

Introduction to the Four Southern California National Forests: Los Padres • Angeles • San Bernardino • Cleveland

Southern California's four national forests (Los Padres, Angeles, San Bernardino, and Cleveland) boast some of the nation's most popular places to hike, camp, picnic, fish and hunt, bird-watch, rock-climb, mountain bike, horseback ride, stargaze, and indulge in a host of other nature-based activities. Each year, millions of people from all over the country visit these forests to recreate in the mild mountainous climate, hiking the 2,000 miles of trails, fishing the 300 miles of streams, driving the 200-plus miles of Scenic Highways, and climbing 11,000-foot summits. The campgrounds are full throughout the summer; in fact, the Serrano Campground is the most popular in the entire National Forest system.



**Boulder Basin, San Jacinto Ranger District, San Bernardino National Forest
Photo Monica Bond**

Ranging from the world-renowned, redwood-studded Big Sur coastline just south of the San Francisco Bay Area, to the snow-covered peaks of the San Gabriel, San Bernardino, and San Jacinto mountains – at a towering 11,500 feet, San Geronimo is the highest in southern California – to the rugged, arid San Diego and Peninsular ranges spilling over the international border into Mexico, these national forests are the backbone for the conservation of both the natural beauty and remarkable variety of plants and animals in the region, many of which occur nowhere else on Earth. In fact, the south coast region supports the richest diversity of plant and animal life of any region in the continental United States.

These 3.5 million acres of public forests are part of the California Floristic Province, an 8-million-acre region that extends from southern Oregon to northern Baja, Mexico, and encompasses areas west of the interior deserts. The Santa Clara Watershed and the rugged crest of the Santa Ynez and Santa Lucia Mountains lie to the north. The soaring peaks of the San Bernardino, San Jacinto, and Laguna Mountains form the boundary to the east. The region stretches as far south as the Tijuana River watershed, straddling the U.S.-Mexico border, and a series of scattered offshore islands and the Pacific Ocean form the distinct western boundary. The California Floristic Province is one of 25 global biodiversity hotspots, defined as areas that harbor an incredible diversity of species but are undergoing rapid habitat loss such that they have been identified by conservationists as crucial to the survival of biodiversity on Earth. Indeed, while 25 hotspots cover less than 1.5% of the Earth's land surface, they account for roughly 60%

or more of the remaining species on the planet (Mittermeier et al. 1998, 1999). The south coast region of California is a biological hotspot for nearly every taxonomic group, including plants, invertebrates, birds, mammals, and reptiles, in part due to the region's mild Mediterranean climate.

The forests are not only immensely popular recreational areas and vital refugia for native plants and animals suffering from the onslaught of urban development on surrounding private lands. The national forests provide a critical source of clean water for consumption, agriculture, and industry for many communities in southern California, and are thus integral to the regional economy.



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ANGELES NATIONAL FOREST The Angeles National Forest provides habitat for more than 180 species identified as sensitive, of concern, or at risk. The summit area of Mount San Antonio has at least four endemic plant species, including the San Antonio milk-vetch, and the slopes around the mountain are crucial habitat for an isolated and imperiled population of Nelson's bighorn sheep. Bear Gulch and Vincent Gulch above Prairie Fork together support the largest known extant mountain yellow-legged frog population in southern California – one of the most imperiled amphibians in the nation. The Angeles also has many ecologically significant rivers and creeks that are immensely popular swimming spots for urbanites seeking relief from the summer heat.

CLEVELAND NATIONAL FOREST Despite its relatively small size, the Cleveland National Forest provides habitat for upwards of 116 species classified as sensitive, of concern, or at risk, including more than 25 listed as endangered or threatened. The Cleveland supports a rich array of butterfly species, including the endemic Laguna Mountains skipper, Thorn's hairstreak, Hermes copper, Harbison's dun skipper, and habitat for the highly endangered Quino checkerspot butterfly. Guatay Mountain hosts an old stand of Tecate cypress, and Viejas and

Poser mountains support the largest population of the federally threatened San Diego thornmint as well as other rare plants like the chocolate lily, tiger lily, cleveland sage, and creeping sage



Laguna Mountains skipper
Photo Douglas Aguiard

SAN BERNARDINO NATIONAL FOREST

The San Bernardino National Forest alone provides habitat for about 280 species identified as threatened, endangered, sensitive, or rare, including 139 plant species (a global hotspot for plants). The Big Bear-Baldwin Lake-Upper Holcomb Valley area supports unique, biologically rich habitats such as pebble plains, hosting the largest concentration of endemic plants in California – 11 federally listed species (Stephenson and Calcarone 1999). The watersheds of Deep Creek, the Santa Ana River, the North Fork San Jacinto River, and Bautista Creek are recognized areas of extremely high ecological significance, providing habitat for imperiled California spotted owls, northern goshawks, arroyo toads, mountain yellow-legged frogs, the endemic San Bernardino flying squirrel, and myriad other species.



