



A GALVANIZING VISION

Jennifer Norris on Enduring Conservation and Equitable Access

by LIV O'KEEFFE

Last October, Gov. Newsom appeared in a vineyard against an orange, smoke-filled sky to announce a new executive order focused on biodiversity and climate change. As he spoke, California was reeling from its worst wildfire season on record and would soon enter the deadliest months of a global pandemic. Amid multiple, coinciding crises, Gov. Newsom prioritized three intersecting goals for the years ahead: climate resilience, biodiversity protection, and equitable access to nature for all Californians.

That executive order marked the evolution of California's 2018 Biodiversity Initiative, introduced in the final months of Jerry Brown's administration. Today, Gov. Newsom's order aligns with international and national efforts to protect 30 percent of the world's lands and waters by 2030—a milestone toward reaching 50 percent protection by 2050. (Learn more about 30x30 on page 26.) California is now in the early stages of its 30x30 initiative, and robust public participation is the foundation of that work. As this issue goes to print, the California Natural Resource Agency is

conducting regional workshops across the state and gathering public input online. California Deputy Secretary of Biodiversity and Habitat Jennifer Norris and her team are responsible for the effort, which she hopes will be a “galvanizing” force for years to come.

With a PhD in ecology and a master's degree in conservation biology, Norris has spent her career at the intersection of land management, wildlife biology, and conservation. Last year, she joined the California Natural Resources Agency as the first deputy secretary focused on biodiversity. Prior to moving to Sacramento, she worked as a biologist with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in New Mexico. Norris says she's known what she wanted to do since age 11. In fact, she credits her entire life trajectory to a summer camp called Camp DeBruce in upstate New York, where she says she was inspired to spend the rest of her life protecting nature.

Recently, Norris took a few minutes to talk with us about the business of protecting the natural world and what she hopes 30x30 will mean for California.



Liv O'Keeffe: Given the impact Camp DeBruce had on your life, I can imagine you feel strongly about people having fair and equitable access to nature.



Jennifer Norris: Yes, and education. The value of environmental education can change people's lives. That camp was really the first time I got to wade through a stream, sit by a tree, and listen to the leaves. It completely changed my life. It was like I was suddenly home. It's why today I'm working to protect places in California, so other people can have those same experiences.

California is the first state to prioritize equity and access to nature alongside its biodiversity and climate resilience goals. It feels like we as a state, but also as a global community, are in the midst of a shift to a more expansive view of what it means to protect nature: Rather than treating humans only as the perpetrators of harm and threats to the natural world, we're now recognizing that we are in fact part of nature, and that addressing social inequity is an inextricable part of protecting the environment. Do you observe similar shifts, and how do you see that playing out in California?

Definitely. I think it's a relief to finally talk about it in this way. We are a part of nature. We are biological beings. We need nature. It cleans our air, cleans

our water. I've been thinking about this idea that plant people know better than everyone: We talk about biodiversity and ecosystems, but you don't have an ecosystem without protecting all the organisms within it. You don't protect biodiversity over here and then the ecosystem over there. The ecosystem doesn't work without the species. We live in the natural world. This is our spaceship. We're not going anywhere else, so I think our connection to it is really important.

The need for equity brings this issue home for me. You can look outside your window and see hummingbirds, which I do every day while I'm sitting at my desk. They come and they feed on my flowers. I want everyone to have that experience. I think it's a really exciting time to bring people together around this issue and make this a priority.

You've been in your new role for almost a year. What are some of your initial observations about the state of biodiversity in California?

The biggest one is how much of a leader we really are in California, how many different organizations and institutions are dedicated to biodiversity conservation. CNPS is a good example. There are people everywhere doing amazing work. Still, there's a lot more to be done. Species are in peril, ecosystems aren't functioning as they should. So, I think this 30x30 initiative is a really nice galvanizing vision, bringing a whole bunch of people from different places into one space to sort of rally around a concept. It gives us a

way to think about the importance of habitat and ecosystems and being strategic about protecting large landscapes, which really speaks to me.

I saw early on that meeting with all these groups individually wasn't what we needed. We needed to all be in one space sharing information. So, I really pushed for this collaborative approach because it's the sharing of information and finding opportunities that is really going to make all of this happen. We're all out there working on this, but we just need to work together.

How would you describe your directives under Gov. Newsom's executive order? And what do you think will be the most critical factors for a successful outcome?

