

Experts highlight benefits of mainstreaming nature in U.S. policymaking

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Nature and natural resources play a critical role in our health, national security, economy, infrastructure design, and more. Yet, in policymaking, nature is often left out of the equation entirely or siloed into environment-specific or land management agencies. The process of overcoming these barriers is known as "mainstreaming nature," and in [an article recently published in *Science*](#), Eli Fenichel, Knobloch Family

Professor of Natural Resource Economics, and a group of leading environmental and economic policy experts explain its benefits and the process the Biden-Harris Administration has used to begin mainstreaming nature into U.S. policymaking.

"Mainstreaming nature is taking a systems thinking approach, with a bit of extra care to make sure information about nature enters the process—in ways it often has not in the past," Fenichel said. "It doesn't mean putting nature on a pedestal; it means being thoughtful and smart about the way we use and interact with nature so that more people can enjoy the benefits of nature at lower costs. It is good governance."

The authors noted that the Biden-Harris administration used the "CASE" criteria—cross-sectoral, appropriate, strategic, and evidence-based—as a guide for when and how to mainstream nature into policy- and decision-making and cite examples including incorporating nature into the national economic accounts.

The U.S. had traditionally lagged behind other countries in incorporating nature in its core economic accounting. In 2023, however, the [federal government](#) made significant progress in efforts to better account for nature and natural resources within the economy when the Biden Administration published the "[National Strategy to Develop Statistics for Environmental-Economic Decisions](#)," a framework for a multiyear effort to use data to better understand nature's critical contributions to the U.S. economy. In June of 2021, Fenichel took an 18-month leave from YSE to serve as assistant director for natural resource economics at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), where he was a critical member of the 27-agency team that produced the strategy. The 15-year national strategy, which commits to producing natural capital accounts that will begin as research and experimental statistics, what many countries already have, eventually leads into official national statistics, which few countries have done to date.

Further progress in incorporating nature into policymaking came through several other policies between 2022 and 2024. For example, the [2022 national roadmap for nature-based solutions](#) elevated nature as a priority issue for climate change, economic prosperity, and equity. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) subsequently released a [memorandum](#) directing all agencies that fund or support infrastructure to consider nature-based options for resilience and fund them "unless alternatives are demonstrated to be more beneficial to society when the full range of benefits are considered."

"OMB's infrastructure memo, which applies to all infrastructure funded through the Inflation Reduction Act, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and any other federal program—covering trillions in government spending—is an example of a policy creating a major avenue for real change because it helps agencies consider options they might not have otherwise," said Heather Tallis, executive fellow at the Center for Coastal Climate Resilience at the University of California, Santa Cruz and the article's lead author.

OMB also re-iterated [instructions to agencies](#), which had been in place since the George W. Bush Administration, to consider nature in formal analysis they do related to designing regulations or project selection. However, in 2024 the CASE framework led OMB to issue a [supplement to the guidance](#) to help agencies frame such analysis and carry it out in a consistent manner. An important feature was that this guidance applied to all agencies, not just those with an environmental portfolio.

So, what makes the CASE framework an effective way to incorporate nature across the broad scope of U.S. policymaking?

A *cross-sectoral* approach to policymaking is one that is crafted to make relevant and aligned changes to multiple sectors, rather than one at a time, to create more efficient governance and minimize conflicts and

inconsistencies, the authors noted.

Furthermore, nature can and should be considered at *appropriate* points in the decision-making process for sectors that affect, or are affected by nature, even in those sectors that have traditionally been considered as having nothing or little to do with the natural world. This type of fundamental shift will lead to new stakeholders, experts, community perspectives, and diverse sources throughout the decision process. Similarly, incorporating the *strategic* element of the CASE framework into policymaking in areas, such as infrastructure investment, which historically has often contributed to biodiversity loss, could boost efforts to combat [climate change](#) and reverse nature or biodiversity loss.

Efforts to mainstream nature into the policymaking process also need to be *evidence-based*, drawing on documented successes and failures and a robust understanding of connections among, economic, security, social, and ecological systems. The authors readily admit that evidence does not always support the nature-based solution, or an idea proposed by an environmental group.

As efforts to mainstream nature into policymaking expand, federal agencies will require robust evidence from researchers to assess and guide the design of nature-based interventions, such as restoring wetlands for flood risk reduction and protecting habitat for clean water supplies. It will also require the design of policy incentives to drive adoption of those solutions, such as accounting for how nature restoration projects can lower flood risk and insurance premiums or how expected climatic changes will alter the ability of the federal government to balance the budget.

If such efforts to mainstream nature into federal policymaking are ultimately successful, it will, they add, "put nature—on equal—not preferred, footing and still allow the possibility that decision processes

will ultimately choose a non-nature alternative."

"If conservation is wise use, then we must be wise about the frameworks we use to make decisions that use or influence nature, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and we need to be inclusive of the different ways that people interact with nature, and at the end of the day that mainstreaming nature is building the processes to do that," Fenichel said.

More information: Heather Tallis et al, Mainstreaming nature in US federal policy, *Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1126/science.adp5394](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adp5394)

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