

Interior Secretary Haaland tours Utah monuments at center of public lands debate

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BLANDING, Utah — Interior Secretary Deb Haaland met with tribal leaders, elected officials and other stakeholders on Thursday as part of a Biden administration review of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments, a wide swath of southeastern Utah that has become a symbol in the debate over how to manage public lands.

Haaland said she intended to talk with as many people as possible to determine how best to preserve what she called a "very special place," including pictographs she saw while touring the monument. She said she understands the effects the monument struggle has had on people who live nearby and acknowledged that Bears Ears "belongs to everybody."

"I'm here to listen and learn," she said.

The review of the two monuments was initiated by one of President Joe Biden's first executive orders, which calls for evaluating Trump-era actions and regulations that may conflict with Biden's objectives of environmental and national monument protections, among other such aims.

In 2017, President Donald Trump slashed by 85 percent the size of Bears Ears National Monument, then a 1,351,849-acre parcel in San Juan County established in 2016 by President Barack Obama. The monument was broken up into two smaller monuments, Shash Jáa (129,980 acres) and Indian Creek (71,896 acres).

Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, established by President Bill Clinton in 1996, was reduced by 896,000 acres. It now has three components: Grand Staircase (209,993 acres), Kaiparowits (551,034 acres), and Escalante Canyon (242,836 acres).

Tribes across the Southwest hold the lands as sacred and culturally vital, and non-Native environmentalists see them as important in protecting a fragile landscape. Fearing the monuments would be offered for fossil fuel and uranium mining, the Hopi Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni and Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, along with the Natural Resources Defense Council, Earthjustice, the Access Fund and others filed suit to restore the monuments.

Those suits are on hold pending the outcome of the Interior Department review.

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, a Republican, said he was grateful for the tribal elders who went on the tour. But, he said, everybody involved in the future of the monuments needs to get to the core of what matters: "What is it we really want?" The lands are used for ceremonies, recreation, woodcutting, hunting and other purposes.

Cox also echoed the concerns of local residents who, although not invited to the direct talks, have been raising the issue of the increasing numbers of visitors to the monuments and the degradation from ATV tracks, vandalism and outright looting.

He said political "pingpong" between Democratic and Republican administrations makes the situation worse.



Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, said Biden has a unique opportunity to do something permanent for both monuments.

"I see a lot of energy and angst here," he said.

Tribal leaders also would like the monument issue solved so they can be sure their sacred places would be better protected.

"We still have our ceremonial ties to this area, as much like the church, the Mormon temple up in Salt Lake City," said Hopi Vice Chairman Clark Tenakhongva. "These are our churches. If you disagree, destroy our shrines, our temples down here, you're destroying our culture, our religion, our lifeline and our history."

Ute Mountain Ute Chairman Manuel Heart said he had heard people in discussions over Bears Ears say they had been in the region for four or five generations.

"But we've been here since time immemorial," said Heart.

Echoing the sentiments of many non-Indian residents in the region, Bluff, Utah, Mayor Ann K. Leppanen said in a statement: "Many Utah local elected officials and residents who live near these majestic monuments are eager to finally see Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante monuments restored. Every day that goes by leaves these resources at risk. We need to see protection of these local and national treasures as soon as possible."

Haaland meets with tribes, agencies and officials

During her three-day visit, Haaland met with the leaders of the five tribes in the Bears Ears [Inter-Tribal Coalition](#) on Wednesday and tweeted out a picture of the event.

The coalition is dedicated to the protection of the sites in the region, known to Indigenous peoples as Hoon'Naqvut, Shash Jáa, Kwiyaqatu Nukavachi and Ansh An Lashokdiwe, which the coalition noted means "Bears Ears."

In addition to the five core tribes — the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, and Ute Indian Tribe — 30 other tribes with ties to the region have signed on to support the coalition's work. Two of those tribes are the Pueblo of Laguna, of which Haaland is an enrolled member, and the Pueblo of Jemez, which is the other New Mexico tribe Haaland has descended from.

Haaland also was briefed on the national monuments by Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service employees. She visited the Bears Ears Education Center in Bluff, which was set up to educate the public about the monument when it became apparent that visitation had increased.

She also held meetings in San Juan County with stakeholders, including local elected officials, ranchers, conservation organizations, business owners, mining companies, outdoor recreation permit holders, paleontologists and archaeologists.

Haaland was also scheduled to travel to neighboring Kane County to hold additional meetings with stakeholders. When asked why she had only reserved one day for Kane County and Grand Staircase, Haaland said she wished she had had two weeks to be in the region, but said that the process would continue.

A statement released by the Interior Department said that prior to the site visit, other meetings had been held with a number of officials, nonprofits and small-business owners.

Many Native people in local communities also hope the federal government will reinstate the boundaries.

In Bluff, Natalya Yazzie and her brother Seth had just finished work at the Rural Utah Project, a voter support and education group. The Yazzies, members of the Navajo Nation from nearby Mexican Water, said the area was

very sacred to them. In addition to medicinal plants, “we get cedar and sage out there and hold ceremonies,” said Seth Yazzie.

When people come into the region and damage those lands, it hurts, said Natalya Yazzie.

"It's disrespecting our backyard," she said. "You wouldn't go into anyone else's backyard and do whatever they wanted."