



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



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Bears Ears National Monument

Bears Ears National Monument and Beyond

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Recently, Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke recommended to President Trump to “...vastly reduce the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, and seek congressional authorization to turn over the remaining landmarks to be co-managed with Native American Tribes.”¹

If enacted, this transfer would be the largest reversal of America’s practice of reserving land for the American public---a practice that began with the Antiquities Act.

This law was signed by Theodore Roosevelt in 1906. It gives the President the authority to establish national monuments from existing federal lands. The idea behind the act was to protect the land because of its Native American heritage. It was also enacted to prevent damage to land that might be driven by commercial interests, such as mining, drilling, and grazing.

While in office, President Obama signed an executive order to protect the 1.35 million acres of Bears Ears. A portion of this land is shown in the figure accompanying this article.²



Trump has called Obama’s action an “egregious abuse of federal power.” I think President Trump is over-reacting. Granted, Obama’s order added new protections on the public land in San Juan County, Utah, but he also kept intact the on-going, traditional uses for both Native Americans, as well as ranchers. (However, based on the terrain of Bears Ears, it is difficult to see how a rancher could make a go of it on this land.)

The controversy comes from those who want the land to be available for possible oil, gas, and mining operations. Trump responded also by saying “...the Bears Ears

¹ *USA Today*, June 12, 2017, 3A. “Interior Dept. to Trump: Downsize Utah Monument.”

² <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-trimble-zinke-bears-ears-reduction-20170619-story.html>

designation ‘never should have happened’ and that it was part of ‘this massive federal land grab that’s gotten worse and worse and worse.’ ”³

Land grab? The land already belongs to Uncle Sam. There has been no eminent domain seizure of private land.

The opponents of Obama’s actions want to shrink the monument and to scatter it into non-contiguous pieces, a plan that is opposed by the Native Americans’ Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition. Because of the history of various tribes being pushed off land in this part of America, they are taking a strong stand on this issue. (Google the subject of Bears Ears for a history of the area.)

A Larger Plan

President Trump’s plan goes beyond Bears Ears. He has directed Mr. Zinke to review national monuments created by Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama, which includes at least 20, and maybe up to 40 monuments.

The reaction from the public has been pretty much along political lines: The left is in opposition to Trump. The right favors Trump’s orders.

This Writer’s Experience

In my late teenage years and early years of my twenties, I worked in the oil fields of the Permian Basin in west Texas and southeast New Mexico. The oil boom there created many jobs. The tax revenues from the boom led to the construction of extraordinary educational institutions. By my working as a roustabout in the oil fields, I was able to pay for part of my college education.

The oil boom also resulted in substantial parts of the landscape in my home county (Lea County) being despoiled. Since working there in the 1950s, I’ve walked many acres of the county. You cannot appreciate the damage of the land from the seat of a vehicle. You have to walk the pastures to gain a sense of the defilement.

I came across many abandoned sites that had left traces of black oil---now baked by the sun and spread out over the landscape and in the soil. Scores of rusting oil tanks---ones I used to clean-out---silhouette the flat prairie. Hundreds of pipes and other fittings are strewn about. Much of the county’s landscape resembles a dangerous junk yard.

Dangerous in that the oil has contaminated the soil, perhaps leaching into the grass and posing a threat to grazing livestock. This is not idle speculation. In China, soil pollution is poisoning rice fields. Consumers are beginning to become ill from eating rice laced with chemicals. The country is just now waking up to the fact that it has an ecological disaster on its hands.

I am not suggesting America has soil pollution problems equal to that of China, but I thought of China as I walked the landscape in Lea County. Furthermore, to be clear, I favor using America’s land to our economic advantage. I know that compromises must be made between environmentalists and commercial enterprises.

But the price my home county in southeast New Mexico paid for the economic oil boom and the wildcatters’ disdain for this land has made me leery of oil and gas companies’ operations and their impact on America’s countryside.

³ Francisco Kjolseth, Associated Press.

In this regard, my conservative nature regarding finance and economics bends to that of a mesquite hugger. (There are almost no trees in southeast New Mexico.) Once the land is altered from its natural state, it is difficult and expensive to restore it to that state.

It is likely that many of these monuments, or parts of them, will be turned over to commercial interests. We should say to these companies, go ahead, do your job: Make money. But upon leaving, return the land as much as possible to its original state. Make that action the cost of doing business on land you do not own.

My preference is to leave these monuments unmarred for the use of ranchers, hikers, hunters, fishermen, and America's later generations: our children's grandchildren.

But I know this view is not in Donald Trump's vision. He is a New York City urbanite and likely has different visions of landscapes than do Western America people.

Regardless of right or left wing predilections, we Americans should keep in mind that the mineral bounty obtained from our lands will be consumed shortly after it is extracted.

What remains, and will remain for centuries, is the result of how we as a nation treat one of America's most valuable and treasured resources: our public land.