A Strategy to Match the Scenery

WildEarth Guardians Strategic Vision 2020
WildEarth Guardians unveils this plan at a time of great reckoning for our nation and our world.

This reckoning is driven by colliding and compounding climate, health, ecological, and economic crises that expose underlying inequities and highlight the systemic nature of these problems. It is our intent that this plan sets us on a firmer path to addressing our exploitative past with a more just, sustainable, and inclusive future.

There is likewise a growing awareness that the forces of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and all the other exploitative forces are serving neither planet nor people. We are living in a finite world as if there were infinite resources. We coronate leaders as if power was inherently just. These are not merely political or policy matters—these are existential matters. What kind of society do we want to create? How will we treat our fellow human beings? What kind of relationship do we want with the natural world?

Until recently, leaders at the highest levels in our country denied facts, ignored science, and exploited people’s fears—all while fueling actions that led to greater economic disparity and worsened the compounding global environmental and public health crises.

At this turbulent and pivotal time, WildEarth Guardians embarks on a new direction to build the power necessary to meet the challenges and opportunities of our time. At the heart of our vision is a belief in the intrinsic rights of nature, the blessings of diversity, the critical role of bold action, and the belief that citizens’ voices are essential—on the streets, in the halls of Congress, and in the courtroom—to address the nature and climate crises. Likewise, Guardians will nurture an ethic of social and racial equity as central to the success of all our work. This new path will ensure that Guardians is as strong and resilient as the West’s wildest, diverse ecosystems.
The American West is a place set apart, defined by its vast wild spaces of public land, and by the presence of a diverse (though increasingly imperiled) community of native plants and animals.

The howl of wolves, the song of sandhill cranes, the dance of sage grouse, and the sight of a seemingly endless horizon filled with wild desert peaks or forested mountains are all part of the identity of the American West. Wild nature still has a vibrant pulse in this place.

WildEarth Guardians exists to protect what remains of the wild, restore what has been damaged, and build human communities that celebrate diversity and live in greater harmony with nature. Core to our identity is a belief in the intrinsic value not only of all species, but also of all ecological processes—from flood to fire. We believe that dynamism of the land is key to its, and our, resilience in our climate-constrained present and future.

Since our founding we have centered our work on defending the rights of nature by protecting the vulnerable and voiceless and confronting the powerful people and unjust systems that stand in the way. We believe social and environmental justice are deeply intertwined, and that we can and should do more to create a more just, equitable, diverse, and inclusive organization and world. Therefore, we will deepen our work to partner with frontline communities who are disproportionately harmed by existing systems of power to build power for environmental, social, and economic justice. We will work to become a better ally and accomplice in realigning traditional conservation and environmentalism with the pillars of environmental justice and uplifting the voices of others.

We will continue to prioritize protection of wolves, beavers, and prairie dogs because these highly interactive species engineer whole ecosystems. We will prioritize the protection of species such as sage grouse, grizzly bears, and desert tortoise because they are iconic symbols that can secure protections of whole ecosystems from the Sagebrush Sea to Southwestern deserts.
The American West has been a colony to our nation’s dependence on fossil fuels. We will continue to fight the exploitation of land and communities by the fossil fuel industry. We will simultaneously work with pioneering tribes, rural co-ops, and municipalities that are leading the way in embracing cleaner, cheaper energy systems that will restore faith in our democratic institutions.

Though aridity defines much of the American West, it is our rivers that sustain it. We believe that sustaining living rivers for all life is essential to ensuring a healthy future for both people and ecosystems. By changing how we value rivers and reforming the archaic system of western water policy, we will safeguard clean water, revive dynamic flows, protect imperiled fish, wildlife, and plants, and ensure cultures and communities can thrive in balance with nature.

America is a nation founded on ideas and public land is one of those uniquely American ideas. Protecting all of our remaining wild public land is vital because nature has intrinsic value and is essential for human health and the human soul. By protecting wild public lands, we believe that the American West can lead the way in helping to solve two of the existential crises of our time—the biodiversity crisis and climate crisis. The region will also continue to provide the connection to nature and the respite from over-development that is essential for humans to thrive. Public land that has been damaged must be healed and restored. Rewilding and reconnecting wildlife corridors will be vital work of the future.

Being a Guardian not only means to act on principle to protect what matters but to engage in bold thought leadership that guides the way.

