) on the state of biodiversity found that nearly 1 million species are now facing extinction. In North America alone, as many as one-third of species are vulnerable to extinction, according to the [National Wildlife Federation](#).

The Trump administration, of course, only served to accelerate these trends, and the past four years have been [devastating for wildlife conservation](#) in the United States. It'll take ambitious goals pursued at multiple scales to achieve the level of protection needed to stop extinction. As Paula Ehrlich, president and CEO at the E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation, said during last year's Half-Earth Day festival, "Once these species are gone, they're gone forever."

The Biden administration has already taken some proactive steps to tackle the issue, most notably by committing to protect 30 percent of US lands and waters by 2030, a [global initiative](#) known as 30x30. The president's Climate Day executive order directs the secretary of the interior to coordinate with other federal agencies, states, and Native American nations to develop a plan for reaching the 30x30 goal. Some advocacy groups and scientists, however, think the 30x30 initiative on its own is not enough to stem the tide of mass extinction. Given the complex, overlapping factors driving the extinction crisis, these groups would like to see the Biden administration confront the problem in multiple ways.

Here are four of the most significant.

Strengthen the Endangered Species Act.

One of the most obvious ways for the Biden administration to address the extinction crisis would be to fully enforce the Endangered Species Act. The [Trump administration did its best to gut the implementation of the landmark bill](#), most notably by narrowing the criteria by which a species can be listed and easing restrictions on extractive industries. The Trump administration also narrowed the definition of what qualifies as a species' habitat.

Most wildlife advocates are calling for a total repeal of Trump's modifications. Some groups, like [WildEarth Guardians](#) and the [Environmental Policy Innovation Center](#) (EPIC), say that it won't be enough to just reverse the previous administration's actions. They want to see the Department of the Interior led by science and [not politics](#). EPIC's recommendations include expanding the existing definition of habitat, making the process for listing faster, and improving methods to track the conservation status of species.

"Things weren't exactly working great in the pre-Trump era for endangered species," says Ya-Wei Li, director for biodiversity at EPIC. "I think that we now finally have an administration that I hope is willing to take a really hard look at what it takes to conserve biodiversity in the country and then start thinking about tools that are needed to meet that goal."

Protect wildlife habitat.

Habitat loss is one of the biggest drivers of extinction. According to one comprehensive study, [the United States lost over 24 million acres of natural areas to development](#) between 2001 and 2017. [David Theobald](#), one of the coauthors of the study, says that figure is the equivalent of nearly three football fields of wildlands lost to development every minute. This scale of development leaves many species with only a fraction of their historic range. For instance, the [Florida panther](#)'s range has been reduced to 5 percent of its former territory.

In response, some [philanthropic foundations](#), [scientists](#), and other [advocates](#) are pushing for more protected spaces. This is where the Biden administration's commitment to conserving 30 percent of US lands and waters comes in. [Nearly 30 percent](#) of the United States is made up of public land, but only about [12 percent](#) offers protected wildlife habitat. Logging, mining, oil and gas drilling, and cattle grazing make many public land areas ill-suited for wildlife conservation.

The best way to protect lands permanently is for Congress to use its authority to establish national parks, national wildlife areas, and wilderness areas. But if Congress refuses to act, Biden could use the power of the [Antiquities Act](#) to create new national monuments on federal land. Biden appears poised to do just that. On his first day in office, he signed an [executive order](#) that lays the groundwork for restoring the original boundaries and protections of Utah's Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument and Bears Ears National Monument as well as Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument, all of which were downsized or curtailed by Trump.

Working with states and tribes would provide another route for the administration to protect not just federal land but also wildlife corridors at the local level. Many western states are already leading the way on this. For example, [Washington State](#) has invested over \$200 million in connecting habitat along the I-90 corridor. [The project](#) supports the construction of fencing, wildlife bridges, and underpasses to help wildlife like [deer](#), [bears](#), and [wolverines](#) safely access forested areas on either side of a 15-mile stretch of highway. Efforts like these reduce accidents while also increasing habitat.

The Biden administration could also work with private landowners to create [conservation easements](#) to incentivize them to leave their land undeveloped. The [US Fish and Wildlife Service](#) estimates that over [50 percent](#) of endangered species use private land as habitat, so this would be particularly helpful in expanding protections for biodiversity-rich areas.

“To effectively conserve biodiversity and limit our impacts on wildlife, we need to advance conservation at the scale that nature needs, and that means conserving ecological networks,” says Jodi Hilty, president and chief scientist at the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, a nonprofit that aims to restore connectivity in the western US and Canada. “What the science shows is that interconnected protected parks and other areas for biological diversity conservation are much more effective than isolated areas in human-dominated systems.”

Join the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The Biden administration could send a major signal to other countries that the United States is ready to address the extinction emergency by calling on the Senate to ratify one of the most important global environmental treaties: the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) came out of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and its goal is to protect biodiversity while ensuring there is an equitable share of natural resources across countries. The treaty has been ratified by every nation-state on Earth—with the exception of the United States, that is. Scientists and conservationists are hoping President Biden will change that by lobbying for Senate ratification of the agreement.

“Humanity stands at a crossroads regarding the legacy it leaves to future generations,” writes Sarah Saunders, a research scientist at the National Audubon Society, in a piece she coauthored for [The Hill](#). “The US should ratify the CBD and join the table to design equitable and inclusive global biodiversity targets, working to secure a brighter future for our nation and the planet.”

Declare the extinction crisis a national emergency.

There is another tool in the president’s toolbox, though it is controversial among environmental groups and constitutional law experts. President Biden could declare the extinction crisis a national emergency under the [National Emergencies Act](#).

The main proponent of this idea is the Center for Biological Diversity, which has released [a proposal detailing](#) what Biden would have to do to address extinction. A national emergency declaration is at the top of its list.

But some organizations are leery of this idea—especially given that the last time the NEA was invoked, Trump used it to speed up the construction of his border wall. Some legal experts, like Andrew Boyle at the Brennan Center, a nonpartisan law and policy institute, are concerned that using the NEA to address extinction would be contrary to the purposes of the act. There are also reasonable constitutional concerns about whether routine presidential declarations of emergency would invest even more authority in an already powerful executive branch. For its part, the Sierra Club has not taken a position on using the NEA to address biodiversity loss, though it is calling for a comprehensive national strategy to respond to the crisis.

“We’d like to see an executive order or a secretarial order that really calls out the need for a national strategy and which sets a national directive for various agencies to coordinate to address the biodiversity crisis,” says Bonnie Rice, senior representative for the Sierra Club’s Greater Yellowstone/Northern Rockies campaign.

If President Biden did declare a national emergency, it would enable him to access a broad suite of statutory powers, normally inaccessible to the executive branch, with the goal of bolstering conservation efforts.

According to Tierra Curry, senior scientist at the CBD, the Biden administration could use the various powers granted by a national emergency declaration to strengthen protections for endangered species; to fund transportation projects, like the construction of wildlife crossings that would make roads safer for wildlife and drivers; and to place tariffs on foreign businesses and countries that contribute to the destruction of biodiversity hot spots.

“First, the president must declare that the extinction crisis is a national emergency, since the destruction of the planet’s natural life-support systems are in every respect an emergency,” says the CBD report [Saving Life on Earth](#). “Doing so would galvanize public awareness and support for action.”