

At Bears Ears in Utah, Heated Politics and Precious Ruins

The new national monument, with remarkable archaeological sites, is under review by the Trump administration, which could reduce its size.

By STEPHEN NASH JULY 25, 2017

This week, we visit three national monuments (more than two dozen are under review by the Trump administration and could be made smaller and opened to logging and mining): Bears Ears in Utah (below), Gold Butte in Nevada and Berryessa Snow Mountain in California.

My entourage and I blew into Bears Ears National Monument in Utah just as Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke and his entourage departed.

Actually, I had brought only one companion to this enormous high-desert landscape of rust-red and clay-gray cliffs, pinnacles, mesas and ravines. It is all national public land, roughly 90 times bigger than Manhattan and a third again as large as Grand Canyon National Park.

It shelters what former President Barack Obama called “some of our country’s most important cultural treasures, including abundant rock art, archaeological sites, and lands considered sacred by Native American tribes” when he ordered increased protection for them all by creating the national monument last December.

President Trump, however, has said that the process of designating national monuments, inaugurated during the Theodore Roosevelt administration 111 years ago, is “another egregious abuse of federal power.” He called the protection of

Bears Ears and other national monuments a “massive federal land grab” that “should never have happened.”

We were just exploring. Mr. Zinke’s entourage was a more authentic one, with news releases, helicopters, photo ops and protesters. He was there at the president’s behest, to recommend whether Bears Ears — and a long list of other national monuments created during the past two decades — should be revoked or pared down to make more room for logging, mining, gas and oil development, grazing and motorized recreation.

A day after his departure, my wife, Linda, and I made our way toward the gaping Fish Mouth Cave, perched high on a slick-rock ridge. It is visible from miles away along the juddery, hairpinny dirt approach road. On the trail, only an insistent canyon wren and breezes in the cottonwoods broke an enfolding silence.

On the first day here, though, it can take a while for the gnat cloud of homely preoccupations to recede. My friend’s latest email, am I thirsty, did I lock the car?

All that was brushed aside as we followed a faint spur and walked in among a scatter of rock walls and columns within the shade of an alcove. It was an instant, vertiginous step back, about a thousand years, toward other lives and broader questions. These remnants, signals from an earlier phase of our human condition, have been endlessly ciphered by generations of archaeologists in the Bears Ears region (which is named for twin buttes near its center).

Was it the drying, warming climate that pushed the ancient farmers off their fertile mesas to live within the canyons, or was it a defensive maneuver to meet the threat of raids and other violent conflict? And the more typical question: Where did they go when they departed? For some visitors, those are diverting, and safely distant, concerns. Others may find societal distress and a changing climate rather more immediate. As for me, I’m a little at odds. I may travel to escape, say, political news, for a time: the therapy of forgetting. But in that case, Bears Ears would be a curious choice just now.

The series of ruins we encountered on the trail to Fish Mouth Cave, despite their evocative power, are modest examples. A common estimate is that the Bears Ears region includes several hundred thousand archaeological sites — arguably the

most intense concentration in North America, and perhaps in the world.

That evidence of successive waves of human settlement begins with hunter-gatherers who pursued mammoths and mastodons here some 12,000 years ago, as the last ice age receded, and on through the inflows and ebbs of cliff dwellers who occupied the area until around 1300 A.D. Much of that span is on view even to casual, astonished visitors like us. That is Bears Ears' glory as a travel destination, and its vulnerability.

On our drive out to blacktop at the end of the day I was reminded, and not for the last time, that archaeology and anthropology are close cousins. We reached a T-junction. One way led north toward the town of Blanding, population about 3,600, whose welcome sign proclaims that it was "Established 1905." That hearkens to its incorporation by a late-arriving tribe of pioneers of European origin. Many of their descendants here in San Juan County are among the most tenacious opponents of the national monument.

"You just don't take something from somebody," Phil Lyman, a San Juan County commissioner, told a New York Times reporter in May. He equated the monument designation to grand theft. "From a principle standpoint, this needs to go away," he said. "I agree with President Trump: This never should have happened."

