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Now More Than Ever We Need to Protect Our Public Lands

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Now More Than Ever We Need to Protect Our Public Lands

By Nathan Vink

UCF Forum columnist

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I spent nearly a year of my life walking within the borders of what is now designated as the Bears Ears National Monument in southern Utah. I covered hundreds of miles hiking across plateaus, climbing into canyons, and scrambling up cliff walls as a wilderness educator, guide and recreationist. I stumbled upon countless Native American artifacts and sites, giving me a glimpse into the ancient history of native people of the region. My first steps on the land were as a student and eventually I came full circle and became an educator.

So when I heard the news regarding the designation of the Bears Ears National Monument by President Obama in December, I was elated. The time I spent in the region left a profound impression on me, helping to mold my ideals and ethics around the importance of wilderness, not only in its beauty but in the real feeling of freedom in mind and body.

The designation said to me that many others felt the same way. The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, created by 30 Native American tribes, made a great effort to push for this designation, as all the member tribes claim ancestral and historical ties to the region. The designation of this land as a national monument protects cultural sites and artifacts from looting, mineral development and unauthorized off-road vehicle use. This was not wilderness to them, but a road map of their past and future.

All of this was made possible through the Antiquities Act of 1906, which gives a president power to protect areas that hold significant historical, prehistorical and scientific features. This is not just designated for wilderness sites, as Obama also designated two sites within city limits, the Freedom Riders National Monument and Birmingham Civil Rights National Historical Monument, both in Alabama.

I have also spent considerable time working and recreating in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument also in Utah, which was designated in 1996 by President Bill Clinton. Following the designation, the local population and economies of surrounding towns have grown, which can be tied to the designation of the area. Grazing rights and mineral rights are still in place and while there may be some differing on details, overall the relationship between the Bureau of Land Management, the federal governing body, and local residents is agreeable.

What is my point in all of this?

Now more than ever there is a need to take interest in what is happening with our public lands. The federal government has managed public lands in an attempt to make them accessible to all, but this doesn't always agree with everyone. There is a movement in some circles that would like to repeal the Bears Ears designation and significantly shrink the boundaries of Grand Staircase-Escalante. They would also like control of public lands to be given to the states to allow each state to manage the land as they see fit, including selling to private investors. This can be hazardous to accessibility, as parcels of land being sold off can block and limit access, not to mention the environmental implications from how the land is used.

Historically speaking, a national monument has never been repealed after the official designation, but it does not mean it can't happen.

Some would say that these lands are empty and disposable. I would ask them: Have you spent time there? Have you walked in that space and slept under the stars?

Author Edward Abbey, who frequented the Bears Ears region, once said, "Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread. A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself."

Take it from those that have been there, these places are worth protecting.

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