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Interior Secretary Haaland visits Bears Ears, Grand Staircase

- Anastasia Hufham Moab Sun News
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Franmarie Metzler U.S. House Office of Photography

Newly-approved Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, formerly a Democratic representative for the state of New Mexico, will visit Utah this week to review the controversial boundaries of the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments. In anticipation of her visit, many local officials and organizations have voiced their support for the restoration of these national monuments to their original boundaries.

The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument was created in 1996 by President Bill Clinton and has been a point of political controversy for many years. Some Utah conservatives

contend that Clinton’s designation “destroyed hundreds of rural jobs and the economic stability of local communities by locking up clean coal, endangering future grazing rights and cutting off multiple use and access,” as Rep. Chris Stewart (R-UT) wrote in a 2017 op-ed.

In 2017, President Trump issued an executive order that drastically reduced the acreage of the Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears national monuments. Utah Indigenous groups and conservation organizations opposed this executive order, and several groups — including the Wilderness Society, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, Grand Staircase Escalante Partners and more — sued the Trump administration, saying that the “illegal proclamations by President Trump represent the single greatest attack a president has ever launched against America’s federal public lands,” as SUWA Executive Director Scott Groene said at the time.

Perhaps even more infamous, President Trump also reduced Bears Ears National Monument — created by President Obama in 2016 after years of local Native American tribes asking that the ancestral landscape be protected — to 15% of its original 1.3 million acres. All members of Utah’s Congressional delegation, Utah Governor Gary Herbert and the San Juan County Commission had opposed the monument’s initial designation in 2016. The five tribes of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition — Hopi, Pueblo of Zuni, Diné (Navajo), Ute Mountain Ute and Ute — sued the president, arguing that the reduction was illegal.

On his first day in office, President Biden stated his intent to restore both Bears Ears and Grand Staircase Escalante to their original boundaries. Utah’s congressional delegation has urged the president to hold off on executive action in favor of letting Congress develop a legislative solution, rather than prolonging back-and-forth executive action. [*See “Utah lawmakers ask for more time, permanent legislative action on national monuments,” March 11 edition. -ed.*]

Now, Haaland has only days in Utah to attempt to understand the intricacies of the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante controversies.

Both the Grand County Commission and the Moab City Council support the restoration of Bears Ears, which they expressed in letters sent to President Biden earlier this year. The council

condemned President Trump's "illegal reduction" of Bears Ears, arguing that "Moab businesses depend on these lands being managed in a way that preserves their archaeological riches, natural beauty, recreational value, and ecological integrity." The county commission's letter to the president urged the administration to "take all necessary steps in managing the Monument to ensure the preservation of the rich cultural history of Native Americans, past and present."

Regarding Haaland's visit, Moab Mayor Emily Niehaus said that she looks forward to hearing a "fresh perspective" on the monument controversies. "I am hopeful that under her leadership, we will have a collaborative management plan that considers varied perspectives while also fiercely protecting the place and her cultural resources," she said.

In her own statement, Grand County Commission Chair Mary McGann acknowledged America's history of broken trust and treaties with Indigenous peoples. She sees the restoration of Bears Ears as symbolic.

"The monument should be restored so that this time the United States government keeps its word with the Native Americans," McGann said in a statement.

Outside of Moab and Grand County, several other local politicians support the restoration of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments, not only to protect valuable natural resources, but to honor and respect the wishes of Indigenous tribes who have called southeastern Utah home for thousands of years.

"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," said Ann Leppanen, mayor of Bluff, Utah, near Bears Ears. "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."

Summit County Council Chair Glenn Wright also weighed in, stating the need for the two monuments to be "restored and protected now" by President Biden. "Management plans for these monuments should include input from local elected officials and concerned citizens," Wright

said. “We hope that Secretary Haaland and President Biden will listen to the long-standing calls for better protections for Utah’s public lands — the future of our backyards depend on it.”

Haaland’s visit will impact President Biden’s ultimate decisions regarding these national monuments, the ramifications of which will influence the tourism, economies and cultural significance of the monuments’ surrounding areas. Paleontological sites, petroglyphs and other ancient, culturally profound structures — which are still used in ceremonial practices today — draw millions of visitors annually to southeastern Utah, but without the proper protections, these living landscapes won’t be preserved for later generations or the tribes who depend on them now.

The Bears Ears Coalition shared that looting, vandalism and general ignorance “have contributed to the desecration of Bears Ears and its cultural sites” now that these areas aren’t protected. They recommend visiting the Cedar Mesa Visitor Center in Bluff, Utah before entering the national monument for more information on how to recreate respectfully.

“Utah's got to come out and say, ‘we think these are places with resources that are valuable to the entire nation, and we have a suggestion that we think is great for the entire nation, not one that just satisfies local interest,’” said Scott Berry, Board vice president for Grand Staircase Escalante Partners in an interview with the Moab Sun News. “We welcome the suggestion to participate in a national conversation about how best to protect these lands in the future. On the other hand, we think that delaying taking action now is a bad idea.”

Even if President Biden does restore the monuments to their original sizes through executive action, Utah’s congressional delegation could still pursue legislation further delineating the management of the land.

“We would much prefer a legislative solution. A legislative approach — if pursued with the support of the Utah delegation — would serve both the nation and our constituents. If successful, such an effort could help us end this historic cycle of disputes,” read the Utah delegation’s letter to Biden in March.

Haaland will be the third Secretary of the Interior to visit Bears Ears, symbolic of the historic debate over this cultural landscape in only the last five years. Her position as the first Native American presidential cabinet member and Interior Secretary will certainly influence her stance, which may lead to an end to Utah's controversial place in the national spotlight.