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California's Subnational Model for Biodiversity Action

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About this Publication

Introduction

Launched by Executive Order in 2020, California's 30x30 initiative commits to conserving 30% of the state's land and coastal waters by 2030. This case study explores the participatory process used to develop California's Pathways to 30x30 Strategy, focusing on community engagement, transparency, and accountability mechanisms that have shaped the initiative and its impacts.

California's approach demonstrates how inclusive, and bottom-up strategies can accelerate biodiversity action and provides practical insights for other regions developing subnational 30x30 initiatives.

Project Summary

California's 30x30 initiative is a leading example of how regional strategies can be designed to align local priorities with global biodiversity goals. This case study focuses on the process undertaken to develop California's 30x30 strategy, emphasizing the importance of including diverse perspectives across the state and creating transparent mechanisms for evaluating progress. We explore the participatory process California undertook from 2021-2022 to develop its Pathways to 30x30 document, which sets clear goals, defines key action strategies, and ensures accountability through public data platforms and regular reporting. As of 2025, California has conserved 26.1% of its land and 21.9% of its coastal waters, demonstrating early progress toward the 30x30 goal. The case highlights how California's strategy advances global biodiversity objectives at a subnational scale and provides guidance for other regions on creating strategies that (1) reflect local needs, (2) ensure ongoing evaluation, and (3) foster strong partnerships across sectors and regions.

Key information

Location:
California, USA

Area of Focus:
biodiversity conservation, climate mitigation, access to nature, conservation strategies, stakeholder engagement, subnational governance

Founded in:
2020

Investment:
Initial investment (2022) of $768M with o ngoing investments

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework Targets addressed:
Target 3

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Background and Context

California's 30x30 initiative builds on the state's long-standing conservation leadership and history of biodiversity policy and investment. The California Biodiversity Initiative, launched in 2018 under Governor Jerry Brown, established a coordinated effort to

"secure the future of California's native biodiversity".

This initiative laid the groundwork for Governor Gavin Newsom's 2020 Executive Order (EO N-82-20)[1], which committed California to conserve 30% of its land and coastal waters by 2030. Known as the "30x30" initiative, this commitment aligned California with national and global efforts, including the United States' *America the Beautiful initiative*[2] and Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)[3].

Legislature action soon followed: while Assembly member Ash Kalra's AB 3030 (2020) did not pass, it signaled growing support across both houses, and subsequent bills, AB 2278[4] and SB 337[5], which collectively institutionalized 30x30 as a durable and accountable target. In doing so, California reaffirmed its role as a subnational leader in biodiversity and climate action.

Beyond Target 3, California's strategy advances many of the 23 GBF targets by promoting ecological restoration, equitable access to nature, and improved science and monitoring. The initiative is central to California's broader Nature Strategy, linking biodiversity conservation with climate resilience, community well-being, and sustainable land use.

California's 30x30 approach also emphasizes equity: the strategy involved engagement with diverse communities, including Indigenous peoples, to ensure conservation efforts respect rights and reflect local priorities. By integrating biodiversity, climate, and equity considerations, the initiative provides a model for other regions aiming to implement inclusive and accountable conservation strategies.

California's long legacy of biodiversity conservation: From early national parks to 30x30

California has a long history of environmental leadership, beginning with the establishment of Big Basin State Park, Yosemite, and Sequoia National Parks in the late 19th century. Landmark policies, including the California Coastal Act of 1976 and the Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006, shaped the state's conservation framework.

California's ecosystems are extraordinarily diverse, spanning marine and coastal habitats, grasslands, shrublands, mountains, alpine zones, and deserts, and harbor a high concentration of endemic and culturally significant species, making it a global biodiversity hotspot. The state faces growing threats from climate change, habitat loss, and wildfires, highlighting the importance of equitable, inclusive, and science-based strategies such as 30x30.



[1] Executive Order N-82-20, issued by Governor Gavin Newsom on October 7, 2020, sets the state goal of conserving at least 30% of California's lands and coastal waters by 2030.

[2] Executive Order 14008 — Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad, signed by President Biden in 2021 but has since been rescinded by the Trump administration.