I'm in charge of two pieces: I'm leading the 30x30 effort and organizing the Biodiversity Collaborative, which is bringing scientists and practitioners together across silos to talk about how we can work together to promote biodiversity. 30x30 is taking up a lot of energy now, but the input from the Collaborative undergirds how we're going to be able to be successful in conservation. What's the science that helps us understand where biodiversity is, how do we protect it in places that are useful? How do we do restoration well, and how do we bring everybody into the conversation? That's always in the back of my mind as we're thinking about 30x30. 30x30 is simplified to identifying acres to conserve, but which acres we choose, which ones will protect biodiversity, which ones will

Photo courtesy of
Jennifer Norris

help us combat climate change and importantly, increase access to nature for everyone—how we identify those requires all that other knowledge.

What do you see as the state's role in understanding and promoting biodiversity?

Our role is to take a holistic approach to keeping communities healthy and resilient, to be thinking about climate change and our biodiversity and functional ecosystems. There are two parts to that. The first is working within the government to communicate across silos, sharing info about water, talking about climate change, and talking about forest health. The second part is bringing together these larger groups of people to think about how all these things intersect. We really need everybody to get together.

Is there a specific example that comes to mind for you on this cross-silo collaboration?

One is the restoration work in the Central Valley on these multi-benefit floodplain solutions, where we're building flood capacity by allowing water to slow down on fields, as well as growing rice and potentially habitat for birds and food for fish. It's a really interesting intersection of different needs coming together in one space. We're asking lands to do more with less—like all of us, right? There's just not that much land available, so if we can get co-benefits, it's really inspiring.



How has it been for you to move from a career in science to one shaping public policy?

I think speaking like a scientist has been really valuable for my career in public policy. I understand how science is done, and the uncertainty and how we address that. I've always wanted

science to be relevant to conservation. I've always been working at the interface of science and policy and trying to apply that science. So, the most important part of the switchover is being able to talk to people and meet them where they are, helping them to understand these complex ideas and engage with the natural world

and grow to appreciate it. That's why I'm so excited about 30x30 and these workshops. People from all walks of life are coming and engaging and talking about their love of nature, which has been amazing.

Do you have any immediate observations based on what you've been hearing from people in these workshops?



I've been impressed by the diversity as we move from region to region. It's partly what you'd expect, but it's so rich.

The things that matter to people in different parts of the state really vary. Their passion is really deep. Tonight, we're going to go to the North Coast, and I expect we're going to hear about redwoods. When we talked in the Central Valley, people were really talking about park-poor communities and agriculture and the desire to protect rivers. When we were in the Sierra, the concern was around forests and wildfire and recreation. So, the differences have been really interesting to see, but there is always a lot of passion around conservation.

What do you see as the critical success factors and potential barriers to achieving the vision behind 30x30? What will really make or break this effort?

I see success as making 30x30 an open-source movement, where everybody can see themselves as part of it. I want a bumper sticker on every car in California. I want people to say, "I'm helping to make 30x30 happen," whether it's planting a garden, putting trees in the middle of the urban core, helping rebuild trails in the wilderness. We're part of this larger movement. To me success will be getting people from all over the state to rally around this.

What are the challenges? There're a lot of other things going on at once, a lot of other challenges we face. But what I think 30x30 can offer us is that it's unifying, it's positive. It's not a set of new requirements but a place where we can get excited and forward-thinking and purposeful. I think it's something people want to be a part of because it makes them feel hopeful that we can make a difference.

There's so much to it, and I see that there is going to be a push to incorporate a lot of platforms and positions. Equitable access is one of the biggest priorities. How do you think 30x30 can increase not only access to nature but representation as well?

I think this first year is step one: What is the suite of strategies that we can deploy to conserve lands across California, and where should we be targeting those efforts? Then comes in how you manage those lands, which absolutely brings in the equity piece. How do we improve programming and make spaces more welcoming to a broader group of people and provide that access whether it's transportation or bringing school kids out? It's like biodiversity research; there's a whole

other set of principles that we need to unpack and figure out how to deploy those at each place. This is a 10-year—or longer, I hope—program, and our work right now is setting the stage for all those important things to happen.

California is rising to meet so many urgent needs and crises at once. We could tick off the list of things like wildfire resilience, sea level rise, housing, carbon sequestration, transportation. How do you see the state balancing or prioritizing these? What are the best opportunities for multi-benefits?

I feel really lucky to be part of this administration, because we are really being bold in this space and doing what we can to address a lot of really big issues. Just the fact that they created this position, a deputy secretary for biodiversity and habitat, really elevates that.

