

2-7-2016

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Recommended Citation

Kevin Washburn, *Cedar Mesa Proposal Good for All*, *Albuquerque Journal* (2016).

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Cedar Mesa land proposal good for all

By Kevin Washburn

**Albuquerque Journal
February 7, 2016**

Just on the other side of the Four Corners, in Utah's San Juan County, there is an area known as Cedar Mesa, an amazing plateau that rises to 6,500 feet. It is the site of deep canyons and red rocks.

Just to the north is a strikingly beautiful feature that rises to nearly 9,000 feet called the Bears Ears, so named for the silhouette it produces when viewed from the south.

On Bears Ears are high-altitude forests filled with quaking aspens, tall pines and wild game of all sorts. Surrounding Cedar Mesa and Bears Ears is a landscape with more than 100,000 petroglyphs and numerous ancient Indian dwellings, proving that this land has been visited by Indian tribes, and their predecessors, for thousands of years.

The area is also a dream location for hikers, campers and hunters and other visitors to the public lands.

A coalition of tribes, led by the Hopi and the Navajo, and including the Utes of Colorado and Utah and several of New Mexico's pueblos have asked President Obama to use the Antiquities Act to declare this landscape a national monument to be protected alongside other nearby national treasures, such as Arches, Canyonlands, Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks. Their request has been joined by national and regional conservation groups.

Protecting this sort of resource is precisely the reason Congress gave presidents this power in the Antiquities Act in 1906.

President Teddy Roosevelt used the law to protect New Mexico's own Chaco Canyon and Gila Cliff Dwellings as well as the Grand Canyon before it became a national park. All of these are national treasures.

The truth is that it would not be economically costly to protect Bears Ears. This area remains undeveloped largely because it has never been viewed as having especially rich mineral resources. Though the archeological resources don't have a measurable price tag like coal, oil and gas, many people agree that the archeology is far richer than any mineral resources that could be extracted. And the ancient art needs much stronger protection from looters.

In addition to approaching the White House for a national monument, interested citizens of the region have also encouraged congressmen Rob Bishop and Jason

Chaffetz, both Utah Republicans, to develop legislation to protect the area. Tribes have been outspoken about the need for management of this land and have expressed frustration that both congressmen have seemed to ignore tribal concerns and have refused to engage with tribes even when they sat in the same room.

After much foot-dragging, Bishop and Chaffetz last month finally released a public land initiative for this area that is focused more on facilitating mineral development and less on protecting archeological resources.

Bishop, who chairs the House Natural Resources Committee, has bristled at criticism from tribes. To punish the Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation for expressing past frustrations, Bishop has proposed to transfer thousands of acres of federal land within the tribe's Uncompahgre Reservation to the State of Utah in exchange for state lands outside the reservation. His stated purpose was to consolidate within the reservation the scattered parcels of state land held for the state education trust fund to facilitate mineral development and "maximize revenue for Utah's schoolkids."

Of all the federal land that exists throughout Utah, Bishop's decision to focus the consolidation effort on taking the land within the Ute Indian reservation is diabolically genius. It pits the Indian tribe against schoolchildren. Let's hope that our own congressional delegation opposes Bishop's cynical and vindictive strategy.

The fact is, all of us must compromise on the use and protection of federal public lands and resources. If partisan members of Congress are more interested in being vindictive than developing real negotiations, then the White House may have no choice but to lead the effort to develop a sensible plan

President Obama has angered the left for allowing drilling in the Arctic Ocean and angered conservatives - and even Indian tribes - for attempting to reduce our nation's reliance on coal-fired power. The president knows how to hear from all of the constituents and make hard but fair decisions. Bears Ears should be protected.

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