[3] CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity). (2022). Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Adopted at the fifteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15). https://www.cbd.int/gbf

[4] AB 2278 (Kalra, 2022), 2021–2022 Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2022), codified at Cal. Pub. Res. Code §§ 71450–71452, requiring the California Natural Resources Agency to report annually to the Legislature on progress toward conserving 30 percent of California's lands and coastal waters by 2030.

[5] SB 337 (Min, 2023), 2023–2024 Reg. Sess. (Cal. 2023), codified at Cal. Pub. Res. Code § 71450(b) (establishing state goal to conserve at least 30 % of California's lands and coastal waters by 2030).

Key Activities and Innovations

To shape strategies for reaching 2030 biodiversity targets, California actively engaged communities and stakeholders across the state.

This outreach process helped ensure that California's 30x30 strategy reflected the diversity of the state's people and ecosystems, embodying California strategy's commitment to inclusive, place-based conservation. Together, the following activities demonstrate how broad engagement and transparency can accelerate biodiversity action.

This was done through nine regional workshops, five topical advisory panels and workshops, over 70 tribal consultations and listening sessions, and a synthesis of more than 1,000 public comments, in aggregate reaching over 4,000 individuals across the state.

I. Engagement process

a. Soliciting input from the public across the state through regional workshops and online surveys

In April and May of 2021, the 30x30 California initiative, led by CA Natural Resources Agency Deputy Secretary Jennifer Norris, conducted nine regional workshops across the state. Participants shared challenges, priorities, and definitions of success in various regions of California via comments, discussions, and online polling. Summaries of these workshops were made public, ensuring transparency and broad participation in developing conservation goals and strategies. The diverse social and ecological contexts throughout California reflect different priorities and perspectives on conservation[6].

For example, input from regional workshops in the San Francisco Bay region emphasized the importance of urban green spaces, coastal habitats protection, and sea-level rise mitigation; Sierra Nevada participants focused on forest health and fire management; and North Coast participants prioritized culturally significant lands. Synthesizing these differences was essential to ensure the 30x30 strategy reflected California's diverse ecological and social contexts.



b. Soliciting input from advisory panels:

The initiative convened panels of experts from academia, NGOs, and the private sector, across the state7 to ensure that its 30x30 goals and strategies were well-informed and aligned with a diverse set of perspectives. Panel questions and inputs were shared with the public and open to public comments, allowing for more technical inputs from the broader community.

c. Tribal consultations:

Between 2021 and 2022, California conducted over 70 tribal consultations and listening sessions to gather their input on conservation priorities, protection of tribal lands and cultural resources, and support tribal-led conservation. These consultations not only shaped the used definitions of conservation, informed the inclusion of culturally significant lands, and laid the groundwork for the Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program. Overall, the process emphasized government-to-government engagement and centered tribal sovereignty, knowledge systems, and priorities in the final strategy.

d. Public input on written strategy:

An initial draft synthesized workshop, panel, and consultation insights, outlining strategic actions to meet the statewide targets. The draft was opened for public comment via virtual workshops, written comments, phone calls, and email. Despite COVID-19 constraints, these multiple channels ensured broad accessibility and inclusion of input in finalizing the Pathways to 30x30 strategy.

[6] Regional annex to Pathways document.

Key Activities and Innovations

II. Key components of the strategy

California's 30x30 strategy acknowledges a range of land categories that contribute to biodiversity conservation, but 30x30 Conservation Areas are specifically defined as those that count towards area-based targets:

"Land and coastal water areas that are durably protected and managed to sustain functional ecosystems, both intact and restored, and the diversity of life that they support."

These areas align with the California Protected Areas Database (CPAD) and the California Conservation Easements Database (CCED), which track public and private protected lands and their conservation status. Areas with GAP status codes 1 and 2, including national parks, wildlife refuges, and other biodiversity-focused sites collectively contribute to California's goal of conserving 30% of its landscapes and coastal waters by 2030.

