



## Percent GAP Status 3

This EnviroAtlas national map displays the percentage of natural land within any given 12-digit hydrologic unit (HUC) that is classified as [GAP Status 3](#) for conservation purposes under the U.S. Geological Survey's (USGS) National Gap Analysis Program (GAP) for 2020. The map is based on lands compiled and classified by the USGS Protected Areas Database of the U.S. (PAD-US 2.1); it covers the conterminous U.S., Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

### Why are GAP status 3 lands important?

GAP Status 3 lands have protections from major development, but some activities are allowed such as logging, and in some specific cases, high intensity activities such as mining. These lands may have permanent protections in place that limit visitation, use, and human impacts. They include lands held by national, state, or local governments or non-profit organizations, as well as voluntarily protected private lands.

Minimally disturbed natural lands inherently serve numerous ecological, social, and cultural functions. These may include providing habitat, filtering and absorbing pollutants, maintaining ambient temperatures, providing visual relief from the built environment, and allowing for recreational activities. These functions have been associated with improving air quality, ensuring water quality protection, and removing pollutants from the air. Natural areas contribute to [climate change](#) mitigation by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (during photosynthesis) and storing it as vegetative biomass ([carbon sequestration](#)).

These natural benefits can improve the mental and physical health of the surrounding population, as well. For example, visiting wilderness has been shown to provide psychological benefits, opportunities to bond socially, and a sense of connection to nature.<sup>1</sup> People can also recreate and exercise in natural areas, contributing to reductions in the prevalence of obesity, heart disease, and other physical illnesses.<sup>1,2</sup> Natural areas help ensure that drinking water is safe. Natural cover absorbs floodwaters and protects against natural disasters. For instance, protecting land from urban development and agriculture in drinking water watersheds can reduce pollutants and make water easier to treat.<sup>3</sup> Eight million people in the city of New York depend on protected forested watersheds for their [water supply](#). As the population grows, urban



Photo: Atlantic puffins, USFWS, Northeast Region

development increasingly replaces natural lands. The United States is estimated to lose around 2 million acres of open space each year.<sup>1</sup> Giving land a protected status is one way to control where and how much land is developed.

### How can I use this information?

The map, Percent GAP Status 3, is one of eleven EnviroAtlas maps that show protected lands for the United States. Other maps show Percent GAP status 1, 2, & 3 combined, Percent GAP status 1 and 2, and the percent of land that has been classified as protected in seven different categories by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Understanding the percentage of protected land area within 12-digit HUCs could help inform future planning and policy decisions, allow for comparisons within watersheds or ecological regions, and allow users to quantify how much natural area has been set aside for future generations. Areas without significant protection could be vulnerable to future ecological degradation and may have existing ecological and health concerns.

This map could be used in conjunction with other maps in EnviroAtlas. For example, users can see how protected land area relates to air quality or water quality. Protected area land cover may be compared with other data layers depicting protected natural areas (PAD-US), protected status (GAP or IUCN Status maps), or occurrence of threatened and endangered species (see EnviroAtlas biodiversity data fact sheets) to assess whether there are adequate numbers of protected areas to represent important national ecosystems.

## How were the data for this map created?

This dataset uses spatial information from the USGS Protected Areas Database of the U.S. (PAD-US Version 2.1) for the conterminous U.S., Hawaii, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, and Alaska for 2020. The percentages of protected areas defined by category GAP Status 3 were created using the Tabulate Intersection tool in ArcGIS Pro. The percentage of each protection category was computed for each HUC. HUC boundaries (12-digit) were derived from the National Hydrography Dataset Plus ([NHDPlusV2](#) WBD Snapshot) for the conterminous U.S., Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands and from the Watershed Boundary Dataset ([WBD](#)) for Alaska.

## What are the limitations of these data?

All national data layers are inherently imperfect; they are an estimation of the truth based on the best available science. Calculations based on these data are therefore also estimations that should be used to inform further investigation. Periodic updates to EnviroAtlas will reflect improvements to nationally available data.

The Percentage of Protected Lands uses PAD-US data (version 2.1), which is an aggregated dataset comprised of data provided by multiple sources. The boundaries of this data have not been verified by the EPA and there may be inconsistencies in data quality or scale. By using data with a

margin of error, this computed metric may also carry that error in calculating the exact area of the protected land. The percentages in this layer should be used as a relative ranges and not to indicate an exact percentage value. More information regarding the limitations of the source data can be found at the [PAD-US](#) website. Accuracy information for the source data sets can be found on their respective websites.

## How can I access these data?

EnviroAtlas data can be viewed in the interactive map, accessed through web services, or downloaded.

## Where can I get more information?

There are many resources on the societal benefits associated with protecting lands; a selection of these resources is listed below. A detailed explanation of [IUCN categories](#) can be found on the IUCN website. For additional information on how the data were created, access the [metadata](#) for the data layer from the layer list drop down menu on the interactive map. To ask specific questions about this data layer, please contact the [EnviroAtlas Team](#).

## Acknowledgments

The data for this map were generated by Eli Heetderks, EPA Student Services Contractor. This fact sheet was created by Jessica Jahre and Megan Culler, EPA Student Services Contractors.

## Selected Publications

1. Cordell, H.K., C.J. Betz, and S.J. Zarnoch. 2013. [Recreation and protected land resources in the United States: A technical document supporting the Forest Service 2010 RPA Assessment](#). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station, Asheville, North Carolina.
  2. Mitchell, R., and F. Popham. 2008. [Effect of exposure to natural environment on health inequalities: An observational population study](#). *The Lancet* 372:1655–1660.
  3. Wickham, J.D., T.G. Wade, and K.H. Riitters. 2011. [An environmental assessment of United States drinking water watersheds](#). *Landscape Ecology* 26:605–616.
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