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EarthBeat



View of the Indian Creek area of Bears Ears National Monument. Some Native Americans living near the area fear designation as a federal protected area will jeopardize their ability to engage in traditional practices. (Bureau of Land Management)

Joseph Hammond

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As the daughter of a nonagenarian Navajo medicine woman, Ana Tom is used to long road trips. Tom supports her mother Betty Jones' role as a traditional healer by taking her far from San Juan County, Utah, to look for rare herbs for use in various traditional medicines important for Navajo rituals.

"There isn't a lot of [elders] who know where to collect the herbs and what is needed, and sometimes we have taken her past Reno and even up to Lake Tahoe to collect herbs. My father, who was a medicine man, would go to Texas for wild tobacco, and that is a trip we also do."

Taking any plant from Mother Earth, even the smallest thing, involves a prayer, she said. Most of the herbs her family uses are readily available in the area surrounding Bears Ears, two twin buttes that jut up more than 8,000 feet above sea level. Like nearly 65% of Utah, the Bears Ears stand on federal land, though their current status is likely to change.

The Bears Ears National Monument was created by President Obama in 2016, encompassing some 1.3 million acres. Under President Trump, the site was reduced to 201,876 acres. The Biden administration is believed to be mulling the restoration of Obama-era boundaries to the Bears Ears National Monument and the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, both in Utah.

While Bears Ears National Monument received broad support from a coalition of Native American groups across the nation, some Native Americans in the immediate area oppose the monument, with religious freedom issues being a primary concern. Indeed, Betty Jones appeared on stage with President Trump in the Capitol in 2017 to announce the reduction of the monument.

But the day prior, an estimated 5,000 people, including many Native American activists, had protested the Trump administration's decision to decrease the size of

the monument. The Trump administration's move drew the condemnation of both Native American groups and some corporations, like outdoor outfitter Patagonia.

The initial push for the monument was supported by the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, including representatives of the sovereign governments of the Hopi, Zuni, Ute Mountain Ute, Uintah and Ouray Ute, and Navajo nations. At the time, two chapters of the Navajo Nation, the Aneth Chapter and the Blue Mountain Dine, opposed the creation of the monument. The two groups are those closest to the proposed monument, though the latter is a locally organized Navajo group not officially recognized by the Navajo Nation.



Bears Ears National Monument is the site of ancient dwellings. (Bureau of Land Management)

At stake are two different visions of how to best protect sacred land.

"Bears Ears is home to more than 100,000 Native American cultural sites, ranging from lithic scatter to granaries to complex villages," according to the proposal for

the Bears Ears National Monument submitted by the Inter-Tribal coalition. "Some are in faraway backcountry. Others require a day hike. Still, others are easily accessible. This is one of the world's premier areas of reflection on the work of long-ago societies."

For her part, though, Jones has compared the creation of the monument to other federal policies that, while meant to express beneficence, had a profound adverse effect on her life.

Jones, who lives on McCracken Mesa near the town of Blanding, was relocated from her original home along with other Navajos to make way for the Glen Canyon Dam in 1933. That same year, the FDR administration ordered the slaughter of 1 million Navajo sheep, ostensibly as an environmental protection measure, but historians have argued it was undertaken based on flimsy analysis.

"What people don't understand is that this is [Bureau of Land Management] land — it's all being protected," Tom, Jones' daughter, said. "But I am worried about the Abajo Mountains. If they put those in the monument and if they close access, you won't be able to perform some blessings and rituals in that area. This monument is going to break the connection we have to the area."

For Tom and scores of Navajo families, the collection of firewood is another important issue. San Juan County, where the bulk of Bears Ears National Monument will be located, is one of the poorest counties in the contiguous United States. Many of the Navajo who live in the area reside in structures with no running water and only intermittent electricity. They rely on collected deadwood, as they have for centuries, to stay warm through the Utah winter.

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The original Bears Ears proclamation issued by Obama allowed for "the collection of medicines, berries and other vegetation, forest products, and firewood for personal, noncommercial use in a manner consistent with the care and management of the objects identified above."

But Tom said that during the period it was briefly a monument, there were some actions taken to deny access to sites, though she added it is unclear if that activity was linked to the federal government. She also pointed out that on other national

monument lands in Utah, the collection of firewood is prohibited.

A number of Navajo hogans, or ceremonial structures, are located on the expanded monument, and Tom worries about losing access to the sites. She is also concerned about potential vandalism, as has occurred at other monuments, due to the influx of tourists.

Suzette Morris, a member of the Ute tribe who lives on White Mesa, remembers the sinking feeling she had when she read Obama's proclamation. Turning the area into a massive museum was not the best way to honor the continuing sacred relevance of the lands, she said.

"I am worried that making it a national monument will lead to the desecration of our graves, a lot of which are not marked but, we know where they are and how important they are," she added.

Morris — who is related to Chief Posey, the famed Ute leader who gave his name to the final armed conflict between the United States government and a Native American group in 1923 — said she has encountered resistance from tribal leaders and other Indigenous groups who support the monument.

"Others have tried to silence me and tell me the monument is respecting the sacred. There is nothing sacred about putting a big X on the map for millions of people to visit and intentionally or unintentionally vandalize sacred sites," Morris said.

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