Complementary Conservation Measures (CCMs) enhance California's 30x30 Conservation Areas by protecting biodiversity in areas between or adjacent to protected lands. CCMs include GAP 3 and 4 areas and sites not listed in CCED and CPAD, such as on-farm habitat areas (e.g., cover crops, and field-edge hedgerows), rangelands, community gardens, and wildlife crossings. Currently, the strategy does not establish specific targets or clear frameworks for CCMs for maximizing or accounting for their ecological impact. Defining measurable goals and performance benchmarks for quantifying the tradeoffs, such as between biodiversity and climate benefits, will be important for strengthening the overall effectiveness and accountability of the 30x30 initiative.

At the time the California strategy defined 30x30 Conservation Areas, 24% of California's land and 16% of its coastal waters were already conserved. Most of these areas are managed by federal (84.6%) and state agencies (9.9%), with over 95% providing public access.

California's strategy to conserve 30% of its total land and coastal waters is organized into ten Pathways:

- *Accelerate Regionally Led Conservation*
- *Execute Strategic Land Acquisitions*
- *Increase Voluntary Conservation Easements*
- *Enhance Conservation of Existing Public Lands and Coastal Waters*
- *Institutionalize Advance Mitigation*
- *Expand and Accelerate Environmental Restoration and Stewardship*
- *Strengthen Coordination Among Governments*
- *Align Investments to Maximize Conservation Benefits*
- *Advance and Promote Complementary Conservation Measures*
- *Evaluate Conservation Outcomes and Adaptively Manage*

These Pathways and their associated strategies guide the allocation of resources to achieve the objectives and priorities derived from the public engagement process.



III. Creating accessible data platforms for practitioners and the public

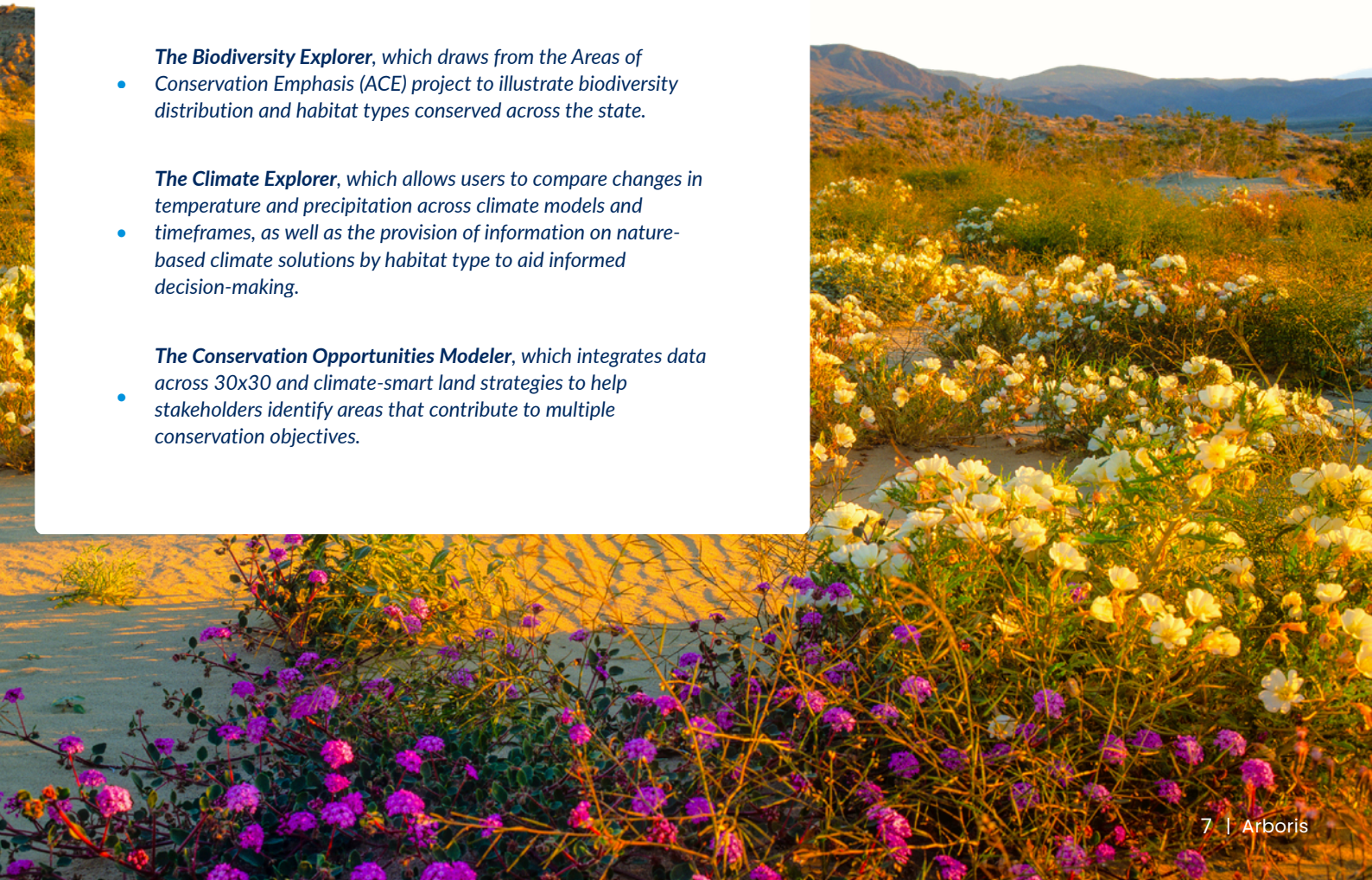
The California 30x30 initiative created a suite of interactive Explorer Applications to make relevant and up-to-date information readily available to stakeholders across the State.