California Spotted Owl
Photo Monica Bond

LOS PADRES NATIONAL FOREST The Los Padres National Forest alone provides habitat for 26 species listed as threatened or endangered and for an additional 300 species that the Forest Service has classified as sensitive, of concern, or at risk – more than any other national forest in California. The Los Padres is essential to the survival of the magnificent California condor – our state bird and one of the most endangered vertebrates in the world – by supporting the vast majority of remaining condors and their designated critical habitat. The Los Padres National Forest is also an area of major historical significance for the state and country and for native peoples



California Condor
Photo David Clendenen

The four southern California forests are under intensive development and recreational pressures due to their proximity to some of the most heavily populated areas in the country. Moreover, many historic practices on the four forests, including livestock grazing, logging, mining, water diversions and impoundments, and unsustainable levels of intensive recreation such as off-road vehicle use have led to the deterioration of these public lands and their natural wealth of biological diversity.



San Gabriel Mountains near village of Mount Baldy, Angeles National Forest
Photo by Farley Olander

The most recent management plans for southern California's national forests date back to the mid to late 1980s and were riddled with weak and ambiguous standards and guidelines that resulted in inconsistent management among the four forests. Recognizing that the forests are critically important for an extraordinary variety of plants and animals, and that the number of imperiled species is escalating rapidly, the Center for Biological Diversity sued the Forest Service in 1998 for violating the Endangered Species Act. The lawsuit claimed that the Forest Service was failing in its obligation to protect a growing number of endangered plants and animals in the Los Padres, Angeles, San Bernardino, and Cleveland National Forests. In 1989, 17 species were federally listed as threatened or endangered throughout the four forests. Today, there are at least 60 federally listed threatened and endangered species in the four forests, with several more species on the verge of becoming threatened or endangered. Many historic practices on the Forests have led to the deterioration of these federal lands and the rapid decline of their natural wealth of species. The more recent plans also failed to emphasize riparian protection, despite the fact that a large number of the threatened, endangered, and sensitive species found in the national forests depend upon riparian and aquatic habitats for all or part of their life cycles.

The 1998 lawsuit resulted in a settlement that mandated interim protections for many listed species and required the Forest Service to update its management plans to ensure the protection and recovery of the imperiled forests and their inhabitants. In 1999, the Forest Service published a comprehensive evaluation of the Los Padres, Angeles, San Bernardino, and Cleveland National Forests, called the *Southern California Mountains*

and Foothills Assessment (Stephenson and Calcarone 1999). The Assessment compiled, integrated, and interpreted existing information on the status of native ecosystems and species and the processes that influence them. The Assessment was a starting-point for this forest plan revision.

Management Plan Revision: An Opportunity to Protect and Restore the Forests for a Generation to Come

WHY FOREST MANAGEMENT MATTERS:

Years ago, several lepidopterists collected specimens of the San Gabriel Mountains greenish-blue butterfly in a single wet meadow on the Angeles National Forest near Big Pines. It was described as a sub-species of *Plejebus saepiolus*, distinct from the other *P. saepiolus* that are found in the Sierra Nevada, on Palomar Mountain, and in the San Jacinto and San Bernardino mountains. Sadly, however, the San Gabriel Mountains greenish-blue butterfly has not been observed in the past decade or so and is likely to be extinct, possibly due to diversion of water from the meadow at Big Pines and the resultant drying of its habitat.

The San Gabriel Mountains greenish-blue butterfly depended entirely on national forest lands for its survival, and is a perfect example of the need for proper forest management to conserve the resources we value. Other species depend almost completely on the national forests for survival, too, such as the Laguna Mountains skipper in the Cleveland National Forest, the mountain yellow-legged frog in the Angeles and San Bernardino National Forests, the California spotted owl in all four forests, and the Mt. Gleason paintbrush on the Angeles National Forest. The forests are also critical sources of clean drinking water for surrounding populations, and long-term management plans for the forests provide essential guidelines for activities that reduce hazardous fuels and decrease wildfire risk to neighboring communities. With southern California's growing population and anticipated increases in recreational and

commercial uses of the forests, it is absolutely vital that the Forest Service advance a forward-thinking strategy for management to protect the natural values for which the National Forests were created to protect.



