Western Leaders Network

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WESTERN LEADERS NETWORK ASKS INTERIOR SECRETARY RYAN ZINKE TO PROTECT NATIONAL MONUMENTS

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Western Leaders Network urges Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to advise President Donald Trump to keep federal protections in place for the 24 national monuments currently under review, including the newly designated Bears Ears National Monument in southeastern Utah. Western Leaders Network, a coalition of local and tribal officials across the Interior West, supports continued monument status for Bears Ears, because the 1.35 million-acre expanse of desert land is sacred to regional tribes and an asset to local economies.

Though the Utah Congressional delegation has challenged Bears Ears since it received monument status in December 2016, monument designation cannot be undone under the Antiquities Act of 1906. Moreover, protecting these lands, which were federally managed before monument designation, was a bipartisan, collaborative and public effort of tribal officials and members, legislators, local governments and private citizens.

The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, composed of leaders from the Navajo Nation, Hopi, Ute Mountain Ute, Uintah & Ouray Ute, and Pueblo of Zuni tribes, led the push for designation and protection of Bears Ears in an effort to ensure strong tribal participation and preserve the historic and cultural landscape. Western Leaders Network board member and former Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Councilwoman Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk fought for Bears Ears on behalf of her tribe as a leader with the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition.

"Rescinding the Bears Ears National Monument would send a very negative message to the tribes and would be detrimental to the relationships between tribes and the federal government. It would regress communication," Lopez-Whiteskunk said. "As tribal leaders, one of the things we often prayed about was to see a strengthening of those relationships, because it's a contemporary time and we have more educated tribal leaders today.

"Involvement of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition helped preserve the sovereign tribal voice and ensure participation in management, decision-making and making sure natural resource development is done in a very transparent way," Whiteskunk added. "When we got word of the designation, one minute I was very happy, and the next minute, I knew we were getting ready for a fight. Once there was official designation, I knew it would have to be defended. Protection of Bears Ears is not just for tribal people, but for all people who access public lands."

The Navajo Nation Council, which supported the protection of Bears Ears through a series of resolutions, has asked Zinke and the Trump administration to "respect the position" of southwestern tribes by upholding monument designation and consulting with tribal stakeholders as the issue moves forward.

National monuments are a significant component of outdoor recreation and therefore a valuable asset to local economies. A study by Headwaters Economics found that the economies of communities adjacent to 17 national monuments in the west expanded following the monument's creation. And according to the Outdoor Industry Association, the outdoor recreation economy generates $887 billion in consumer spending each year and supports 7.6 million American jobs.

Additionally, a bipartisan poll conducted by Colorado College found that large majorities in seven western states support national monument designation for public lands. As Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper said, "Our public lands are a fundamental part of our identity."

It is important to note that nearly 600,000 acres were left out of the original proposed parameters for Bears Ears, and that land holds the potential for natural resource development as well as motorized recreation.

To downscale or revoke national monument status is to dismiss the hard work of the people who fought to protect those lands and an insult to native tribes. Utah Dine Bikeyah, a nonprofit formed to protect Bears Ears, has requested a meeting with Secretary Zinke when he visits Utah next week to show the Interior Secretary how important federal protections are for this area. We are pleased he has accepted the invitation to meet with the group's executive director and urge him to listen to the will of the people and recommend that President Trump neither reverse monument status nor downsize any national monuments under review, because of the cultural, historic and economic values they hold for tribes, outdoorsmen, tourists, economies and the general public.

Western Leaders Network unites, supports and cultivates local and tribal elected officials to protect western lands and build healthy, sustainable and resilient communities.

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