These applications include:

- ***The Conserved Areas Explorer**, which serves as a dashboard of conservation success stories from across the state and enables users to explore the data used to track progress towards the 30% area goal.*
- ***The Access Explorer**, which aligns with the Outdoors for All Initiative and leverages existing park access and community census data to promote inclusivity and equitable access to outdoor spaces.*
- ***The Biodiversity Explorer**, which draws from the Areas of Conservation Emphasis (ACE) project to illustrate biodiversity distribution and habitat types conserved across the state.*
- ***The Climate Explorer**, which allows users to compare changes in temperature and precipitation across climate models and timeframes, as well as the provision of information on nature-based climate solutions by habitat type to aid informed decision-making.*
- ***The Conservation Opportunities Modeler**, which integrates data across 30x30 and climate-smart land strategies to help stakeholders identify areas that contribute to multiple conservation objectives.*

Together, these Explorer Applications, embedded in the CA Nature Explorer web environment, provide valuable resources for policymakers, conservationists, and the public to support science-informed and community-driven decisions and accountability. The tools were built in a close partnership between the state government and ESRI, Inc. While maintaining these tools requires financial resources, open-source alternatives exist and may offer pathways for other regions.

Notably, California's 30x30 initiative did not include statewide priority maps to explicitly identify areas for conservation action and investment. This approach preserved local flexibility, helped avoid conflicts over land use designation, and allowed regions to develop priorities aligned with communities' values. At the same time, the absence of explicit prioritization may limit progress toward ecological objectives such as complementarity and connectivity.



Environmental Impacts

As of 2025, California has conserved an additional 2.35 million acres of land and 191,000 acres of coastal waters, bringing the total to 26.1% of land and 21.9% of coastal waters under long-term conservation protections.

Notably, 95% of newly conserved lands are adjacent to existing protected areas, enhancing ecological connectivity and landscape-scale resilience to climate change, drought, and wildfire. This milestone was reached through new conserved areas, improved protections, ancestral land return, and the inclusion of existing conserved lands in a centralized public database.



These gains have spanned a wide range of habitats, including redwood forests, deserts, grasslands, rivers, and marine ecosystems. Among the most significant restoration efforts is the Klamath River Renewal Project, which removed four major dams and reconnected more than 400 miles of riverine habitat, representing one of the largest river restoration efforts in U.S. history and 30x30's potential for supporting ecological recovery. This exemplifies the Pathways' emphasis on connectivity, ecosystem resilience, and climate adaptation, illustrating how 30x30 contributes to the Nature Strategy's integrated vision for California's landscapes and seascapes.

