

Conservation in a New Era

Over three presidential administrations and economic booms and busts during the ten-year span of this annual survey, Western voters in 2021 are registering some of the strongest concerns about nature and arguing for bold action on conservation investments and efforts.



Westerners are more pessimistic than positive about the condition of nature as they look ahead. They are nearly twice as likely to say they are more “worried” than “hopeful” about the “the future of nature, meaning our land, water, air and wildlife” (61 percent to 36 percent). Their reasons range from concerns about climate change, to more people moving into their state and the resulting development, to concerns about government and elected officials. As one Latino man in Nevada expressed, “it just seems things keep getting worse every year.”

Concerns about a range of environmental problems have increased over the last decade. In 2011, we conducted the survey in CO, MT, NM, UT, WY, and asked respondents about seven environmental concerns. This year, we asked about those same seven environmental concerns and all but one registered significantly higher as a problem in the original five State of the Rockies states.



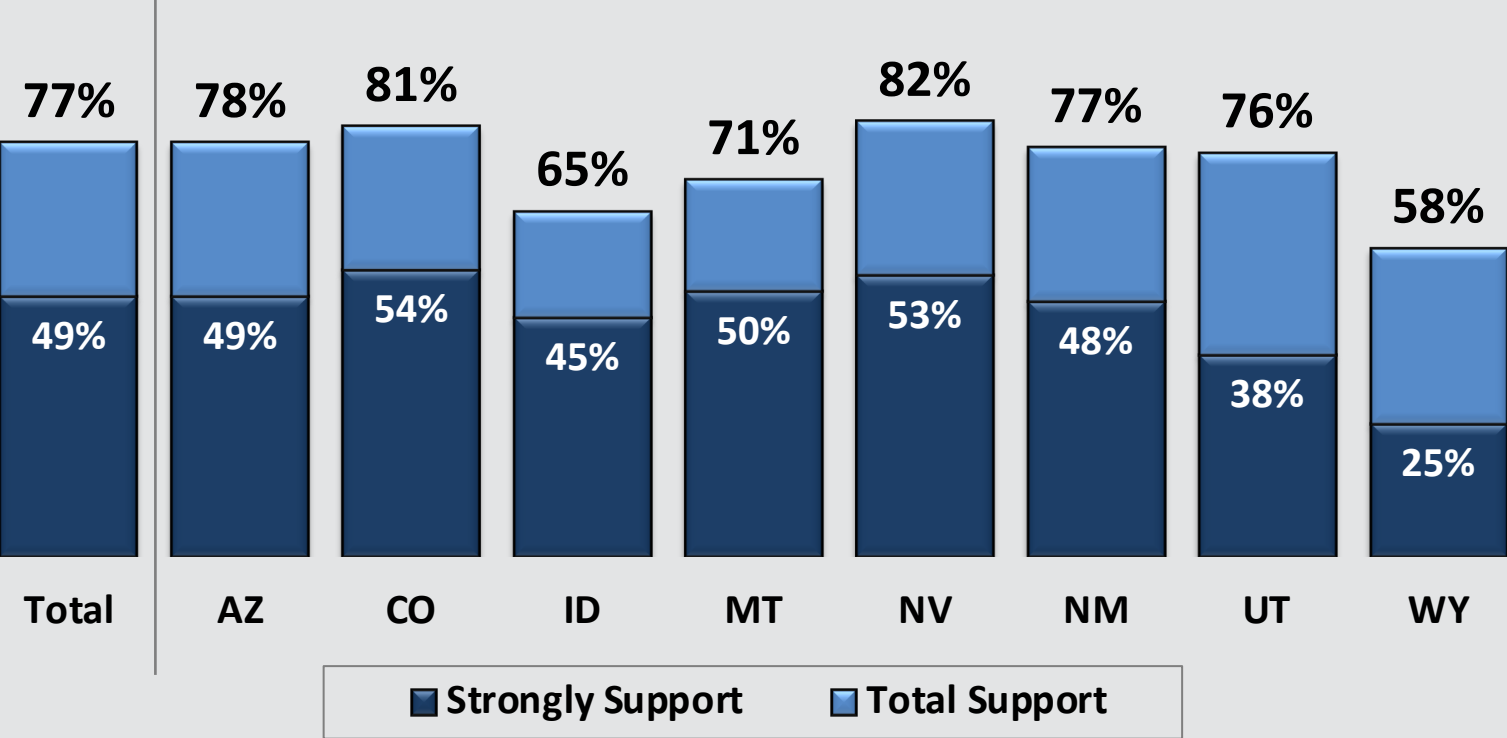
<i>% Extremely/Very Serious</i>	2011	2021	% Increase
Climate change	27%	→ 54%	+27%
Loss of habitat for fish and wildlife	38%	→ 55%	+17%
Pollution of rivers, lakes, and streams	42%	→ 55%	+13%
Inadequate water supplies	40%	→ 51%	+11%
Loss of family farms and ranches	50%	→ 56%	+6%
The impact of oil and gas drilling on our land, air and water	31%	→ 37%	+6%
Air pollution and smog	40%	→ 43%	+3%

Over the past ten years, the greatest increase in concern has been about the “loss of habitat for fish and wildlife” and there was a significant increase even in just the last year in concern about the “loss of pollinators such as bees and butterflies” (63 percent say it is an extremely or very serious problem, up from 55 percent in 2020).

