

# SOME HERETICAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THE PROPOSED BEARS EARS NATIONAL MONUMENT

JIM STILES

I've always loved the Bears Ears. When I first discovered the canyon country, back in the 70s, I was driving north from the Grand Canyon on old US 160. As I passed through Monument Valley, near the Utah/Arizona border, I could clearly see the two sandstone promontories on the northwest horizon.

Hours later, approaching Blanding, a junction loomed ahead. It said, "Utah 95...Unimproved Road. Use Caution." I looked at my Texaco road map---the land to the west, for 150 miles, looked deserted. The entire southeast quadrant of the state. Only Hwy 95 traversed it. And directly west, I could see the Bears Ears. They were like a pair of red rock beacons, urging me onward. But 100 miles of dirt road? No services?

What the hell... I was young and stupid and sure my VW Squareback was up to the task. The next few days changed my life.

I spent the rest of my vacation in the shadow of the Bears Ears, climbed their summits, marveled at the expansive views, camped quietly in the sage meadows and stands of Ponderosa scattered across the open meadows, and made a vow that this remarkable land would be my home. A couple years later, I broke the bonds of Kentucky and moved to southeast Utah. A few years later, I bought some land in San Juan County. The deed says I 'own' it, but all I'm really doing is trying my best to keep it like I found it. Now, decades later, I can stand in the middle of my sagebrush meadow among the pinyon-juniper and scrub oak and look west to the most comforting sight--- above the stretched out tablelands of Elk Ridge, my familiar friends---the Bears Ears.

In 1985, coming down from the east summit, with a friend and my dog, I saw my first mountain lion. We were almost back to the road, when I noticed some movement in the oak brush. I thought it was my pup, but as I moved closer, the animal turned and stared directly at me. She was magnificent. The lion lingered just a moment, then crossed the dirt road and vanished in the ravine below.

I have a special spot up there on one of the Ears. Along an exposed rocky ledge I buried a message in a film can, more than 30 years ago. I've been back many times, to update the message, and to remind myself how much has changed in my life and in the world since the first time I laid eyes on this country. Remarkably, the view from up there, for once, hasn't changed much. Until lately, I rarely saw anybody up on Elk Ridge except the occasional rancher, looking for cows, and in the fall, of course, the hunters. For decades of relative peace and serenity, I am grateful. I hope it lasts---The Bears Ears are, as they are for others, a sacred place.



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With that kind of personal history, I still have reservations about the proposed Bears Ears National Monument.

On the one hand, I'm hopeful. The web site Indian Country Today reports that "a Navajo conservation group called Utah Diné Bikéyah has taken the lead on a campaign to protect a 1.9 million-acre area called Bears Ears." The group has created an alliance, the Inter-Tribal Bears Ears Coalition, with a number of environmental groups, recreational groups and outdoor equipment companies like Patagonia.

According to that article, "Willie Grayeyes, Navajo, the group's board chairman, said Navajos, Utes and San Juan Paiutes use the area to gather medicinal plants and for ceremonies and hunting. But as for the motivation to protect the area, 'mainly it's the ancestral interest that we have,' he said. 'The second focus of our position is that there's a lot of grave robbery, artifacts being disturbed and taken without authorization and being sold elsewhere.'"

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http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/07/13/bears-ears-sacred-site-unites-24-tribes-rock-climbers-conservationists-161055

And Gavin Noyes, executive director of Utah Diné Bikéyah, noted that, "This is an area that the elders pretty much unanimously have said should be preserved in its current state,"

"...preserved in its current state."

But do all supporters of a Bears Ears National Monument share that goal? As more environmental organizations team up with the tourist/recreation industry to promote

their own agendas, I have to wonder if keeping the Bears Ears region "in its current state" is possible. And how do recreationists interpret its "current state?" Are they speaking specifically of the physical resource itself, or do they understand that there is more to this magical place than the mere sum of its parts?

Many of the same individuals and organizations who played a role in making Moab what it has become (do I need to say more?) have now turned their sights south, to San Juan County and the Bears Ears region for its tourist dollar potential. It's been more than a decade since environmental organizations in Utah began to link their wildlands preservation proposals to the economic component derived from tourism and recreation. They reached the conclusion back then, that tourism was the economic panacea for the rural west's financial hardships. I can't recall the last time I heard an enviro group speak of the solitude and the silence of wilderness as an intangible asset, without also mentioning the real money that can be made from exploiting these precious places.

In the early 2000s, SUWA printed a feature story in its quarterly newsletter called "The Local Economic Impacts of Protected Wildlands: Enhanced Economic Vitality." It was written by Thomas Michael Power, a Professor of Economics at the University of Montana. Power and his data asserted that protecting the rural West's wildlands did not damage local economies; on the contrary he believed that "protected landscapes are often associated with enhanced economic vitality."

But considering the article's intent, he followed that declaration with a curious caveat that was all but ignored by environmentalists. Power warned:

"This does not mean that those seeking to preserve natural areas should base their case for preservation on the economic expansion it will stimulate. That could be a dangerous strategy in the long run... In fact, in the long run, ongoing economic growth may well threaten the ecological integrity of wildlands as growing population, human settlement, and commercial activities and their accompanying pollutants isolate and disrupt natural areas."

The remainder of Power's essay moves away from that warning. Using the data he had gathered, Power struck several blows in support of the amenities economy. He discovered that population growth in

areas near wilderness areas was higher than state averages. And Power observed that Wilderness "protection was associated with growth rates two to six times those for other non-metropolitan areas." He even noted that employment rates were higher in areas near parks and wilderness areas.

