

# Conversation Contents

## Outside Magazine on monuments

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**Subject:** Outside Magazine on monuments

Not a bad piece.

### [Comments About the National Monument Review Are Flooding In. What Now?](#)

*More than 396,000 people have spoken up so far about the Trump administration's desire to shrink or abolish the national monuments. Will the White House really read all of them?*

Just 64 days after newly minted Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke rode a horse to the White House for his first day on the job, the Department of the Interior announced it would conduct a thorough review of 27 national monuments. By early June, Zinke had already released a report that recommended downsizing Utah's Bears Ears National Monument.

If Zinke's proposal to reduce the size of Bears Ears—and the monument review itself—was unprecedented, so is the massive invitation to the American public that came with the review. The DOI opened Regulations.gov, telling people to speak their minds about the monuments under question and the effects of the Antiquities Act, which the president may wield without consulting the public.

By the morning of June 27, with two weeks remaining until the deadline, more than 396,000 comments had been submitted. "Must we destroy everything? Can't we simply have beautiful, natural spaces that everyone can enjoy at any time during their life?" wrote one commenter. "I support Rescinding Bears Ears National Monument," wrote Ryan Erik Benally, a Native American resident of Montezuma Creek, Utah. He expanded in an email to Outside: "We would like to enjoy living the way we've always have, without the need of an oppressive BLM-run national monument which would be no different than our questionable relationship with the government's Bureau of Indian Affairs."

As of publication, comments are still flooding into Regulations.gov in tidal waves of several thousand per day, and the DOI is also accepting snail-mail comments. But what exactly happens to all that feedback?

The first step: Someone will read every comment. It's reasonable to wonder if Zinke has enough staff to do so. As of this publication, of the 558 key governmental positions in the executive branch, 409 had yet to have someone nominated to fill them. According to the Washington Post, in the DOI alone, the director of the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey had no nominees.

No additional people were hired to sift through comments, says Heather Swift, press secretary for the DOI. She says that “a team of approximately 20 existing employees from various bureaus” will read them. If the commenting continues at a steady pace of 5,000 per day until commenting closes on July 10, there will be more than 400,000 comments to read. That means each of those 20 employees will have to read 15,000 comments before the final report is released on August 24.

“We fully expect—and they are on pace—to go through all of the comments in time for the Secretary to have all the information before he makes his final decisions,” Swift says. “Each comment counts equally.” So comments like “undo everything obama did !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” and “Please be strong and resist those liberals” will carry the same weight as the pleas for preservation and conservation.

Then, each comment will likely be tallied depending on whether it’s a vote for or against the review. “Many of the comments are general and say something along the lines of ‘I like monuments’ or ‘I don’t like monuments,’” Swift says. “Those will be counted, of course,” but the DOI will also note the comments that come in for each specific monument.

Swift can’t yet say how the final tally will be presented—if officials will simply get a final count of “for” and “against” comments, or if they will see particularly poignant comments as well. Because Zinke has discretion when making his decision, it’s not necessarily just a popularity vote. Many are putting strategy into making their comment stand out and resonate with him. Hundreds of commenters are invoking the spirit and policies of Theodore Roosevelt, who created the Antiquities Act 111 years ago. “These monuments are a legacy of Teddy Roosevelt. He and all fifteen subsequent presidents—of both parties—have recognized the need and value of protecting these public lands,” wrote one commenter. “I urge you to uphold Roosevelt’s legacy and maintain these monuments for current and future generations.”

Joel Webster, director of western lands at the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, sees this as perhaps the best appeal. “Zinke sees Theodore Roosevelt as a figure in American history he looks up to. I think it’s important to draw that connection,” he says. “He’s got a picture of Theodore Roosevelt in his office that he brings from office to office.” In fact, Zinke has been called a “Roosevelt fanboy” after hashtagging his Twitter bio with “#TeddyRoosevelt & #PublicLands fan.”

Conservation organizations have also encouraged members to share deeply personal stories rather than hollow letters of support. Citizens have flooded Zinke’s office with postcards donning photographs of the Grand Staircase-Escalante monument and the Giant Sequoias of Northern California. On one, a child’s scrawled handwriting begged Zinke to leave the monuments as is. “We do not want oil,” wrote a six-year-old girl. “We need good plants.” People shared memories of family vacations and honeymoons, of vision quests and adventures, of being children and feeding chipmunks. They told Zinke that, as Americans, there is a need for quiet and sanctuary in a world where “there is so much unrest and ugliness.”

Even with the volume and fervor of responses, public comments are just one factor weighing Zinke’s final decision. He’ll also consider information gathered during on-the-ground monument tours and meetings with tribal representatives, local officials, historic preservation experts, and other stakeholders. The DOI, too, is holding its own meetings. In May, Swift says the acting deputy secretary “held a four-hour meeting with tribal officials on Bears Ears and other monuments,” setting up a “specialized channel for tribal input via monument listening sessions.”

John Gale, conservation director at Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, says the whole premise of this review process is flawed: Each of the monuments under review already underwent robust approval processes, including public listening sessions and garnering support of locals, congressmen, and senators. “The argument that they didn’t get an opportunity to be vetted publicly is really a false claim,” Gale says. “It’s just an excuse for trying to unravel what has

already become a really fantastic contribution to our national legacy.”

Or as one commenter wrote, destroying that legacy “is unconscionable...like cutting off some stars from the American flag.”

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