Mt. Gleason paintbrush
Photo Richard Fisher

CURRENT THREATS TO THE FOUR FORESTS:

In the 21st century, the nation's forests and grasslands face four major threats. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth has identified these as: (a) [fire and fuels](#), (b) [invasive species](#), (c) [loss of open space](#), and (d) [unmanaged recreation](#), and the Forest Service has devoted a web page to the topic (www.fs.fed.us/projects/four-threats). Forest management plans must emphasize, address, and ameliorate these four threats in order to prevent them from becoming merely words on a page. As such, plans must contain visionary goals, appropriate guidelines, and strong, enforceable standards to ensure the public that the Forest Service is truly committed to dealing with these threats.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOREST MANAGEMENT PLANS:

The revised Land Management Plans for the four southern California national forests outline the management goals and strategies to be implemented for the coming 15 years, and the specific standards that the Forest Service must follow when taking management actions on these public lands. To be meaningful, the standards must provide adequate protections for the environment including fish and wildlife, vegetative health, and water and soil quality, and must provide for sustained equitable access to the forests by a diverse array of human communities. The National Forest Management Act affords the first priority to “maintain[ing] or restor[ing] ecological sustainability of national forests and grasslands to provide for a wide variety of uses, values, products, and services.” 36 C.F.R. 219.2(a). The Act goes on to note that “considering increased human uses, it is essential that uses of today do not impair the functioning of ecological processes and the ability of these natural resources to contribute to sustainability in the future.” *Id.* As such, NFMA requires that the Forest Service management actions ensure that viable populations of wildlife species are maintained and that healthy soil and water quality is sustained.

WHAT THIS PLAN HOPES TO ACCOMPLISH:

According to Part 1 of the Land Management Plans, the Southern California National Forests Vision, there are 12 goals and desired conditions for the forests. These 12 goals are:

- 1.1 Improve the ability of southern California communities to limit loss of life and property and recover from the high intensity wildland fires that are a natural part of this state's ecosystem
- 1.2 Restore forest health where alteration of natural fire regimes have put human and natural resource values at risk
- 2.1 Reverse the trend of increasing loss of natural resource values due to invasive species
- 3.1 Provide for public use and natural resource protection
- 3.2 Retain a natural evolving character within wilderness
- 4.1 a Administer minerals and energy resource development while protecting ecosystem health
- 4.1 b Administer renewable energy resource developments while protecting ecosystem health
- 5.1 Improve watershed conditions through cooperative management
- 5.2 Improve riparian conditions
- 6.1 Move toward improved rangeland conditions as indicated by key range sites
- 6.2 Provide ecological conditions to sustain viable populations of native and desired

nonnative species

7.1 Retain natural areas as a core for a regional network while focusing the built environment into the minimum land area needed to support growing public needs

WHY THE REVISED PLANS WILL NOT ACCOMPLISH THESE GOALS:

The major, overarching fatal flaw with these new plans is that they allow the continuation of activities that have long degraded and damaged water, soils, and biological diversity in the four national forests. The plans focus on “fixing” damage to ecological resources after the damage has been done, such as treating and eradicating invasive species and restoring watersheds. The plans do not identify areas without invasive species and watersheds that are in good condition and then zone to prevent degradation to these areas. The plans also fail to designate the maximum amount of wilderness and protect the roadless character of roadless areas. Rather than focusing on prevention of damage, the plans allow continued and, indeed, increased damage and then purport to monitor for the damage and fix it afterwards. The Forest Service’s revised plan is a far costlier and riskier venture than the Conservation Alternative recommended by Appellants, and – given current and project severe budget constraints – is fiscally irresponsible. Moreover, the plan ensures the continuation of a management approach that does not prioritize diversity, and that effectively limits access to the forest by members of the many low-income and minority urban communities located in close proximity to the four forests.

In its quest for ‘greater flexibility’ for local managers, the Forest Service has essentially eviscerated the concept of a forest plan. The standards are vague, weak, ineffectual, riddled with loopholes, and provide no guidance to local managers and no assurance to the public that soil, water, biological, air, and heritage resources will be protected as mandated by law. The Forest Service is saying “trust us, we’ll do the right thing at the project level,” but there is no assurance that the right thing will be done. This violates the very foundation upon which forest planning was meant to rest.

Throughout the public comment process, Appellants provided the Forest Service with a comprehensive set of visionary, science-based recommendations for all aspects of forest management to conserve and restore our precious natural resources while allowing sustainable levels of recreational and commercial use. The agency chose to ignore most of these recommendations and cede much of our precious forests to off-road and development special interests.

“National Forests exist today because the people want them. To make them accomplish the most good, the people themselves must make clear how they want them run.”

Gifford Pinchot, 1907