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President Biden should move to protect more nature by using the Antiquities Act

BY ANNA PETERSON, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 02/20/23
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President Biden's commitment to saving more nature will continue to require bold action. In his first two years as president, he and his administration have accomplished many forward-looking climate, land, water, air, and wildlife protective actions. Yet, with an almost evenly split Congress, more congressional protections are unlikely, and President Biden and his administration must recognize the time-sensitive need to do more.

Hundreds of western local elected officials have been calling on the president and his administration to follow through on many of his campaign promises including to “establish national parks and monuments that reflect America’s natural heritage.”

The Biden administration can achieve its goal of protecting more nature by using the Antiquities Act to create new national monuments. Community-based solutions, like locally-led national monument efforts, can protect archeological, historical, and cultural resources; ensure more equitable access to nature; address the climate crisis; restore America’s biodiversity and wildlife; and begin to reckon with historic and present social injustices.

In 1906, Congress passed the Antiquities Act, which created the first national historic preservation policy for the United States and ensured that the president can designate national monuments to protect natural, cultural, and historic sites, as well as waters and lands of great scientific value.

Protecting public, scientific, and cultural lands by establishing national monuments has always been a bipartisan effort and one that all Americans can celebrate. Nationally, since the Antiquities Act was passed, 18 presidents—nine Democratic and nine Republican—have designated or expanded 159 national monuments across the country with nearly 100 being located in western states. These presidents protected many iconic and treasured landscapes as monuments, including the Statue of Liberty, Giant Sequoia, Muir Woods, and Chimney Rock, among others.

Thankfully, in fall of 2021, President Biden restored protections for Bears Ears, Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine, and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments after protections had been stripped by former President Trump.

Then last October, President Biden used the Antiquities Act to designate Camp Hale-Continental Divide National Monument in Colorado. He heeded calls from veterans, local elected officials, and the many others across the state and country who asked him to honor Colorado’s military legacy of the 10th Mountain Division ski troops.

President Biden and his administration must continue to build on this momentum by protecting other important historically and scientifically significant landscapes—especially those important to tribes and historically marginalized communities like Avi Kwa Ame in Nevada; Castner Range in Texas; as well as monument expansion opportunities like the Pacific Remote Islands in the Central Pacific Ocean, and Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument to include Molok Luyuk in California.

In late November, at the 2022 White House Tribal Nations Summit in Washington D.C., President Biden announced plans to designate an Avi Kwa Ame National Monument in Nevada soon. This designation would protect the nearly 450,000 acre landscape known as Avi Kwa Ame, the Mojave name for Spirit Mountain. This place is at the center of Yuman creation stories and is considered sacred to ten Yuman-speaking tribes as well as the Hopi and Chemehuevi Paiute. The area is rich in both history and beauty, and is home to one of the biggest Joshua tree forests in the world and some of the oldest and largest Joshua trees on the planet. The area is also an important wildlife habitat providing large-scale habitat connectivity and migratory corridors.

Additionally, the Castner Range in west Texas has significant geological, paleontological, and archaeological features; a cultural history that western scientists

say dates back 10,000 years; and serves as a natural flood control storing and slowly releasing water over time. For nearly 50 years, community members have been working to conserve what is left of Castner Range on the outskirts of El Paso, Texas. Many hope President Biden will take action to designate it a national monument soon.

He should also designate cultural monuments to honor the 1908 Springfield Race Riot in Illinois and a monument to honor Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley in Missouri and Illinois.

Our nation's protected public lands contain scientifically important landscapes and cultural and historic sites that are tremendous assets to our communities. They play a critical role in our way of life and support our economies, health, and well-being. They help contribute to a better tomorrow for future generations that also honors the past. The Antiquities Act conserves vital places so our stories can be told and experiences can be shared for generations to come. Western local elected officials who live near many of our cherished national monuments look forward to President Biden moving swiftly to use his authority to conserve more vital places for our communities.

Anna Peterson is the Executive Director of The Mountain Pact, an organization that works with nearly 100 Western mountain communities to speak with a collective voice on federal climate, public lands, and outdoor recreation policy.