

US protected lands mismatch biodiversity priorities

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Because habitat loss is the main cause of extinction, where and how much society chooses to protect is vital for saving species. The United States is well positioned economically and politically to pursue habitat conservation should it be a societal goal. We assessed the US protected area portfolio with respect to biodiversity in the country. New synthesis maps for terrestrial vertebrates, freshwater fish, and trees permit comparison with protected areas to identify priorities for future conservation investment. Although the total area protected is substantial, its geographic configuration is nearly the opposite of patterns of endemism within the country. Most protected lands are in the West, whereas the vulnerable species are largely in the Southeast. Private land protections are significant, but they are not concentrated where the priorities are. To adequately protect the nation's unique biodiversity, we recommend specific areas deserving additional protection, some of them including public lands, but many others requiring private investment.

conservation priorities | protected areas | endemism | range size | extinction

Protected areas are the most widespread and effective means to conserve natural ecosystems. Given that habitat loss is the primary threat to species survival, which places society chooses to protect will largely determine how many and which species survive. The original intent of many protected areas in the United States was to protect landscapes, not biodiversity. Nevertheless, protected areas are still the backbone of conservation in the country—as they are globally.

We describe geographic patterns of biodiversity and the distribution of protected areas and land ownership in the United States. We then combine them to map priorities for future protection. Our focus is the continental United States minus Alaska, recognizing that Alaska is biodiversity poor and a substantial fraction of it is already within protected areas. We also exclude Hawaii and US territories because, although rich in endemic species, they are comparatively data poor.

We can assess coverage of protected areas by how well they include different elements of biodiversity, be they ecosystems (1), biophysical landforms (2–4), or individual species (5–8). We focus on species, because their extinction is irreversible (9, 10). Previous studies of the US protected area system focused mainly on federally listed endangered species (11–15); we consider all species within taxa for which data are sufficient.

Knowing precisely where individual species occur limits inferences. We compiled species' range maps for taxa where all species in the taxon are relatively well-documented within the United States, recognizing the limits of such data (10, 16–18). These are, however, the most comprehensive and readily applicable data for guiding decisions. We mapped diversity by overlaying maps for various subsets of species in each taxon (*Methods*).

Geographic patterns of total species richness differ substantially among taxa (Fig. 1). Mammal richness is highest in the west, birds along the coasts, and reptiles broadly across the warmer south. Amphibians, freshwater fish, and trees are most diverse in the humid east and, especially, the warm and humid Southeast. These patterns are interesting, worthy of further study, but do not direct conservation. Widely distributed species dominate overall patterns

of species richness (19), but they are generally not the species in need of conservation efforts.

In identifying conservation priorities, one must consider both existing protected areas and the intrinsic vulnerability of species. Vulnerable species tend to be in two groups (10): those with small geographic ranges, which is often correlated with local rarity, and large-bodied species that are sparsely distributed across large ranges. The latter species, which are relatively few but include predators like panthers and wolves, were largely extirpated from the east and still face persecution across large extents of the west.

Most imperiled species are of the first group: small range size is the best predictor of extinction risk and, thus, the first metric for conservation priority (20–22). We focus on small-ranged species defined in several ways. First, we consider endemics—those with their entire range in the United States (*Methods*). Amphibians (70%) and freshwater fish (68%) show the highest levels of endemism, followed by reptiles (30%), trees (29%), mammals (28%), and birds (<3%). Patterns of endemism for all taxa are consistently centered in the Southeast, although the west also has significant mammal endemism (Fig. 1).

Next, we consider “small-ranged species,” those having ranges smaller than the median size, and do so from two perspectives. There are species whose ranges are small by global standards and those that are small relative to species within the United States. For globally small-ranged species, most birds and mammals are in the west (Fig. 2). This pattern is in contrast with their endemism patterns, for many globally small-ranged birds and mammals have ranges extending into Mexico or Canada. Amphibian ranges are so small (Table S1) and isolated that no location has more than two species with overlapping ranges, although 61 small-ranged species occur in the country. A general characteristic of regions with small-ranged amphibians is complex topography. For instance, 18

Significance

The United States has one of the oldest and most sophisticated systems of protected areas in the world. Given the large amount of information on the country's biodiversity, and the potential resources available, one might expect it to do well in protecting biodiversity. We find that it does not. The United States protected areas do not adequately cover the country's unique species. To improve the coverage, we map priorities for multiple taxa and recommend specific areas for immediate conservation attention. These areas contain a mix of public and private land, meaning that major progress in conservation will require actions in both the public and private sectors, and will succeed only if done in the correct areas.