Additional progress includes the designation of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary and expanded protections in desert areas such as the Chuckwalla National Monument, supporting biodiversity corridors. While these advances are key to achieving 30x30 targets, assessing direct biodiversity outcomes remains an ongoing challenge. Continued investment in biodiversity monitoring and integration with existing biodiversity collections data to assess impact is critical.

Socioeconomic Impacts

California's 30x30 initiative has seen significant financial commitments supporting inclusive and community-driven conservation goals.

As of 2025, more than $1.3 billion in state and partner funding has supported land and coastal conservation, including over $107 million awarded to 34 tribal-led projects through the Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program.

In addition, programs such as the Point Blue Conservation Science Roots Program have supported engagement by underserved communities across working lands. While not all sites count toward formal 30x30 acreage, they contribute to biodiversity goals, education, and climate resilience goals. These investments strengthen community stewardship and align with the 'Outdoors for All' pillar of the California Nature Strategy, ensuring that conservation delivers social as well as ecological benefits.

The pathways initiative tracks and reports funding allocations annually, underscoring the role of transparency in the implementation of regional strategies. As the initiative progresses, continued transparency in funding allocation will be critical for building trust and ensuring equitable socioeconomic benefits. The state also hosts an annual 30x30 one-day conference, convening participants from across the state to share successes and sustain support towards implementation.



Policy Impacts

The 30x30 strategy was initiated by Governor Newsom's Nature-Based Solutions Executive Order in October 2020, which prioritized natural and working lands as key tools for addressing climate change and biodiversity loss.

A major policy outcome of this strategy was the formal adoption of the 30x30 goal into state law with the signing of SB 337 in October 2023. This legal codification reflects the influence of the participatory processes and provides a strong foundation for long-term implementation.

Beyond SB 337, the 30x30 strategy helped shape broader policy and funding measures that accelerated conservation action, including significant state investment in stewardship, restoration, and conservation projects. The framework also informed policy changes across state agencies and departments, reinforcing alignment between conservation goals, funding mechanisms, and implementation. For example, aligned with 30x30 is the California Natural Resources Agency's Cutting Green Tape initiative, which advances regulatory and administrative reforms to reduce bureaucratic barriers and accelerate the implementation of conservation and restoration projects.

Together, these actions demonstrate how the 30x30 strategy moved from an executive commitment to an integrated policy framework supporting on-the-ground action. While much discussion has emphasized the terrestrial dimension of 30x30, marine and coastal policy outcomes have been equally significant. The California Ocean Protection Council (OPC) has advanced the ocean components of the 30x30 through management reviews and marine protected areas, development of blue carbon strategies, and programs to strengthen coastal resilience in response to sea-level rise and climate change.



Sustainability

Financial investments have played a key role in supporting California's 30x30 the initiative. In the 2022–2023 state budget,

California allocated $1.3 billion for Nature-Based Solutions, with a portion dedicated to projects aligned with 30x30.

Although allocations were reduced in the subsequent budget years, future funding will depend on the state's broader budget outlook. A major boost came with voter approval of the California Climate Bond (Proposition 4) in November 2024, a $10 billion measure that includes $1.2 billion for Nature-Based Solutions and 30x30.

By embedding 30x30 within the California Nature Strategy, the initiative ensures institutional continuity and multi-source funding to sustain conservation outcomes beyond 2030.

Importantly, the Pathways to 30x30 document was designed as a strategic framework to align and leverage investments from multiple sources, including federal and local governments, NGOs, and the private sector.

As a result, the state investment is only one component of the broader financial support advancing the 30x30 goals.



Partnerships

The 30x30 Partnership model illustrates how diverse actors can co-govern conservation implementation at a statewide scale.

Collaboration with state agencies, indigenous communities, environmental NGOs, scientists, and private landowners has enabled the pooling of resources, knowledge, and expertise in California. The California Natural Resources Agency launched the 30x30 Partnership to support implementation and engage partners working toward its objectives. It provides an organizational space for dialogue, coordination, and strategic planning, including convening participants, communicating progress, highlighting best practices, addressing challenges, and identifying opportunities to meet the 30x30 goals.