Guardians will continue to cultivate our collective and individual thought leadership, ensuring that as we protect and restore the land we will also nurture civic virtues and civility to help ensure our democratic institutions endure.

Envisioning, implementing, and succeeding in this work will rejuvenate the land and revitalize our spirits. Through all this work the American West’s awe-inspiring beauty will fuel our resilience - which will be critical to overcoming the many crisis of our time.
WildEarth Guardians believes we must catalyze a great transition from the exploitative and extractive economies of the past to restorative and regenerative economies. Addressing problems of this nature requires thinking and acting on a systemic scale.

Thus, the most profound commitment of our strategic plan is to drive **systemic** change. For many years, Guardians has reacted to—and fought the symptoms of—systemic problems. Whether in seeking to stop the poisoning of wildlife, drying up of rivers, clearcutting of forests, or dumping of carbon into our atmosphere we have relied on our **legal advocacy**.

In the future our role as pioneering legal agitators will remain a primary strategy. In fact, winning big in the court of law is invaluable not only because of the land, water, air, and wildlife protected, but also because it engages and inspires citizens. These citizens and the communities they represent will help us strike at the heart of systemic injustices by building political will for new leadership that embraces the rights of nature and recognizes the need to live within our means.

Yet in order to effectively drive **systemic** change legal advocacy alone is insufficient. Thus we will shift our organizational focus to build power through strategic **campaigns**. This means selecting campaigns, no matter the scale, that also integrate our vision of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. In order to campaign effectively we must also have the capacity to do so. That means more organizers and campaigners working at multiple scales—geographical, political, and cultural.

To build greater power now, and in the future, which will be needed to drive systemic change, WildEarth Guardians is reclaiming a piece of our past—reaching back to our earliest days when Guardians was a small grassroots organization that mobilized citizens to stand up and speak out to halt ancient forest logging on public lands. Politicians respond to and are even defined by the moment, which can be created by a strong movement.
Guardians will do this type of work again by creating our own team of organizers that will help build the power necessary to win each and every one of our key campaigns.

We have been trending in this direction for the last five years with many of our most recent hires being organizers, so we will not be starting from scratch. Our approach to organizing is about building power and confronting power. We want to inspire leaders to do the right thing and hold them accountable when they fail to do so.

Our focus on campaigning is, at its essence, a commitment to winning. Wild nature, our climate, and Earth’s life support systems have already experienced significant losses and we can’t allow further losses. This also means picking the right forum, whether it’s at the county, state, or federal level. Working at the sub-national level across our campaigns reflects our belief that we must incubate change and create belief at smaller scales in order to ultimately drive systemic change at broader scales.

What this plan then means for Guardians is to embrace complexity, to tenaciously confront and build power, and to relentlessly celebrate the beauty that defines the American West and the public lands, wild spaces, and wide-open skies that are at the heart of our region’s identity.
10 Priority Initiatives
Nurture an Ethic of Coexistence

For nearly a century, a federal agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture has carried out a vindictive war on wildlife, especially native carnivores. We are committed to ending this war by prohibiting the use of traps, snares, poisons, and all other methods used to brutally kill native wildlife. We will work at the local, state, and federal level to enact a new system and governing ethic for coexistence with wildlife grounded in compassion.

Reform State Wildlife Agencies to Protect

State wildlife agency operates in a system that is inherently biased against most native wildlife. We need a new system that is more inclusive in its governance and more diverse in its funding. We will work in select western states—including Colorado, New Mexico, and Oregon—to build support for new funding and governance that better cares for and recovers all native plants and animals.
Democratize, Decentralize, and Decarbonize Electric Power Systems

We support the push for energy independence that is sweeping across the rural Rocky Mountain West because it provides a model of what democratized power can and should be. Small rural electric cooperatives are charting a course that ensures cleaner, cheaper local energy that creates jobs in rural communities. This is a recipe for climate and economic resilience that our legal advocacy and organizing will support.

End the Era of Fossil Fuel Exploitation of Public Lands

For more than a century, public lands and indigenous communities have been exploited by the fossil fuel industry—fragmenting lands, polluting waters, and worsening the climate crisis. We will continue to work with frontline communities and bring bold, legal advocacy to justly and swiftly end the era of exploitation. We will build political leadership in Colorado and New Mexico, which is critical to enacting a national moratorium on leasing, and conduct a national environmental review of extraction policies as a basis for building support for a swift transition away from fossil fuels.
Prevent the Extinction Crisis

The ecological safety net that is the Endangered Species Act is one of our America’s most powerful environmental laws. We will work to restore and strengthen the Act, which was systemically dismantled over the last four years. Since our inception we have acted boldly to address the extinction crisis through relentless and innovative deployment of the Act to protect species—from the lesser known, but no less important, to the charismatic—and the habitats they need to survive. We will continue this work. Likewise, listing unprotected yet imperiled species, protecting critical habitats, and improving species’ recovery plans will all be essential work in the coming years.

