

Trump slashes national monuments in Utah: “I’m a real estate developer”

By Gabriel Black and Daniel de Vries
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On Monday, President Trump announced that he would reduce the size of Bears Ears National Monument in Utah by 85 percent and the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument by half. The move strips away protections for 3 million acres of federal land in an area eyed by industry for rich deposits of fossil fuels and uranium.

The gutting of the national monuments, unprecedented in more than a century, amounts to the initial stages of a land-grab by the oil, gas and mining industries. Alongside these two redesignations, the Trump administration has moved to open up federal lands to expanded drilling and mining operations. In March, the president directed agencies through an executive order to “alleviate or eliminate... actions that burden domestic energy production.” Since then the administration has initiated the repeal of more than two dozen regulations directly impacting energy and mining companies.

Trump is seeking nothing less than to eviscerate the entire framework of land conservation controls and environmental protections, which at times have limited mining and drilling operations and imposed cost on industry in order to mitigate public health and the environmental impacts.

Trump is also attempting to intimidate and suppress Native American groups, which, despite some divisions, were instrumental in urging the establishment of the national monuments last year. Tribal lands have come under acute threat from the rapid expansion of domestic drilling and transportation under the Obama administration. The past few years have witnessed bitter resistance struggles of Native Americans and others against the threat of environmental destruction, most notably related to the Dakota Access Pipeline. Trump ordered the pipeline

project fast-tracked shortly after taking office. With the decisions in Utah, he is issuing another provocation.

Removing lands from protected status fits into the broader strategy of the administration. The announcement Monday came just days after the Senate passed a tax bill that sets the stage for a new round of vicious attacks on social programs while simultaneously engorging the rich. In his remarks revoking the monument status, Trump stated, “I’m a real estate developer. When they start talking about millions of acres, I say, ‘Say it again?’ Because that’s a lot.”

The reduction of the size of a national monument at this scale is unheard of in US history. The only other reduction so far was done by President Wilson in 1915 when he removed 313,000 acres from the Mount Olympus National Monument.

Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante are just the beginning. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke followed up on the reclassification announcement a day later with a report that identified four more national monuments for downsizing, as well as changes to the management of another six. The report is the initial response to the president’s request to review 27 monuments established since 1996.

The move has already been met with opposition from an assortment of conservation groups and Native American organizations. Lawsuits are already underway, including one by five tribes—the Hopi, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni and Ute Indian—against the shrinking of Bears Ears. Shaun Chapoose, a member of the Ute Indian tribe, told the *Salt Lake Tribune*, “They declared war on us today. If they think we’re not prepared to protect it, they’re kidding themselves.”

The Bears Ears National Monument in southeastern

Utah currently comprises 1,351,849 acres of sparsely developed land. It was created as a final act of the Obama Administration in 2016 and protects significant Native American and natural landscapes.

The Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in southern Utah is 1,880,461 acres large. It was created in 1996 by President Bill Clinton and also protects significant landscapes and archaeological and cultural sites.

Both regions were sparsely populated before receiving monument status under the 1906 Antiquities Act, which allows a president to use executive power to establish a National Monument. However, both regions are resource rich. Obama, when creating the Bear Ears Monument, deliberately left out the Daneros Mine in Red Canyon, because it was a currently operating uranium mine.

The Trump Administration and its Republican supporters presented the move as a boon to common rural people. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said, “This is about giving rural America a voice.” Utah state Rep. Gregory H. Hughes said, “The little guys’ voices were heard. Voices in the community were heard.”

In truth, it was the voice of the fossil fuel and mining industries, which are salivating over the prospect of unfettered access to the country’s natural resource wealth. In the same breath that Trump claims to be helping the rural poor, he is overseeing reforms that would dramatically escalate the attack on the environment and social programs across the country.

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