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Warning from Wilderness Watch: National Monuments Review Threatens Wilderness

by George Nickas, Executive Director, Wilderness Watch

President Trump's executive order demanding a review of all national monuments larger than 100,000 acres and established since 1996 portends serious consequences for the National Wilderness Preservation System.

For starters, within those 27 monuments are 29 Wildernesses in six western states. While the president can't undo the Wilderness designations—that would require an act of Congress—the protections national monument status affords to the lands surrounding these Wildernesses undoubtedly help preserve the conditions within them. Healthy wildlife habitat and populations, biodiversity, water quality, scenic vistas, silence, solitude, remoteness, and dark skies are all values within these Wildernesses that benefit from the surrounding national monuments.

Consider the Dark Canyon Wilderness, as just one example. This relatively small 45,000-acre Wilderness on the Manti-LaSal National Forest in southeastern Utah lies near the geographic center of the new 1.35 million-acre Bears Ears National Monument. Prior to establishment of the national monument, much of the land around Dark Canyon was open to logging, mining, oil and gas development, and off-road motorized and mechanized vehicle use. But because of the monument proclamation the lands surrounding Dark Canyon Wilderness are largely protected from industrial uses, and vehicles are

limited to roads and trails designated for their use. If Bears Ears National Monument is rescinded, the Dark Canyon Wilderness could eventually be ringed with development and ORV use.

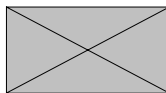
But there is an even greater threat to Wilderness from President Trump's monument repeal effort: it is the first shot across the bow of the Administration and Congress to undo many of our nation's greatest conservation laws. There are all ready more than a dozen bills introduced in Congress to weaken the Endangered Species Act. And as I write this the House of Representatives has an oversight hearing scheduled to discuss the "overreach" of the Wilderness Act and Federal Land Policy Management Act, which they claim have "gone astray." Any day we expect to see the latest incarnation of the "Sportsmen's Heritage Act," legislation that would effectively repeal the Wilderness Act. Previous versions have passed the House, but stalled in the Senate, partly due to the Administration's opposition. That opposition has likely vanished.

While the national media and public attention is focused on issues like the health care debate, tax reform, and Russian meddling in our elections, it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking the Trump Administration is failing and its agenda is stalled. To those involved in protecting our endangered wildlands, threatened wildlife, and our nation's natural legacy, the Trump agenda is anything but stalled. It's full speed ahead.

This is why every wildlands and wildlife conservationist should be alarmed and ready to do battle over the Administration's efforts to repeal any of our nation's national monuments. Should Trump, Secretary Zinke, and their allies in Congress succeed, the monuments will be only the first to fall.

Photos: Top Basin and Range National Monument by Bob Wick, Bureau of Land Management; Above left George Nickas is the executive director of Wilderness Watch. Above right Dark Canyon Wilderness, Utah, by Brian Murdock.

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