All those sorts of balancing questions come down to a particular place. When you get down to the place, and you're talking about something specific like addressing wildfire risk, that's a very site-specific conversation. I think it can be done, and I think we've shown that it can be done. It takes deep thinking and listening to each other and walking out on the land.

The California Biodiversity Collaborative has identified five guiding principles: Understand, Protect, Restore, Engage and Empower. How do you apply or interpret those principles as you look for those multi-benefit solutions?

I look at how they fit into our larger goals: Is this advancing our understanding



Norris with the Department of the Interior's Secretary Sally Jewell and John Kopchik, executive director for the East Contra Costa Habitat Conservation Plan, at a discussion with community leaders about landscape level conservation efforts. Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

of biodiversity in California? Is this helping us protect it? Is this addressing our climate needs? Restoration is obviously a really big opportunity to restore habitat and also provide these other benefits, particularly with wetland restoration, not just along rivers, but along our coasts, addressing sea level rise. There are a lot of opportunities to protect biodiversity and address climate and hopefully get access for people. So, to me I'm thinking about those multi-benefits: climate, biodiversity, access. How are these projects driving on those things, while also keeping in mind our need for economic stability and food supply? Those things are important too, so how do we combine all of them? Regenerative agriculture is another way to protect soils, sequester carbon, and provide for increased biodiversity on working lands.

At CNPS, we see a few areas where California's goals may be in conflict if not managed skillfully. One example is the tension between habitat preservation and the siting of renewable energy. How do we achieve both for Californians rather than sacrificing one for the other?

This is when you get away from the site-specific scale and try to think more about the landscape scale, taking into account what you need to accomplish and figure out where you can get that done and not adversely affect biodiversity. You don't want to address it once you're already attached to a particular



Norris on a visit to see California red-legged frog habitat in Yosemite National Park. Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

things like wildfire-related vegetation treatment projects and carbon sequestration, what do you think is necessary to ensure we're also taking the necessary steps to protect species and habitat?

Let me be clear, cutting the green tape is definitely not about throwing out the rules and not protecting the environment. It's about accelerating restoration to get ecosystems working again. It's about finding ways to do the right thing, just more efficiently. There are a lot of really good strategies. They take some up-front investment, but there are ways to not take 20 years to permit a restoration project (and that's not a rare occurrence).

One of the really good strategies is that we have a lot of different agencies involved in permitting restoration projects. So, we're building cross-agency teams where people can work together and share information.

The San Francisco Bay Restoration Regulatory Integration Team is a good example, where they're working on tidal marsh restoration around the Bay. I'm really hopeful that now that they've formed, they're going to really be able to accelerate restoration of tidal marsh, which we need to protect us from sea level rise. We can't wait 20 years for that. That's got to start now. So, that's cutting green tape in my opinion, that kind of process.

site. So smart planning, strategic planning. The Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan is a good example of that, so are natural community and habitat conservation plans. These regional plans are really where you're figuring out the places that are really special and how you can protect them. How can we strategically manage our growth and our need for things like energy and put those in places where they will do the least harm? It can be done, but it definitely takes planning.

I think one of our biggest issues in this state is that everything is happening at once. We don't get to put things on a tidy, linear trajectory, so how do we slow ourselves down enough and plan as needed?

I will say those conversations are happening. Exactly those. We've got a big, bold renewable energy goal and a big, bold biodiversity goal, so what's our plan? I have a lot of faith in the ingenuity of California. If anybody is going to do it, it's going to be California.

How do you think we can successfully balance biodiversity protection with "cutting the green tape"? As we speed up the pace of approval for

The other is a programmatic approach, where you get one permit for multiple projects. It's the same thing over and over again. It's really about trying to get those things in place, so we're not reinventing the wheel for every restoration project we come across. We've got to start restoration at scale. We've got a lot of degraded systems, and we can't just protect our way out of biodiversity or the climate crises. We've got to start to fix some of what's broken, and cutting the green tape is part of that.

How can organizations like CNPS be most effective in promoting and supporting the state's conservation goals?

I have two answers: One is keep doing what you're doing. I think of CNPS as a scientific organization. Keep doing the really good basic research that's going to help us protect biodiversity where we need to and restore habitat. The other part is to stay engaged. Keep helping people understand the importance of the conversation. Keep them engaged as part of this larger conversation about how we're all part of these ecosystems. Be a voice for support for programs like 30x30 because as we said earlier, there're a lot of other things going on. We want people to understand that this can't be something that is nice to have. This is something we need for ourselves. We need to protect this place we love.