If you plan a vacation that takes in the landmarks of contemporary local cultures, then, you can visit Recapture Canyon, near Blanding. It has many important cliff-dweller sites, but it is also a local all-terrain-vehicle playground. Vandalism and pothunter looting were so common here that in 2014 the Bureau of Land Management, the federal agency responsible for managing most of these lands, closed an illegal track that A.T.V. enthusiasts had bulled into the canyon. Hikers and horse riders were still permitted.

It was a serene enough place during our visit. But in 2014 a protest pageant of dozens of A.T.V.s roared into Recapture Canyon, some driven by out-of-towners bearing assault rifles. (More than 2,000 miles of trails on public lands were already open to A.T.V. riders.)

One of the principal organizers was Mr. Lyman, the county commissioner. He

spent 10 days in jail as a result. Mr. Lyman still holds office, and was one of the anti-monument dignitaries who met several times with Mr. Zinke. The Native American representatives had about an hour with Mr. Zinke at the end of his four-day listening tour, and the nonprofit Friends of Cedar Mesa representative got 35 minutes. Parts of Recapture Canyon have recently been reopened to A.T.V.s.

Back at that road junction, though, if you turn south instead, you reach the outskirts of a hamlet with different affiliations: Bluff, population maybe 300. Its city limits are marked: “Established 650 A.D.” That can easily be read now as a declaration of support for the new, adjacent monument.

Bluff is more of a home base for environmentalists, archaeologists and tour companies that specialize in gentler explorations. They include treks and road trips to ruins, rock art and spectacular geology such as the Natural Bridges and Valley of the Gods areas, as well as guided raft trips down the San Juan River with stops at rock art sites that are exceptional, even here.

With Jan Noirot, a guide for one of those outfits, **Four Corners Adventures**, we explored watercourses, miles across or sometimes shoulder tight, that have riven the broad mesas. Exquisite, eerie ruins are tucked within dark rock alcoves or nearly hidden by piñon-and-juniper forests out on the mesas and canyon rims: Monarch, Target, Ballroom, House on Fire and the stunning Cave Towers, for example.

Trade goods from as far as what is now Mexico belie the seeming isolation of these settlements. In the small, skillfully curated and interpreted **Edge of the Cedars State Park Museum** in Blanding, one of many such brilliant treasures can be seen. It’s a sash made of red macaw feathers, dated to about 1150 A.D., when local peoples came under the spell of the Chaco culture that was centered in New Mexico.

We often found ancient pottery shards along the trails. Strands of long and detailed human narrative can emerge from each of those little ceramic pieces. Some show delicate black-on-white tracteries. Others have strong “Bluff Black-on-red” designs that originated here but were widely traded far to the south, around the 800s. This is mildly disorienting. It’s like visiting a museum, freely reaching into the display cases and fingering the ancient materials — the heritage of dozens

of centuries of mostly inadvertent preservation.

Evidence of looting and vandalism can be seen in many places. We hiked to the Wolfman Panel, a yards-long display of bold pictographs looking out from a cliff face over Butler Wash. They are pocked with bullet holes. An off-road motorcyclist recently penetrated deep into the canyons and slalomed “doughnuts” on the grounds of a burial site. We also visited the wreckage of a petroglyph on a mesa wall near Bluff. Someone had attacked it with a rock saw, perhaps in a wretchedly clumsy attempt to carry it off to be sold on the lucrative market for antiquities.

The archaeologist Benjamin Bellorado, a doctoral candidate at the University of Arizona, has conducted research in this area for 20 years. He led me down the side of a trailless canyon on one bright morning, as we stayed on the slick-rock and off the fragile biological crust that secures soils against erosion. We also tried not to create any trace of a trail that would invite others.

After about an hour of bushwhacking, we reached a ruin of living rooms and grain storage that has been the focus of some of his research. It was inhabited for 50 years or so by about 20 people, perhaps an extended family. There is also a small kiva — a circular, semi-subterranean spiritual and community center — whose carefully laid roof timbers are still intact.

Mr. Bellorado’s research has dated this kiva with remarkable precision. It was constructed in A.D. 1215 and rebuilt in 1229. He showed me mural depictions of a bird, a plant, a herd of sheep, all incised in the plaster walls. Then, in a layer laid on a few years later, evidence of a cultural shift that could have been the result of in-migrations: Bolder design elements appear, abstracted from decorated sandals, a cotton belt and a blanket. These insignia may have served to mark social status and the spread of new religious ideologies, Mr. Bellorado said.

