

# Assembly Bill 30

## Access to Nature Act for Californians

Assemblymember Ash Kalra

### SUMMARY

The Access to Nature Act would establish that the State of California recognizes that access to nature and the benefits of nature. It would further establish the policy of the state that every resident has safe and affordable access to nature, especially those living in communities that are nature-deprived or have historically lacked access to nature.

AB 30 also directs state agencies to prioritize investments and access to nature in a manner that protects the health and safety of the public to communities in need, including communities of color, Indigenous Peoples, and economically disadvantaged communities.

### BACKGROUND

Existing California law establishes that every Californian should enjoy the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and that every community should be a healthy one in which to live, work, play, and learn. Moreover, the statute declares that no single group of people should bear a disproportionate share of negative consequences or adverse health impacts from industrial, governmental, or commercial operations or policies. The Legislature has further found that millions of Californians continue to live, work, play and go to school in unhealthy environments.<sup>1</sup>

Being able to access the many benefits of nature is necessary for the mental<sup>2</sup> and physical health, and overall well-being of people.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Health and Safety Code § 116765(a), 116765(b), 116765(d)  
<sup>2</sup> Ulrich, R. S., Simons, R. F., Losito, B. D., Fiorito, E., Miles, M. A., & Zelson, M. (1991). Stress recovery during exposure to natural and urban environments. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 11(3), 201-230. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(05\)80184-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(05)80184-7)

<sup>3</sup> Giannico, V., Spano, G., Elia, M., D'Este, M., Sanesi, G., & Laforteza, R. (2021). Green spaces, quality of life, and citizen perception in European cities [Abstract].

The American Public Health Association's policy statement on Improving Health and Wellness through Access to Nature states: "Access to nature has been related to lower levels of mortality and illness, higher levels of outdoor physical activity, restoration from stress, a greater sense of well-being, and greater social capital." The Association further acknowledges that: "A rapidly growing body of evidence establishes that protecting and restoring access to nature in different spheres of people's lives, among those of all ages, social groups, and abilities, can alleviate some of the most important problems in public health, including obesity, stress, social isolation, injury, and violence."<sup>4</sup>

Access to nature may include physical access to amenities such as parks, beaches, regional open spaces, and wilderness areas, but may also include access to the co-benefits of nature, such as clean air, clean water, and other benefits of a healthy environment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the benefits of access to nature in urban centers has been especially recognized.<sup>5</sup>

However, the pandemic has also revealed existing inequities in accessing these open spaces as more people have sought respite in the outdoors during this challenging time. Studies have shown that people of color are less likely to have access to nature and Indigenous People living in rural areas have likewise suffered disproportionately from

*Environmental Research*, 196. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2021.110922>

<sup>4</sup> Improving health and wellness through access to nature. (n.d.). Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2014/07/08/09/18/improving-health-and-wellness-through-access-to-nature>

<sup>5</sup> Lu, Y., Zhao, J., Wua, X., & Loa, S. (2021). Escaping to nature during a pandemic: A natural experiment in Asian cities during the COVID-19 pandemic with big social media data [Abstract]. *Science of The Total Environment*, 777. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2021.146092>

environmental degradation and displacement. Communities of color are three times more likely than white communities to live in nature-deprived areas, and 70 percent of low-income communities today live in nature-deprived areas.<sup>6</sup> As the destruction of nature accelerates at unprecedented rates due to climate change,<sup>7</sup> marginalized communities will continue to bear more of the negative consequences of the climate crisis.

Such realizations are informing global conservation efforts, including the international goal to protect 30 percent of the world's lands and waters by 2030, an initiative known as "30 by 30," which was adopted in California under Governor Gavin Newsom's Executive Order N-82-20 in October 2020 and across the United States by President Joe Biden's Executive Order on January 27, 2021.<sup>8</sup> As we continue on this path, we have the opportunity to better invest in our public lands, doing our part to make Californians healthier and more resilient, while also increasing access to the communities who need it most.

Therefore, the State of California needs to not only act expediently to protect and conserve its natural resources, but also act to provide all Californians with healthy environments in which to live, work, play, and learn. Complimentary to this goal is to access nature and prioritized investments in programs that improve access to nature for nature-deprived communities in need.

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<sup>6</sup> Rowland-Shea, Jenny et al. 2020. *The Nature Gap: Confronting Racial and Economic Disparities in the Destruction and Protection of Nature in America*. The Center for American Progress. Accessed at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2020/07/21/487787/the-nature-gap/>

<sup>7</sup> See Lee-Ashley, Matt et al. 2019. *The Green Squeeze: America's Nature Crisis*. The Center for American Progress. Accessed at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/reports/2019/10/22/476220/the-green-squeeze/>

<sup>8</sup> Gibbens, Sarah. 2021. *The U.S. commits to tripling its protected lands. Here's how it could be done*. National Geographic. Accessed at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/biden-commits-to-30-by-2030-conservation-executive-orders>

## SOLUTION

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The Access to Nature Act, AB 30, would affirm that access to nature and its benefits would also direct state agencies to incorporate consideration of this into investments and policies regarding nature access, especially for communities that are—or have historically been—nature-deprived.

The bill recognizes the access to nature during the current pandemic and helps plan for improving access, especially for urban and rural residents who far too often do not have access to healthy environments.

By adopting AB 30, California would become the first state to declare that access to nature for all Californians as a benefit, setting an important example for the rest of the nation that our most vulnerable communities can benefit equitably in our efforts to protect nature. Access to public land, nature, and a healthy environment should be a safe and affordable for all Californians.

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