For more on 30x30 and how to get involved, see page 24.

SAVE NATIVE PLANTS

LA's Griffith Park, which includes more than 4,000 acres of chaparral. Photo: Al Pavangkanan

30x30

ENSURING MORE
EQUITABLE ACCESS TO
NATURE IN CALIFORNIA
—A CALL TO ACTION

by LIV O'KEEFFE AND ANDREA WILLIAMS

Following disturbing forecasts of global mass extinction, federal and state leaders are joining international efforts to protect a minimum of 30 percent of the Earth's land and water by 2030. Work in California is moving forward rapidly:

In October 2020, Gov. Newsom signed N-82-20, an executive order on biodiversity and climate change. That order, now referred to as "30x30," set the goal of conserving a minimum of 30 percent of California's land and waters by 2030.

Nationally, President Biden issued a similar executive order during his first month in office. This spring, under the new leadership of the Department of Interior's first Indigenous American leader, Interior Secretary Deborah Haaland, the department announced a 10-year plan, "Conserving and

Restoring America the Beautiful" to accomplish the nation's 30x30 goals.

The scope of this plan is global, but the work is local. In the department's May 6 news release, Sec. Haaland said the report is "a call to action to support locally led conservation and restoration efforts of all kinds and all over America, wherever communities wish to safeguard the lands and waters they know and love."

At home, California's 30x30 initiative is only one part of the governor's October executive order. In conjunction with a 30 percent conservation target, Gov. Newsom's executive order mandates that California must also advance economic prosperity and food security; protect and restore biodiversity; enable enduring conservation measures on natural and working lands; build climate resilience; reduce climate risk and help address climate

change; and expand equitable access to outdoor lands and recreation. The executive order also calls for natural and working lands management plans to include carbon sequestration, climate mitigation, and biodiversity protection.

California's Deputy Secretary of Biodiversity and Habitat Jennifer Norris is shepherding the effort. On page 14 of this issue, Norris acknowledges that many Californians and groups like CNPS are already working on these issues. She hopes 30x30 will galvanize support for a common set of priorities in a diverse group of people. The results, she says, will be what we as individuals and advocacy groups make of them. She hopes every Californian will identify with the campaign, and keep shared priorities at the forefront for years to come.



TIME TO GET INVOLVED

The California Natural Resources Agency (CNRA) aims to complete the state's 30x30 plan by February 2022. This spring, the agency announced a series of public workshops and an online platform (californianature.ca.gov) to gather public input through September. Conservation and community-based groups, including CNPS, have rushed to organize.

Regional community workshops are now complete, and CNRA is hosting a series of topical workshops through the summer, including a biodiversity workshop on July 27. Although mid to large nonprofits, developers, and government staff have thus far been well-represented in these workshops, CNPS and other organizations have noted that few community-based organizations and non-affiliated individuals have participated.

More outreach and engagement are needed to secure important perspectives from the people most negatively impacted by land-use decisions, particularly people living in low-income and non-white communities. A data review by the Center for American Progress shows that 76 percent of people in those communities live in "nature-deprived" areas, defined as areas with a higher proportion of natural areas lost to human activities than the state average. These communities need to have more input into decisions about how nature's benefits are distributed.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

CNPS members are a necessary and much-needed voice for plants as part of the 30x30 effort. Your participation is needed now, particularly to surface local important plants and places in need of protection. CNPS can also be an important ally to historically disenfranchised communities, to ensure they get an equal say in what happens to nature and how that impacts people.

HOW TO HELP NOW!

Join the CNPS 30x30 working group

Contribute to regional and topical comment letters

Share positive 30x30 social media posts and articles

Talk about 30x30 in your community and encourage others to get involved

WHERE AND HOW TO ENGAGE

Visit www.californianature.ca.gov to learn about 30x30, see upcoming workshops, view past workshops, and track public comment deadlines.

For CNPS 30x30 activities, contact CNPS Biodiversity Initiatives Director Andrea Williams (biodiversity@cnps.org).

THE CNPS 30X30 CAMPAIGN IS ADVOCATING FOR THE FOLLOWING STATEWIDE PRIORITIES:

- A strong definition of "conservation"
- The incorporation of California Important Plant Areas
- Biodiversity protection
- Equitable access to nature's benefits
- Honoring Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty
- Land management that promotes biodiversity and climate benefits
- Metrics and measurements for achieving