

5 Ways *to* Advocate *for* Wildlife



CITIZEN ADVOCACY is a linchpin of American democracy and one of the most effective tools for driving lasting change. Individuals like you have changed the course of history by standing up for issues they believe in, encouraging others to do the same, and igniting policy change by applying constant pressure to elected officials. Public

outrage ignited the fight for civil rights, advanced women's rights and created the present-day environmental movement. The mass mobilization of constituents has affected positive change in many areas, including the one we're passionate about—protecting America's native wildlife and habitat.

Constituent input can strongly influence a legislator's position. As a constituent with the power to vote, you play a critical role in ensuring that the voice of the people is heard on Capitol Hill and rises above that of industry and corporate interests. With our wildlife, public lands and landmark environmental laws like the Endangered Species Act under constant attack on Capitol Hill, we need your voice now more than ever. Use the five ways that follow to raise your voice and make a difference for wildlife!



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Write or call your members of Congress.

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Handwriting and mailing a letter or postcard is a really effective way of communicating with your elected officials. Alternatively, sending an email can also make a strong impact. Whatever option you choose, make sure to personalize it by sharing your connection to an issue and the impact the issue has on your community or state. A personalized letter has a much greater impact than a form email generated by an advocacy group. Security screenings mean it can take up to six weeks for a letter to reach a congressional office in Washington, DC. For quicker delivery, mail a postcard (as opposed to a letter) to the D.C. office or mail your letter to your member's in-state offices. Or, even better, hand-deliver it.

A phone call is another effective option. If you don't know the direct number, call the U.S. Capitol switchboard at 202-225-3121 and ask to be connected to your senator or representative's office. Ask to leave a message for your member of Congress, then tweak this basic script based on the issue you're concerned about:

"Hello, my name is _____ from [city, state]. I'm calling to urge Senator/Representative _____ to oppose [bill #/name of bill] that would gut the Endangered Species Act (ESA). I'm an avid birder who is thrilled to see bald eagles but also remembers the days when there were no eagles here. Thanks to the ESA—the only law that can save at-risk species from extinction—bald eagles are back and a major draw for the wildlife viewers key to economic prosperity in my state. Thank you for your consideration."

Whether you write or call, make sure to:

- **Identify yourself as a constituent.** Include your full name and return address in the letter or email and state your name, city and zip code when you call.
- **Stick to a single issue.** Address only one issue per letter or call—clarity and brevity are key.
- **Share a personal story.** Say why you care about the issue, why the issue matters to your state, and why your elected official should care, too.
- **Make a specific ask.** Be clear about the action you want taken. Mention a bill number if applicable. You can find bill information at www.congress.gov or by emailing activist@defenders.org.



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Visit elected officials at their offices.

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Elected officials are eager to hear what you think about specific issues. You don't have to be an expert on the topic, just a concerned, voting constituent. Since members of Congress have busy schedules, you may end up meeting with a staff member instead. Not to worry—staff are the eyes and ears of a legislator and will ensure that your message is heard.

During your meeting, be the "face" of the issue. Provide a local and personal perspective on the positive or negative impacts of a bill on your community or state. It's your personal story and passion—not your expertise on the details—that resonate. Simply and briefly discuss the main points of the legislation you're advocating for or against and the reasons why your member of Congress should care. Most important, request a specific action—sponsoring a bill, supporting or opposing a bill, signing a letter, speaking to colleagues or the media about the issue. Requesting a concrete action makes it easier to hold your elected official accountable in the future.

To summarize, remember these points about meeting with legislators:

- **Know your issue.** Be prepared to identify main points and know enough to speak comfortably about them. Defenders of Wildlife can provide you with fact sheets and other resources to get you up to speed. Email us at activist@defenders.org.
- **Know your elected official.** Learn all you can about your member of Congress before the meeting—legislative priorities, committee memberships, legislation sponsored or opposed, relevant voting history, or useful personal details like an interest in wildlife or the outdoors.

Submit a letter to the editor to your local newspaper.

- **State your personal connection to the issue.** Members of Congress and their staffers focus on dozens of issues every week, so tell a compelling story to stand out. Don't rattle off statistics and background info. Just explain why the issue matters to you and to your city or state.
- **Be truthful.** Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know," in response to a question. You want to be viewed as a credible source of information so it's always better to get back to someone with the correct answer than give an inaccurate response. Plus, getting back in touch with the office gives you another opportunity to communicate.
- **Listen and ask questions.** A successful activist not only talks but also takes time to listen and ask questions. Listening allows you to gauge the level of interest and knowledge of the member of Congress or staffer on your issue and provides an opportunity for you to engage in open discussion.
- **Close with a specific ask.** The ask is the most critical part of the meeting, so request the member or staffer for their commitment to take a specific action.
- **Follow up.** Write a note or send an email to express your thanks for the meeting and to repeat your ask. Also include any additional requested information.

TIPS FOR TALKING TO MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

- **Share your personal connection to an issue.** Your power comes not from being a policy expert, but from your passion and connection to the issue. Telling a story that shows why the issue matters to you, your family, community or state is an effective way to make a lasting impact.
- **Be respectful.** Always be professional and civil in your comments and actions. Overly emotional or threatening comments are often disregarded and can undermine efforts to protect wildlife.
- **Provide positive feedback.** Express your thanks for pro-conservation votes. It shows constituents are paying attention and really care about an issue.

