

# Allow 'nonuse rights' to conserve natural resources

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Traditionally, natural resources in the United States have been managed for productive uses, meaning resource extraction. To acquire and maintain leases of publicly owned resources such as oil and gas, timber,

and rangelands, the resources must be put to certain "productive uses." Purchasing rights to natural resources to conserve them, rather than for extraction, is typically not an option.

PERC Vice President of Research Shawn Regan and PERC Senior Fellows Bryan Leonard, Christopher Costello, and Dominic Parker along with Suzi Kerr, Andrew Plantinga, James Salzman, V. Kerry Smith, and Temple Stoellinger have published a paper in *Science* on the role non-use rights play in conserving natural resources, titled "Allow 'nonuse rights' to conserve natural resources."

The authors argue that "use-it-or-lose-it" requirements, coupled with narrow definitions of valid "uses," limit environmental groups from participating in markets to conserve publicly managed natural resources. Such restrictions can bias resource management in favor of extractive uses, even when environmental groups are willing to pay more. By allowing for non-use rights, environmentalists can express their values in the marketplace, rather than relying on political, legal, or administrative processes.

"If [environmental groups](#) are willing to pay more to protect an area than industry groups are to develop it, then the land clearly ought to be protected," says author Shawn Regan on the subject of what he calls [conservation](#) leasing.

If done thoughtfully, allowing for non-use rights can improve the status quo of public resource management for the following reasons:

- Non-use rights can reveal the economic value of conservation.
- Environmentalists have shown interest in participating in such markets, and granting them further access through non-use rights could expand conservation efforts.
- Non-use rights, if secure and well-defined, could deliver more

lasting conservation outcomes that are not dependent upon shifting political winds.

- A rights-based approach allows for greater flexibility in responding to changing [market](#) and environmental conditions—for example, those posed by a changing climate.
- A rights-based approach can limit conflict by compensating existing leaseholders.

This paper is the result of a PERC workshop that brought together experts in resource management, economics, and conservation to think creatively about how to extend market tools like price signals and property rights to [natural resource](#) conservation.

**More information:** Let environmentalists acquire extraction rights to conserve natural resources, *Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1126/science.abi4573](#)

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