“This is all so untouched, in terms of research,” he told me. “In southeast Utah, we’ve barely scratched the surface.” But this remote, tiny, hard-to-find site has been touched meaningfully in other ways. He pointed out a wall that had likely been shoved over. Pottery shards have been moved around, others perhaps pilfered, and the floor shoveled up by pothunters. “This is what looting looks like,” he said. “This has changed a lot in the last few years. People really tear things up,

even here.”

Increasing numbers of more innocent, uninformed visitors also erode this heritage by pocketing shards or larger items. (Archaeologists’ admonitions: It’s O.K. to pick shards up, but return them with care to the same place. Do not touch rock art — it leaves skin grease. Do not dig.)

Trails and trail heads in Bears Ears are largely without signposts. Most of the monument is administered by the federal Bureau of Land Management, an agency that Sally Jewell, the secretary of the interior in the Obama administration, characterized as *overextended and underfunded*. Paradoxically, the B.L.M. gathers far more billions in revenue for the national Treasury — largely from oil, coal and gas leases — than it spends.

In the 1970s there were seven full-time B.L.M. rangers trying to protect this area from looters, vandals and affectionate carelessness. Now there are only two for the whole of Bears Ears, and they are part-time. Whatever becomes of the monument designation — as I was told by both its supporters and by others who are undecided or agnostic — stepped-up protections and far more public education are a crucial need.

Many legal scholars question whether President Trump has the power to rescind monument designations or make substantial changes to their boundaries. Opponents have promised litigation to stop him if he tries. Mr. Zinke has already said he will recommend a drastic downsizing of Bears Ears. His deadline for revealing more details on that, and on the potential fates of the rest of 17,700 square miles of terrestrial national monuments, and 340,400 square miles of marine national monuments, is Aug. 24.

If You Go

The best times to visit are spring and fall. Voracious gnats arrive around mid-May.

What to Do

Seat-of-the-pants local tour operations may not have required permits, nor be

conservation-conscious. Ask questions.

Recommended: **Four Corners Adventures/Wild Rivers Expeditions** and **Far Out Expeditions**, both in Bluff. Check with the group **Friends of Cedar Mesa** for San Juan River trips and a lecture series; they can also provide information on how to enjoy and respect archaeological sites; friendsofcedarmesa.org.

Where to Stay

Booking several months in advance is advisable.

In Blanding, **Stone Lizard Lodging** has quiet rooms, which include a winning home-baked breakfast. 88 West Center Street; stonelizardlodging.com.

Bluff's **Recapture Lodge** has occasional slide shows by local geologists, archaeologists and naturalists. 250 Main Street; recapturelodge.com.

Desert Rose Inn & Cabins in Bluff offers views of spectacular cliffs. 701 Main Street; desertroseinn.com.

Where to Eat

In Bluff, **Comb Ridge Bistro** offers a limited menu of pleasing, locally sourced and otherwise eco-sensitive dishes: meatloaf, blue corn pancakes, pulled pork sandwiches, stylish hamburgers. Also open for breakfast and lunch. Serves alcohol. 680 Main Street; combridgebistro.com.

In sometimes political Blanding, a dry town where alcohol is not served, the **Patio Drive In**, which is also a sit-down restaurant, offers blend-your-own milkshake combinations. I contrived a raspberry-marshmallow malt that was hoisted through my car window in a nine-inch vessel. It accompanied an equally girthy cheeseburger with green chile. You're put on notice, in large typography, on the Patio's front window: "We are a food establishment reminiscent of a bygone era where the quality of the food meant more to America than how fast it could be served." 95 North Grayson Parkway; 435-678-2177.

Stephen Nash is the author of the book "Grand Canyon for Sale: Public Lands Versus Private Interests in the Era of Climate Change," which will be published in September by

the University of California Press.

A version of this article appears in print on July 30, 2017, on Page TR8 of the New York edition with the headline: Heated Politics, Precious Ruins.

© 2017 The New York Times Company