



# THE CONSERVATION OF DEFENSE:

## Opportunities to Promote Conservation Through Military Readiness

The Department of Defense (DoD) manages some of the most valuable lands for conserving biodiversity, freshwater, and ecological integrity in the United States. One reason is that military training and testing often require natural or other undeveloped areas that simulate wartime conditions. Another is that the military often needs large buffers around its installations for public safety—those buffers also protect nature.

The military manages approximately 27 million acres of land across about 420 large military installations. Only the National Park Service has more ecologically diverse lands. DoD lands also harbor an abundance of biodiversity. This includes approximately 450 species federally listed as threatened or endangered, over 550 species at risk of becoming listed, and 75 species that occur only on military lands. Compared to other federal lands, military lands have the highest density of endangered and at risk species.

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***“Fields, farms, and forests are the best neighbors of the military.”***

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Despite the current and future importance of military lands for conservation, few conservation strategies include any significant focus on national defense. Often, it appears that DoD is pursuing conservation in parallel to but isolated from other national conservation agendas. We are confident that both conservation and national security would be better off if the two were better integrated.

### ***Encroachment is a major concern of the military***

Understanding the military’s concern about encroachment is key to understanding DoD’s conservation potential. A simple working definition is “the real or perceived conflict between the military training mission and the physical environment of people, communities, habitat, and species.”

The Department of Defense almost always gains an enormous benefit to its mission from having conservation lands adjacent to its installations. Those lands act as a crucial buffer against urbanization and other forms of encroachment on the military’s training and testing activities. For example, lighting from cities impedes military nighttime training; residential development near military bases results in noise and smoke restrictions on training activities; and wind turbines interfere with military radar testing.

## National Defense as an Important Conservation Ally

National defense is an important conservation ally not only because of the biodiversity value of DoD lands, but also because of how the Pentagon thinks about conservation. The BLM and Forest Service are multiple-use mandate agencies; conservation is just one of their many coequal priorities. DoD always has the same priorities—training, testing, and military operations—but it has no other priority beyond those other than the conservation and stewardship of the lands and resources entrusted to it. In addition, no other federal agency faces the same type of existential threat to its mission from the loss of neighboring natural areas.

DoD could invest millions of additional dollars into protecting and managing lands, species, and other natural resources, but it needs clear incentives to do so. Conservation has to yield a measurable benefit to the military's mission. If conservationists can help make that benefit real, the military likely has the political capital to secure funding, legislative authority, and other tools needed to unleash a new wave of conservation that also advances the military mission.

### Recommendations for Action

At least five strategies are critical to both support the military mission and to expand their actions that benefit wildlife, protect water resources and ecosystems, and address climate change:

- 1 Increase the number of experts** within conservation groups dedicated to engaging with DoD, particularly on funding, landscape-scale conservation and planning, endangered and at-risk species management, and resilience to climate change.
- 2 The Endangered Species Act (ESA)** already leads to DoD carrying out more conservation than do most other federal agencies. Improvements to endangered species policies could result in even stronger incentives for DoD to conserve species and their habitats.
- 3 One of the Pentagon's most important environmental programs is its **Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program**, which is currently funded at \$100 million annually to address encroachment that restricts military activities. Greater funding for REPI and more ambitious implementation would enhance local land use decisions that protect conservation resources near installations; expand land acquisition by other agencies in DoD's priority areas; and incentivize private landowners to promote conservation and national defense.**
- 4 DoD needs more tools**, potentially established through legislation, that allow pooling of funds across federal agencies to effectively manage natural resources on a landscape scale, because DoD will rarely have the resources to fund this work on its own.
- 5 Public land withdrawal is a very controversial issue** but one that may present overlooked opportunities for conservation. When DoD seeks to withdraw lands from the public domain, conservation groups often fight the proposals. Those withdrawals, however, do not necessarily need to create a worse environmental outcome because DoD's use of the lands and waters may be considerably more benign than those permitted by the land management agency and because a withdrawal might be accompanied by DoD's commitment to protect additional land as a safety or security buffer around an installation or to provide mitigation funding. The conservation community needs a more rigorous and objective approach to evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of each proposed DoD withdrawal, and more capacity to negotiate with DoD to find solutions that meet the needs of DoD and conservation.

These are five of many opportunities highlighted in our report, [Conservation of Defense](#), that would help ensure that more conservation victories are a legacy of DoD's operations and strategies over the coming decades.