Voters are strongly supportive of a range of pro-conservation policies and goals. We tested 16 different policy initiatives, with each respondent hearing eight of the sixteen initiatives. Every single one generated solid support from two-thirds or more Westerners – from requirements on oil and gas operations on national public lands to restoring protections for wildlife, water and public lands.

One of the more ambitious policies voters were asked to consider is the so-called “30 by 30” proposal of “setting a national goal of conserving thirty percent of land and inland waters in America, and thirty percent of its ocean areas by the year 2030.” More than three-quarters (77 percent) of Western voters express support for this policy, with nearly half (49 percent) strongly in support. This national goal is embraced by a majority of voters across the political spectrum (63 percent of GOP, 80 percent of independents and 92 percent of Democrats), as well as among hunters and anglers (68 percent support).

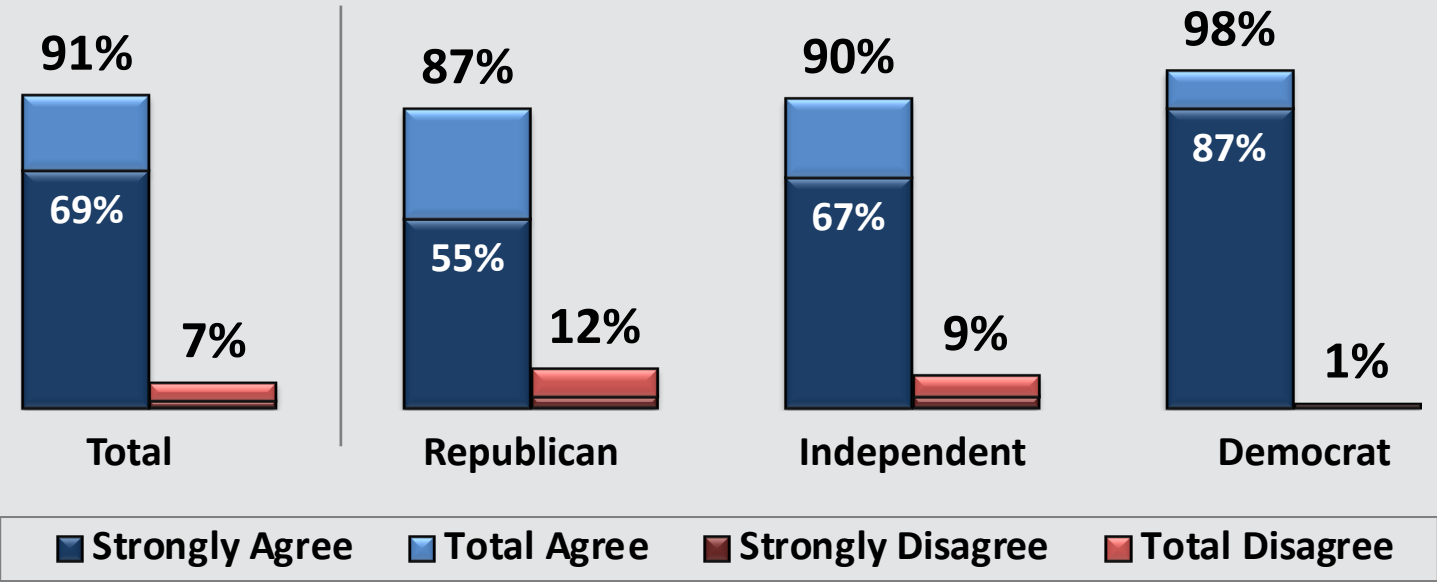
National 30% Conservation Goals



Despite the pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn, Western voters are adamant that conservation is an area worthy of investment. Overall, 91 percent of voters in this region agree that “even with state budget problems, we should still find money to protect” land, water and wildlife in their state. In 2011, 84 percent in the five states in which we interviewed agreed. More than two-thirds (69 percent) strongly agree with continuing to make these investments today, a substantial 17-point increase from the 52 percent who strongly felt this way in 2011.

Significantly, voters across the political spectrum say that conservation is a needed investment, including 85 percent of those who supported Trump in the last election and 98 percent who chose Biden.

Find Money to Protect Land, Water, and Wildlife



Western voters want conservation investments to be made with equity in mind. There is overwhelming support from nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of Westerners for “directing funding to ensure adequate access to parks and natural areas for lower-income people and communities of color that have disproportionately lacked them.” Fully 85 percent of voters of color and greater than two-thirds (69 percent) of white voters support such a policy. Prioritizing equity in funding also generates somewhat greater support among voters who say they are lower income or working class (77 percent support), rather than middle (71 percent support) or upper class (68 percent).

Adequate Park Access for Lower-Income and Communities of Color