Protect the Icons of the West

Wolves, grizzlies, sage grouse, the Joshua tree, and select other species are threatened icons of the West. In the years ahead, we will elevate the protection of these species for the outsized roles they play in engineering ecosystems or as umbrellas in protecting a broad swath of the landscapes of the American West. These species captivate our imaginations and are an irreplaceable part of our national heritage. For all of these reasons, our communications, policy, and legal advocacy will prioritize the protection of these icons.
Ensure Living Rivers

The Rio Grande and the Colorado are two of the West’s most iconic rivers. Yet new water development schemes and climate change threaten to dry up these life-giving rivers. We are on the frontlines challenging new water diversions and dams on the Colorado River and we will sustain our two decades-long commitment to the Rio Grande by advocating for creative new state and federal policies that ensure dynamic flows that sustain living rivers and endangered species.

Retire Grazing Permits, Diversity Rural Economies

Public lands ranchers are a profound ecological, political, and cultural force on the western landscape. Collaborating with willing ranchers, we are working to pass federal legislation that would allow ranchers to relinquish their public land grazing permits in exchange for financial compensation. Starting in New Mexico—and then extending to Arizona, Colorado, and other western states—we will continue working with public lands ranchers to secure permit retirement as an opportunity for other western communities. Together, we are imaging a new future for rural landscapes and communities that secures safety for wolves and other native wildlife while injecting private capital into rural economies.
Create America’s Next Great Protected Area

The Greater Gila is a globally significant biodiversity hotspot and birthplace of numerous visionary conservation efforts. With more than two million acres of still wild but unprotected public lands, it is a crown jewel in need of lasting protection. We envision a continentally-relevant protected area that is home to natural fire, native carnivores, and promotes connectivity between unique ecosystems, large and small. Our vision will create equitable rural economic revitalization and celebrate the rich cultural legacy that is central to the Gila’s identity.

Connect and Protect National Forests

National forests have been fragmented by a legacy of industrialized logging and road building. Old roads, now unnecessary, fragment habitats, pollute water supplies, and disrupt key migratory pathways for wildlife. To protect key wildlife corridors on national forests we work to enact permanent funding mechanisms to close thousands of miles of unnecessary roads. This work of connecting wildlands is key to making national forests, and the wildlife that inhabit them, resilient to the climate crisis.
We live at a time of great uncertainty about our collective future.

Will the injustices that have plagued America be honestly confronted and adequately remedied? Will we come to terms with the need to live within our means and protect the climate and the natural world that sustain us? The answers to these questions also create tremendous possibility. Questions of our fundamental relationship—to the land and each other—must be answered with fundamental changes.

Those who embrace the possibilities inherent in these uncertain times, while rejecting despair and cynicism, will define the future. There is no question that our current system is not viable or sustainable. Despite the scale of the challenges in these times, Guardians is optimistic about the future. Central to our optimism is our resilience fueled by the awe, beauty, and wonder of the American West—qualities that we celebrate and nurture at Guardians.

Guardians’ work must transcend preserving the land for itself or saving a species because of its intrinsic value. Our work must encompass preserving a sense of beauty to create opportunities for wonder that can inspire and motivate the human spirit to believe in something greater than the human experience. For it is our hubris, our absence of restraint, and our utter selfishness that have gotten us in this predicament in the first place.

If Guardians is to be successful in fulfilling our aspirations, we will need you to join us. The key to making this future a reality is enrolling the spirit, compassion, and courage of our members. With a shift in how we do the work, by in part becoming a better ally and accomplice, we seek to inspire an army of Guardians—young and old, black and white, urban and rural—to embrace not only our shared humanity but also our common destiny.

Sustaining the land’s dynamism, protecting its inherent beauty, and ensuring its resilience in these times of crisis will be an incubator of optimism. It is the job of WildEarth Guardians to be that incubator—to birth a new hope for the land, the rivers, and all of the creatures that animate this beautiful planet that we are fortunate to call home.