



Mean Big Game Species Richness: Southwest

This EnviroAtlas national map displays the mean number of big game species with potential habitat within each 12-digit hydrologic unit (HUC) in the southwestern United States (Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah). Big game refers to large animals that are hunted; their designation as a game species is determined by state fish and wildlife agencies. These data are based on habitat models, not wildlife counts. Potential habitat may be specific to wintering, breeding, or year-round activities depending on the species.

Why are big game species important?

Big game usually refers to large animals, such as any type of elk, deer, bear, moose, sheep, turkey, and other species. Big game species richness estimates how many different big game species may inhabit an area, based on potential habitat. Species richness is frequently used as a measure of the relative conservation value of a particular area. It has been used as a surrogate for measuring [biodiversity](#).

Many scientists believe biodiversity, as it represents all forms of life on earth, provides or supports the core benefits that humans derive from their environment and helps sustain human culture throughout the world. Therefore, many organizations consider managing areas for biodiversity a means to achieve an acceptable balance among competing demands for various ecosystem services. Big game species richness is one indicator of biodiversity within an area.

Each species, regardless of type or size, plays an important role within its ecosystem and the [food web](#). Within the [food chain](#), big game animals function as primary and secondary consumers and also as a food source for other wildlife. Some of these animals, such as wolves, may be top predators and even [keystone species](#) within their ecosystems. Grazing big game animals, such as bison, provide a critical function in managing native grasslands and foliage.

In addition to the roles that big game species play in [ecosystems](#), they are also an important food source and are appreciated for the recreation opportunities and the aesthetic value they provide. Elk, deer, bison, and moose attract visitors to parks and wildlife areas. Big game hunting has a long tradition in the U.S. and it is the most popular type of hunting; in 2011, approximately 85 percent of hunters went hunting for big game¹.



Photo: Gary Zahm/USFWS

Beyond its recreational value, hunting provides a critical economic vehicle for conservation, management, and restoration projects, the benefits of which extend beyond big game species. Revenue is collected from a federal excise tax, as well as from state hunting licenses and permits. These funds are required to be used to support wildlife and conservation programs and have supported restoration projects for elk, deer, big-horn sheep, and non-game species such as bald eagles. The income generated by the presence of big game species helps protect lands, maintain wildlife populations, and conserve biodiversity.

How can I use this information?

The map, Mean Big Game Species Richness: Southwest, is one of three EnviroAtlas maps that illustrate indicators of big game species richness for the Southwest. Additional EnviroAtlas maps show the maximum big game species richness and an index of big game species richness for each 12-digit HUC. Used together or independently, these maps can help identify areas of potentially low or high big game species richness to help inform decisions about resource restoration, use, and conservation. Knowing big game species richness provides one aspect necessary to conserve biodiversity.

These maps can also be used in conjunction with other maps in EnviroAtlas to help identify areas with high ecological or recreational value for inclusion in conservation or restoration planning and protection from further development for recreational or aesthetic reasons. This information can help identify areas that may be vulnerable to development.

After finding out the big game species richness values for a particular 12-digit HUC, an area can be more intensively investigated by using individual species models at a higher resolution. Individual species models are available through the Southwest Regional Gap Analysis Project ([SWReGAP](#)).

How were the data for this map created?

This data layer is based on data generated by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Gap Analysis Program ([GAP](#)). The GAP program maps the distribution of natural vegetation communities and potential habitat for individual terrestrial vertebrate species. These models utilize predictive environmental variables (e.g., GAP land cover, elevation, distance to water) to derive deductive habitat models for each species.

A component of GAP, SWReGAP modeled habitat for 15 big game species that reside, breed, or use the habitat within the 5-state Southwest study area for a significant portion of their life history. Big game species richness was calculated by combining predicted habitat for all GAP individual big game species by pixel across the Southwestern United States. The number of big game species in each pixel was then summarized by 12-digit HUC and the mean value for each HUC was calculated.

What are the limitations of these data?

EnviroAtlas uses the best data available, but there are still limitations associated with these data. These data are based on models and large national geospatial databases. Calculations based on these data are estimations of the truth founded on the best available science. Modeled data can be complementary but are not meant to replace monitoring data.

Habitat models do not predict the actual occurrence of species, but rather their predicted occurrence based on their known associations with certain habitat types. Habitat is only one factor that determines the actual presence of a species.

Selected Publications

1. U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Commerce, and U.S. Census Bureau. 2013. [2011 National survey of fishing, hunting, and wildlife-associated recreation](#), FHW/11-NAT (RV), Washington, D.C.
- Boykin, K.G., W.G. Kepner, D.F. Bradford, R.K. Guy, D.A. Kopp, A. Leimer, E. Samson, F. East, A. Neale, and K. Gergely. 2013. [A national approach for mapping and quantifying habitat-based biodiversity metrics across multiple spatial scales](#). *Ecological Indicators* 33:139–147.
- Boykin, K.G., B.C. Thompson and S. Propeck-Gray. 2010. [Accuracy of gap analysis habitat models in predicting physical features for wildlife-habitat associations in the southwest U.S.](#) *Ecological Modelling* 221:2769–2775.
- Kepner, W.G., K.G. Boykin, D.F. Bradford, A.C. Neale, A.K. Leimer, and K J. Gergely. 2011. [Biodiversity metrics fact sheet](#), EPA/600/F-11/006, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Washington, D.C.
- Prior-Magee, J.S., K.G. Boykin, D.F. Bradford, W.G. Kepner, J.H. Lowry, D.L. Schrupp, K.A. Thomas, and B.C. Thompson, Editors. 2007. [Southwest Regional Gap Analysis Project Final Report](#). U.S. Geological Survey, Gap Analysis Program, Moscow, Idaho.

Other factors include habitat quality, predators, prey, competing species, and fine scale habitat features such as woody debris.

How can I access these data?

EnviroAtlas data can be viewed in the interactive map, accessed through web services, or downloaded. Metric values for individual pixels may be obtained from the [New Mexico State University Center for Applied Spatial Ecology](#). [SWReGAP](#) and [GAP](#) data and accuracy information can be accessed through their respective websites.

Where can I get more information?

There are numerous resources about the importance of game species and on biodiversity in general; a selection of these resources is listed below. Information on what is considered big game, and applicable management, rules, and regulations, can be found on each state's fish and wildlife department website. For additional information on how the data were created, access the metadata for the data layer from the drop down menu on the interactive map table of contents and click again on metadata at the bottom of the metadata summary page for more details. To ask specific questions about this data layer, please contact the [EnviroAtlas Team](#).

Acknowledgments

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