The 30x30 Partnership is supported by other specific groups, including:

- ***30x30 Partnership Coordinating Committee (PCC):*** *responsible for creating statewide collaboration and public engagement, the PCC connects stakeholders, identifies implementation opportunities, and helps organize workshops and the annual 30x30 Partnership convening. It is vital for the effective coordination and communication across the initiative.*

- ***California Biodiversity Council:*** *an existing body that strengthens coordination among state, federal and local resource management and environmental protection agencies. The Council developed the California Biodiversity Council Shared Opportunities for Achieving California 30x30, a resource identifying agency programs best positioned to advance 30x30.*

- ***California Biodiversity Network (CBN):*** *a collaborative platform bringing together environmental experts, community leaders, government representatives, scientists, and educators. As part of the 30x30 Partnership, CBN support the initiative's execution and actively contributed to the Pathways to 30x30 strategy document by compiling research and information priorities to guide implementation.*

- ***Partnerships with California Native American Tribes:*** *The Newsom Administration committed $100 million to the new Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program, which provides funding, technical assistance, and capacity support to advance tribal priorities and strengthen collaboration in conservation and climate goals.*

- ***Regional Working Groups and Coalitions:*** *California's 30x30 initiative continues to support regionally led implementation. Local and regional coalitions are encouraged to join the Partnership to share information, identify needs, and collaborate. One example is Power In Nature, a statewide coalition that builds public support, elevates local priorities, and ensures accountability for implementation through community organizing and advocacy.*

Alongside formal partnerships, a growing network of community-driven efforts supports biodiversity action aligned with 30x30. The California Academy of Sciences has expanded the City Nature Challenge, engaging thousands in community science. These efforts are complemented by workforce development programs such as the California Conservation Corps and a statewide database developed by the California Biodiversity Network to connect young people with training and job opportunities in restoration and stewardship. Together, these initiatives build the awareness, capacity, and workforce needed to sustain long-term conservation goals outlined by the pathways document.



Replicability and Key Lessons Learned

As nearly 300 cities and regions around the world commit to 30x30 targets, many still lack strategies, implementation pathways, and accountability systems.

While national governments report progress under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, much of the implementation occurs at the subnational level. California's 30x30 initiative demonstrates how a subnational government can lead in translating global biodiversity targets into actionable strategies.

The state has established a pathway toward achieving Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework—conserving 30% of terrestrial and marine areas by 2030—in ways that are effective, equitable, and ecologically representative. California's leadership provides a model for other regions seeking to align local strategies with global conservation goals.

Several features of the initiative are particularly relevant to other regions:

1. Extensive public engagement: From the outset, California prioritized public engagement as a foundation for legitimacy and impact. This process ensured that the strategy reflected local priorities and diverse community values, while also surfacing potential tensions or trade-offs between ecological, cultural, and economic objectives. The drafting of the Pathways to 30x30 document was iterative, with feedback shaping the definitions of conservation, the role of working lands, and the ten action pathways. The final document is strategic, rather than prescriptive, reflecting deliberate translation of public input into consensus-driven goals.

2. Partnership and shared ownership: Rather than relying solely on top-down implementation, California created formal infrastructures for collaboration and outreach. The 30x30 Partnership provides an ongoing forum for coordination across agencies, tribes, civil society organizations, scientists, and local governments, fostering shared ownership and alignment of goals, data, and investments.

3. Transparency and accountability: California established an accountability framework early in the process through AB 2278), requiring annual public reporting on 30x30 progress. Reports track additions to 30x30 Conservation Areas and updates on the ten action pathways. The 2025 annual report shows 26.1% of California's land and 21.9% of coastal waters under long-term conservation, up from 24% and 16% in 2022. Reports also highlight qualitative outcomes, including gains on working lands, underserved communities, and improvements in habitat connectivity.

California's 30x30 strategy is not a perfect blueprint, but it is a powerful example of subnational leadership in operationalizing global biodiversity targets. Broad participation, flexible implementation, and long-term partnerships support provide a potentially replicable model for other jurisdictions.

As more regions commit to 30x30 goals, California's experience offers practical insights for building inclusive, adaptive, and accountable pathways grounded in local realities and aligned with global policies.



Aknowledgements

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