One of the most effective ways to highlight an issue you care about is through letters to the editor (LTEs). The editorial or opinion section of your local newspaper is the most read section on Capitol Hill and an important avenue for reaching agency staff, members of Congress and other policymakers. LTEs reflect where your community stands on local issues and are great tools for holding elected officials accountable.

LTEs are short, generally between 200 and 250 words, so focus on how you feel about a specific issue and how that issue affects you locally. Newspapers have guidelines for LTEs. Check them out before writing and submitting.

Here are some tips to remember about LTEs:

- **Use your own words.** Don't simply cut and paste from talking points given to you. Many papers won't print letters they suspect are part of an orchestrated campaign.
- **Keep your letter short and concise.** Focus on one or two main points, but make sure to include your personal story and local connection to the issue.
- **Call out your elected officials by name.** This increases accountability and ensures that they'll see your letter. If applicable, ask for the specific action you want taken.
- **Be timely.** Your piece will have a greater impact (and greater chance of getting published) if it's in response to a current issue or an article featured in the paper within the last 24 to 48 hours.
- **If you email your LTE, include the text of your letter in the body of the email.** This will ensure the newspaper doesn't run into issues trying to open your document.
- **Include your full name, home address, day and evening phone numbers.** Your contact info is for verification purposes and will not be published.
- **Have someone else review your letter before you send it.** Defenders of Wildlife is happy to provide that service. Email your LTE to us at activist@defenders.org.

If your LTE doesn't get published in one newspaper, try another. Papers only publish a couple of letters on a given issue, even if dozens were submitted. If your LTE is published, send the link and text of your letter to your elected officials—and to Defenders of Wildlife. Your voice helps us succeed and we want to hear it.



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Attend town halls or other local events hosted by your representatives.

Find out when your elected officials will be back in your state or district and attend town halls, meet-and-greets or other events they host. Legislators appreciate your attendance and take the questions and comments they receive seriously. To find your members' schedules, follow them on social media, sign-up for their email newsletters or visit their websites.

To make the most of a local event:

- **Prepare your questions and comments in advance.** Focus each one on a single issue and include some facts and background information for context.
- **Bring a letter, a fact sheet or other written summary of your issue and requested action.** If you don't get a chance to ask your question, give your written material to a staffer with a request to pass it on to your member.
- **Bring along like-minded friends and colleagues to show that your community cares.** Wear buttons or stickers that show your solidarity on an issue.
- **Take pictures and video.**



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Use social media.

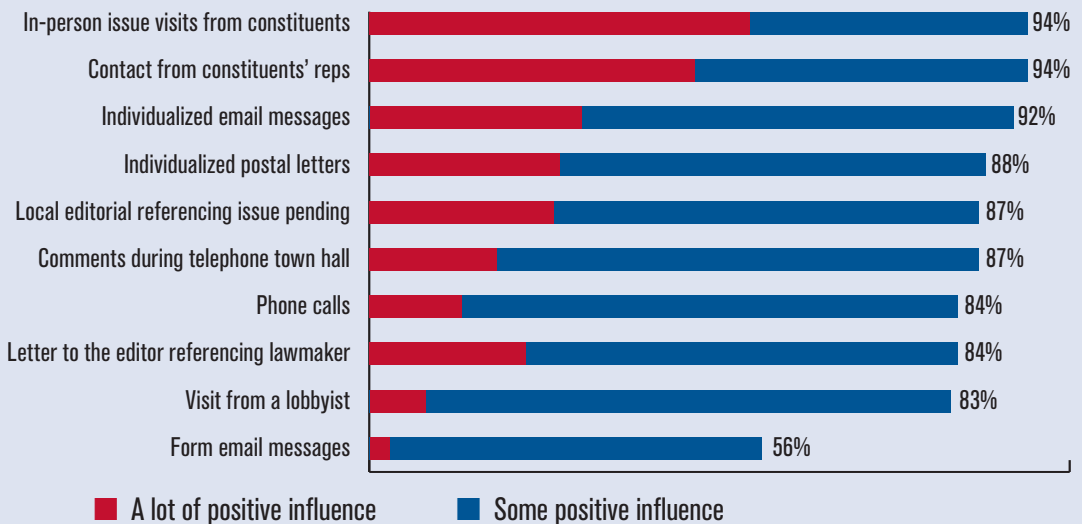
Just as members of Congress use social media to communicate directly with constituents, constituents can use it to express concerns about a particular piece of legislation, to ask for a specific vote and to publicly praise a member of Congress who casts a pro-conservation vote.

Tagging an elected official in a Facebook post or Tweeting directly at your representatives gets your point across quickly and concisely in an easy-to-share format. Post photos or videos from meetings with legislators or town halls they host to Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Always tag the member—and Defenders of Wildlife—so we can help amplify your message. Not only is using social media a great way to hold elected officials accountable, it can also inspire other wildlife advocates to take action like you!

Direct constituent interactions have more influence on lawmakers' decisions than other advocacy strategies

If your senator or representative has not already arrived at a firm decision on an issue, how much influence might the following advocacy strategies directed to the *Washington office* have on his/her decision?

Source: Congressional Management Foundation 2015 survey of congressional staff, including Chiefs of Staff, Communications Directors, Legislative Directors and Legislative Assistants.



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