

# Los Angeles Times

## Boiling Point: The "30 by 30" plan to save nature

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Sammy Roth here, returning to your inbox with this week's climate change and environment newsletter. Let's get started.

One of the things I miss most about Life Before the Pandemic is getting out into nature. Even as Southern California parks and trails have started to reopen — Joshua Tree National Park is now [welcoming visitors](#) — I've hesitated to return. What if there are huge crowds, like those first few shelter-in-place weekends? And do I really want to hit the trail without my hiking buddies?

But it's been comforting to know that pristine wilderness still exists. I can pull up photos of my favorite spots — [Death Valley](#), the [Grand Canyon](#), the [Mecca Hills](#) — and feel confident that these landscapes will be here long after the coronavirus goes away.

**That's what was on my mind when I learned about the "30 by 30" concept, a fascinating idea to save the natural world.**

An international team of scientists first proposed protecting 30% of Earth's lands and waters by 2030 — hence "30 by 30" — [in the journal Science Advances](#) last year. Calling their plan the "Global Deal for Nature," they wrote that setting aside nearly one-

third of the planet from human development could avert “points of no return” for many species and ecosystems.

The idea has taken on a life of its own.

The Convention on Biological Diversity — a global treaty that has been ratified by every United Nations member country, except the United States — is expected to adopt the 30 by 30 framework next year. U.S. Sen. Tom Udall (D-New Mexico) kicked off a virtual “[Road to 30](#)” tour with conservationists this week, promoting his [legislation](#) that would set a national 30 by 30 target.

In California, the Assembly’s natural resources committee approved [similar legislation](#), cleverly designated AB 3030, last week.

About 12% of U.S. lands are currently protected, according to a [report](#) from the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank. The figure is higher in the nation’s coastal waters, with 26% [designated as marine protected areas](#).

**In California, 22% of the state’s [land area](#) and 16% of its [coastal waters](#) are protected.**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, animals have roamed through California’s Yosemite National Park, seen on April 11, 2020, without having to worry about crowds of people. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

That doesn’t mean humans have developed the rest of America’s natural spaces — just that there’s nothing to stop us from doing so, legally speaking. You may have heard the statistic that the U.S. [loses a football field’s worth of nature](#) every 30 seconds. The data point can start to sound meaningless if you hear it too often, but stop and think about it. Every 30 seconds? That’s astounding.

Speaking during the “Road to 30” kickoff call, Enric Sala, an ocean scientist and one of the authors of the Global Deal for Nature, described some of the many ways that people have come to depend on intact natural ecosystems.

Healthy wetlands provide an [important buffer](#) against storm surges during hurricanes — but sprawling cities have paved over them to build subdivisions. Gray wolves [provide a check](#) on the deer and mice that help spread Lyme disease from ticks to humans — but humans hunted wolves nearly to extinction, an extermination that, [some scientists say](#), has allowed Lyme disease to [become common](#) in the United States.

**The COVID-19 pandemic, Sala said, “is the loudest wake-up call we’ve had in recent history.” Researchers have found that [habitat destruction and biodiversity loss](#) are making it easier for this kind of virus to spread from animals to humans.**

**“We have become totally out of balance with nature. And unless we get our balance back, our society as we knew it is going to be a thing of the past,” Sala said.**

I took this photo while hiking through the federally protected Mecca Hills Wilderness, near the eastern end of the Coachella Valley in California’s Riverside County, in February 2015. The Salton Sea is visible in the distance. (Sammy Roth / Los Angeles Times)

The “30 by 30” concept is no panacea.

As long as fossil fuels power the world economy, Earth will continue to heat up at an unnaturally fast pace, threatening all species and ecosystems, people included. And there’s no special magic by which 29.9% leads to total destruction, and 30.1% to salvation. In fact, the authors of the Global Deal for Nature see 30% by 2030 as a steppingstone on the road to [50% by 2050](#).

I called Ash Kalra, the San Jose assemblyman who introduced AB 3030, to ask him why his legislation doesn't define "protected" with much precision, and doesn't provide a mechanism to enforce the 30% target. He told me he's trying to set a goal rather than create a mandate. He wants to give regulators and the public a chance to figure out together how 30 by 30 can be achieved.

**"At the end of the day, we're creating the world that we choose to live in," Kalra said.**

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