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Wall Street Journal - Opinion: The Right Move on Monuments

The Editorial Board

December 5, 2017

President Trump announced Monday that he will dramatically reduce the acreage of two national monuments. The order ends excessive federal control of Utah land, allowing residents to protect their own territory and conserve their cultural relics.

Congress passed the Antiquities Act in 1906 to give Presidents emergency authority to prevent the looting and destruction of national treasures. The law said designated monuments should be limited to “the smallest area compatible with proper care and management of the objects,” but Bill Clinton and Barack Obama misapplied this power to carry out a Washington land grab.

Without public comment, the federal government unilaterally seized control of more than 3.2 million acres of southeastern Utah that together constitute the Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears national monuments. Residents and their elected representatives had minimal influence on the draconian land-use restrictions imposed by Washington bureaucrats. In September, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke described how the Antiquities Act had been abused “to prevent public access and to prevent public use” of land, harming everyone from cattlemen to cross-country skiers.

Last spring Mr. Trump ordered a review of 27 supersized monuments. The Interior Department made recommendations only after accepting formal public comment. Mr. Trump announced Monday that he would shrink Bears Ears by about 85% and Grand Staircase-Escalante by nearly 46%.

Over the past few days, thousands have marched in Salt Lake to oppose the decision. The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance denounced the order as “the single most harmful attack any president has ever launched on public lands.” The group claims the Trump Administration acted “at the behest of ideological extremists and dirty energy barons,” adding that the decision is “an insult to the tribes that advocated to protect Bears Ears.”

Calm down, guys. Most of the two million newly undesignated acres are still public lands, subject to rigorous federal and state protections. The Trump Administration increased Native American representation on the advisory Bears Ears Commission.

Utah Reps. Chris Stewart and John Curtis are introducing two bills this week to govern the scaled-down monuments, with the support of Natural Resources Chair Rob Bishop. Under the Shash Jáa and Indian Creek National Monuments Act, locals would administer and protect the former Bears Ears land, with tribal representatives holding the majority vote.

In other words, the Trump Administration’s order not only ends federal overreach but restores power to local people. That’s a monumental and welcome change.

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