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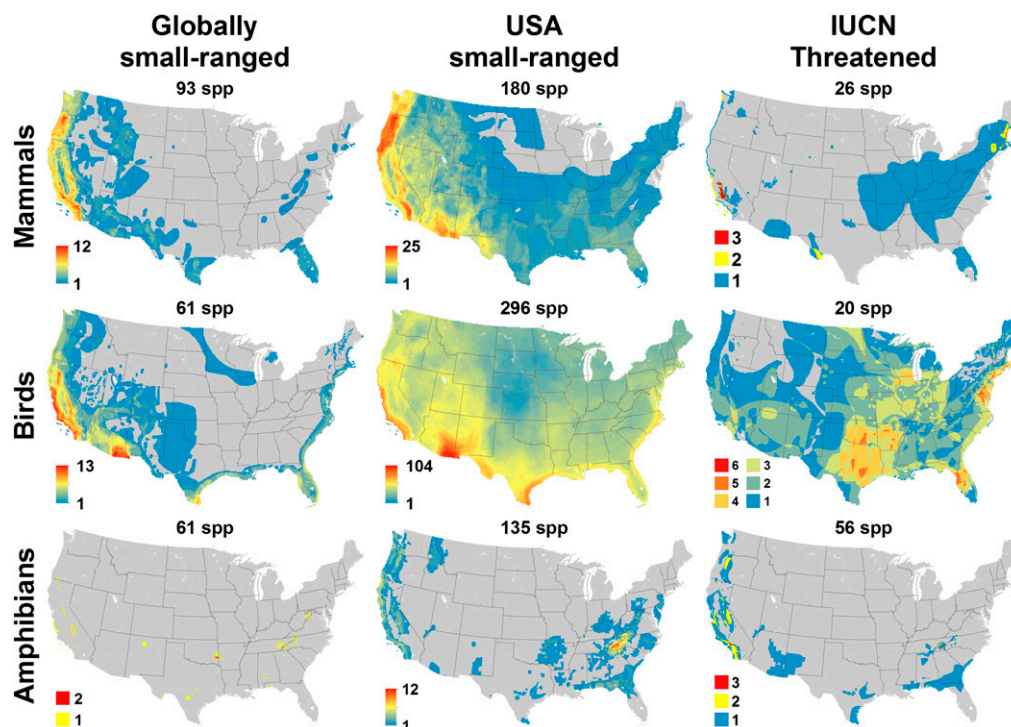


Fig. 2. Small-ranged and threatened species. Globally small-ranged are those species with ranges smaller than the global median for that taxon. USA small-ranged are those species with ranges smaller than the median for the species in the lower 48 states. IUCN Threatened are species considered vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered on the IUCN Red List.

novel patterns. Other plant taxa would be particularly informative because diversity patterns for trees likely differ from those of plants that predominate in grasslands and other nonforest ecosystems. For invertebrates, which are almost certainly more diverse than vertebrates or plants, butterflies might be the best candidate for a nationwide database. Butterflies are diverse, charismatic, and data rich compared with other invertebrates.

Another area for possible improvement is the range maps themselves. Such maps have an inherent tendency for commission errors, including areas that species once occupied but currently do not, or areas that once had habitat but have since lost it (25). For shorter-term planning, it would certainly be useful to document better what part of a species range has habitat and whether it is occupied (26). Importantly, however, species may reoccupy currently vacant areas, and habitats can potentially recover, at least in the long term. For long-term conservation, basing decisions solely on currently occupied habitat would discount the possibility of habitat recovery or of species reoccupying currently unoccupied areas.

In addition to individual species, there is the possibility of using other measures of biodiversity or geophysical proxies. For example, using maps of ecosystems (1, 27, 28), or geophysical features such as elevation and soils (3), are other approaches for evaluating the representativeness of a protected area system.

How well does the United States protect biodiversity? Only 7.8% of the lower 48 states is within an IUCN categorized protected area (Fig. 3A), below the global average of 10.3% (29). Approximately 6% is in stricter IUCN categories of I to IV, about average for the globe (29). The United States employs a broadly comparable system of management categories through the Gap Analysis Program (GAP) (30). The best-protected areas—GAP Status 1 and 2—show a similar rate of 7.1% (Fig. S1 and *SI Results*).

These percentages mask a strong geographic bias. Most protected areas are in the west, which tends to be less suitable for agriculture and development and where a large fraction of the

land is in federal ownership (Fig. 3B). Much of the publicly owned land (i.e., federal, state, and local), however, has no assigned IUCN category and/or is GAP status 3, indicating that it is to be maintained as a particular land cover but is subject to extractive use (e.g., logging, mining, grazing). Some of these public lands may have limited protection with respect to conservation, such as by the National Forest Management Act or the Endangered Species Act if they contain a federally protected species. For some individual species, these legal protections may be significant, though we do not consider them further here. Nevertheless, most of the non-IUCN ranked public lands are also in the west, matching the pattern for IUCN-ranked areas.

Most land in the center and east of the country is unprotected and privately owned. A major instrument for conservation on private land is easements. While a complete national inventory of easements is still underway (31), the partial data suggest that much of the land thus far protected is not ideally positioned for biodiversity conservation. More than 22.6% of the documented easement area is in Maine and Montana, states that together cover 6% of the total area of the lower 48 states, but have almost no endemism or small-ranged species. Florida and California, states with substantial biodiversity, reassuringly are third and fourth in easement area with more than 6% of the total each, in 1.9% and 5.3% of the total area, respectively. However, endemic-rich states in the Southeast (Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia), which make up 10.7% of the total land area of the lower 48 states, collectively contain only 7.8% of the easement area. In other words, these biodiverse states that are mostly private land, and which should be a focus of easement efforts, have less area protected than if easements were randomly distributed across the country. It appears that private land protection efforts, similar to public protected areas, are not prioritizing the most endemic-rich areas of the country, or at least are having less success in those areas.

wholly depends on actions in the United States. There are additional species that are restricted to the study area based on only their breeding (10 species) or nonbreeding (8 species) range. For freshwater fish, we removed some species as endemics based on other sources that indicate their distributions ranged outside the study area (*Strongylura marina*, *Trinectes maculatus*, *Dormitator maculatus*, *Ariopsis felis*, *Acipenser oxyrinchus*, *Lampetra ayresii*, *Spirinchus thaleichthys*, *Thaleichthys pacificus*). For trees, we also checked Kew Botanical Gardens, Tropicos, Global Biodiversity Information Facility, and other online sources for evidence that a species' native range extended

outside the United States. We revised databases for taxonomic revisions where feasible.

Data on protected areas were from the PAD-US database (30). We used ArcGIS 10 for maps and analyses. Maps use the Albers Equal Area Conic projection.

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