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CNN-Opinion: Ryan Zinke: Why we shrunk the monuments

U.S. Secretary of the Interior

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Across our great land, objects of cultural and historic significance tell the story of our nation. From the Statue of Liberty to the birthplace of George Washington, preserving our American heritage means protecting these objects. In 1906, President Teddy Roosevelt signed the Antiquities Act, giving the President power to proclaim objects on federal lands as national monuments and to reserve the smallest area of land compatible with their protection as part of the monument designation.

In recent years, however, presidents have abused the Antiquities Act to lock up vast swaths of public land. The "smallest area compatible" requirement has become the exception, rather than the rule, as public access, hunting and fishing, and use of private property are restricted. Often, these designations are made without the support of the people on the ground. With this in mind, President Donald Trump directed me, in April, to review recent national monument designations under the Antiquities Act.

President Trump was absolutely right to order this review. The President pledged during the campaign that the forgotten men and women of this country would be forgotten no more, and he is delivering on that promise. I met with countless local stakeholders, rode the range with ranchers, spoke with conservationists, and spent time with Native American tribal leaders, trying to understand the effect that these monument designations have had on everyday Americans.

I sat down with people on all sides of the issue to listen to their perspectives and from those conversations, formed my recommendations to the President. What I found was that we can all agree on wanting to protect these objects of historic or scientific interest while ensuring public access to public land. True conservation, based on the philosophy of multiple-use on our public lands, has been the American way for decades.

Here in Utah, President Barack Obama designated a 1.35-million acre national monument, Bears Ears, on his way out the door and over the objections of the state's governor and entire congressional delegation. As for another Utah monument, the Grand Staircase-Escalante, Utah Gov. Gary Herbert told reporters in September that former-Gov. Mike Leavitt (who opposed the designation) found out about the monument's creation in the newspaper the next day.

The Antiquities Act is not a weapon for presidents to arbitrarily restrict the uses of hundreds of thousands of acres of land to prevent uses like timber harvesting and cattle grazing -- ways of life for many American families and the lifeblood of many local economies. It is also not a tool for presidents to use to restrict access for outdoor recreation on land that belongs to all of us.

I highlighted Bears Ears and the Grand Staircase-Escalante in my recommendations to the President, suggesting a new way forward, an approach in which we listen to the voices of the people, not Washington, D.C., special interests. This week, I was honored to join President Trump as he traveled to Utah and signed new proclamations that conform to the spirit and letter of the Antiquities Act.

Bears Ears National Monument will be modified to create two units: the Indian Creek Unit and the Shash Jáa units. Between these two units, which will now span over 200,000 acres of federal land, the proclamation continues to protect important objects -- from the Bears Ears buttes and headwaters, Moon House Ruin, and Doll House Ruin, to unique paleontological resources and areas sacred to Native Americans.

The Bears Ears Commission will be renamed the Shash Jáa Commission and expanded to include San Juan County Commissioner Rebecca Benally, a Native American elected by the majority-Native American voting district in the county.

While previous presidents have said the right things about Native Americans, President Trump is backing it up with action, by requesting from Congress that tribes be granted full co-management authority of the Shash Jaa Unit. At the same time, the new proclamation makes more than a million acres of land that was unnecessary for protection available now to tribal members, Utahns, and other members of the public to use it as they did prior to the Bears Ears designation.

The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument will be modified to consist of three smaller units known as the Grand Staircase, Kaiparowits, and Escalante Canyons units.

The modified monument retains important objects of historic or scientific interest identified in the original designation, from areas with high concentrations of fossil resources, to geological wonders like the Grosvenor Arch, and important historic places, such as Dance Hall Rock.

President Trump's proclamation reduces the monument by more than 850,000 acres, bringing back access and curbing federal overreach.

The President's actions focus on protecting land within the smallest area necessary while restoring traditional uses of these lands and prioritizing the voice of the people over that of the special interest groups. This action does not transfer one square inch of this land out of federal ownership.

As the chief steward of our public lands, it is my responsibility to ensure that these lands are used "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people," as the words above the Roosevelt Arch in Yellowstone National Park so proudly proclaim. Under the Trump administration, this is our charge. Local voices in Utah and across America have a friend in the White House once again.

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