

# The Sagebrush Sea Campaign



## The Landscape

*(I)n the sagebrush lands of the West... the natural landscape is eloquent of the interplay of forces that have created it. It is spread before us like the pages of an open book in which we can read why the land is what it is and why we should preserve its integrity. But the pages lie unread.*

Rachael Carson (1962), *Silent Spring*

The Sagebrush Sea (scientifically known as “sagebrush steppe”) covers approximately 110 million acres of the American West, making it one of the most extensive landscapes in North America. The heart of the Sagebrush Sea is shaped by the Columbia River Basin, the Great Basin, the Wyoming Basin and the Colorado Plateau.

## The Values

*Remember that the yield of a hard country is a love deeper than a fat and easy land inspires, that throughout the arid West the Americans have found a secret treasure... a stern and desolate country, a high bare country, a country brimming with a beauty not to be found elsewhere.*

Bernard Devoto (1943), *The Year of Decision: 1846*

The Sagebrush Sea is a landscape of dramatic contrasts and subtlety. While to some the dry, rocky hillsides and apparently endless bluffs of sage, juniper, piñon, mountain mahogany, and bitterbrush appear monotonous and “barren,” they team with wildflowers, aromatic and flowering shrubs, birds and a great variety of other animals. The Sagebrush Sea is expansive country — “open space” now prized by so many Americans. The horizon extends for 360 degrees and the sky arches over cedar, mustard-yellow and sea-green slopes. Pronghorn race across huge grassy basins and bighorn sheep balance on steep cliff sides. The landscape features lakes, rivers, streams, springs and wetlands, hot springs, salt flats, dunes, volcanic rock formations and mountain ranges.

The Sagebrush Sea is home to a remarkable variety of sagebrush species and subspecies. Approximately 21 varieties of sagebrush grow from sea level to nearly 12,000 feet and in areas that receive as little as eight inches of annual precipitation. Sagebrush leaves remain green year round, providing a vital food source for wildlife. Under natural conditions, sagebrush grows in delicate balance with other high desert plant species, including dozens of varieties of trees, shrubs, grasses and wild flowers.

A mosaic of Sagebrush Sea habitats supports more than 250 terrestrial vertebrate species, including over 100 bird species and 70 mammals. Increasingly rare big sagebrush habitat is alive with 94 bird species, 87 mammals, 72 spiders, 58 reptiles, 52 aphids, 32 gall midges, 31 fungi, 24 lichens, 23 ants and 23 beetles. Sagebrush obligate species (wildlife that depend on sagebrush habitats during the breeding season or year-round) include greater sage-grouse, Gunnison sage-grouse, sage sparrow, Brewer’s sparrow, sage thrasher, pygmy rabbit, sagebrush vole, sagebrush lizard, and pronghorn.

## The Threats

Historically, the Sagebrush Sea covered more than 150 million acres in western North America, and was perhaps as large as 243 million acres, covering parts of 16 states and three Canadian provinces. Despite its size, the Sagebrush Sea is one of the most endangered landscapes in North America. Sagebrush steppe has been reduced by as much as 50 percent since European settlement. Livestock grazing, agricultural conversion, oil and gas development, roads, fences, powerlines and pipelines, off-road vehicles, mining, urban sprawl, unnatural fire, and invasive species are destroying or degrading what remains.

## The Solutions

- **Research and Education.** The Sagebrush Sea Campaign is using publications (both print and Internet), multi-media presentations and conferences to ensure that more Americans come to know and appreciate the least known landscape in North America.
- **Species Conservation.** Many sagebrush obligate species need protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Sagebrush Sea Campaign is presently working to list three as threatened or endangered: the greater sage-grouse, Gunnison sage-grouse and Mono Basin area sage grouse. Due to their need for large expanses of undisturbed sagebrush habitat, these grouse are ideal indicator species for the landscape.
- **Habitat Conservation.** Less than two percent of the Sagebrush Sea is protected as Wilderness, even though 70 percent of the landscape is public land. The Sagebrush Sea Campaign seeks to preserve millions of acres of sagebrush steppe in a system of Congressionally designated reserves.
- **Ending Abusive Livestock Grazing.** The Sagebrush Sea Campaign has partnered with the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign to equitably end livestock grazing in the Sagebrush Sea through a voluntary grazing permit buyout program.

## About the Sagebrush Sea Campaign

The Sagebrush Sea Campaign ([www.sagebrushsea.org](http://www.sagebrushsea.org)) focuses public attention and conservation resources on protecting and restoring the vast sagebrush-steppe landscape in the American West. The campaign participates in public lands management planning, advocates for natural resource protection, and uses education, research, legislation and litigation to conserve and restore the Sagebrush Sea for present and future generations. The Sagebrush Sea Campaign is a project of WildEarth Guardians ([www.wildearthguardians.org](http://www.wildearthguardians.org)).

## For More Information

Mark Salvo  
Director, Sagebrush Sea Campaign  
WildEarth Guardians  
[mark@wildearthguardians.org](mailto:mark@wildearthguardians.org)