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What he failed to mention was that salaries rarely if ever kept pace with the cost of living in these 'gateway' communities, that much of the employment was seasonal and far below a living wage. And he failed to state that housing prices in areas near national parks and scenic areas rose so precipitously, that only a small fraction of the working class population could afford to buy one. In Moab, even middle-income jobs like teachers are forced in many cases to rent. Eventually, many of them give up and go elsewhere.

"...preserved in its current state."

Two years ago, I published a long article called, "Moab Is Assimilated. Bike Borg Moves South." It was about recent efforts to reinvigorate the tourist potential for San Juan County. For recreation economy proponents, all that land south of Moab looks ripe for the picking and just needs some incentive to get the money ball rolling.

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/2014/02/03/moab-is-assimilated-bike-borg-moves-south-is-resistance-futile-in-san-juan-county-by-jim-stiles/>

Representatives from an organization called the Utah Outdoor Business Network (UOBN)\* appeared before the San Juan County Commission to make their case for a dramatically expanded tourist economy. Ashley Korenblat, Jason Keith, Vaughn Hadenfield and Jeff Barrett, all enthusiastic recreation boosters with decades-long vested roots in tourism, shared their unbridled enthusiasm.

(\* They have since euphemistically given themselves a more benign moniker, "Public Lands Solutions.")

Korenblat, the chief spokesperson, made a pitch to their capitalist instincts when she told the commissioners, "...one thing that I want to make clear is that we're not the conservation community...Our viewpoint, our interest, really derives from recreation and the businesses associated with that right now. We may share some interests with the conservation community on conservation in certain areas. But we just want to make sure it's clear that we are coming from our own specific position and the businesses that signed on to this letter really are...um, their interest is economic."



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The problem, as Korenblat and company saw it was that there are plenty of natural “assets” for recreationists to enjoy, but not the business infrastructure to take advantage of it. Korenblat explained, “You’ve got to advertise to get people to come and to encourage people to start the businesses, but unless the business is there. (sic) Unless the restaurants and grocery stores and hotels are there, then you don’t really see the revenue. It’s hard to see the benefit of the advertising. So it’s sort of this thing that has to evolve... Like, it’s just pure entrepreneurship. Like, people that want to start businesses, and want to bring people here.” Though Korenblat told the commissioners she did not support monument status, in other media interviews, she was enthusiastic.

Korenblat referred to the “loads of people leaving Salt Lake City to move to Moab.” But how’s that working out? Much of the work force can’t afford a decent place to live. Many of the jobs are seasonal and minimum wage or lower. The town is crowded, prices are higher, crime is up, traffic congestion to the point of gridlock is frequent.

Yes, Korenblat’s Grand Plan helps the “loads of people” who live elsewhere, who have the assets to make capital investments, and who see an opportunity to cash in on what they perceive to be a depressed economy in San Juan County.

And at whose expense?---the people who already live here, who lack the financial resources or the expertise to exploit the economic opportunities presented by a new national monument and the massive tourist promotion that will come with it.

Who in San Juan County, Utah can resist a future scenario like that?

*“...preserved in its current state.”*



Monticello, Utah & the new “Latigo Industrial Wind Farm”

The Next ‘New West’ town?

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Still, to many residents of Utah and elsewhere, and to the most of the media, the proposed Bears Ears National Monument, has received almost unanimous praise and support. But what, in real terms, would the new monument look like? There are so many questions...

\* What is the Master Plan? How and by whom will it be administered? It’s been stated that Native Americans will be active partners in the monument’s operation. Is that in writing? Does it include the day-to-day operation of the monument? As well as long-range planning?

\* What kind of infrastructure directly related to the monument’s designation will be constructed? Will a new ‘Bears Ears NM Visitor Center’ be built in Monticello? Or Blanding? Is there a plan for a new facility near the Bears Ears themselves, out on Utah Hwy 95 near Natural Bridges NM?

\* What about roads? Will some roads in the monument be ‘improved’ or even paved to make them more accessible to the average tourist? Will other secondary roads and jeep trails that have been open for decades be closed?

\* What other restrictions will be placed on the monument? Will entry to the national monument require an entrance fee? If so, how will the fee requirement be enforced? What kind of staff and how many employees do the monument planners envision?

\* Will Native American customs and rituals previously conducted on the lands now proposed for monument designation be protected in perpetuity? Is it in writing?

\* What are projections for visitation? As the numbers of tourists increase, perhaps dramatically, how do planners avoid the catastrophic effects of too many people, as we’ve experienced in the Moab area?

\* How will the new monument designation affect the local traditions and day-to-day life of the small communities that surround the Monument? How will Blanding and Monticello and Bluff and Mexican Hat be affected? Will it adversely affect the rural values that are so important to those families who have lived in this part of the country for generations?

\* And finally, in real terms, how will it benefit Native Americans who live on the perimeter of the Monument? Are there programs in place to assure Native American participation in entrepreneurial efforts in these national monument ‘gateway’ communities are equitable? Are genuine efforts and plans in place that assure their economic future offers more promise than low-paying tourist related jobs?

These are questions that must be answered.

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Recently, San Juan County Commissioner Rebecca Benally expressed an opinion contrary to the more supportive views of the Inter-Tribal Bears Ears Coalition. In her San Juan Record essay, Benally wrote in part, “Trusting the federal government has historically resulted in broken promises for Native Americans.

As a Diné/Navajo woman, a resident of San Juan County and Commissioner, I speak in behalf of my constituents – the Grassroots Utah Navajos...We strongly oppose the Bears Ears National Monument designation in San Juan County on our sacred and spiritual grounds.”



*“While we recognize the allure of deep-pocketed environmental groups with their promises and potential jobs on a Native American Advisory Council, we reject the notion that groups outside of San Juan County should dictate the future of these lands or pretend to speak for us and have our best interest, but we know better.”*

*“We can speak for ourselves. Environmental groups, do not insult our intelligence.”*

<http://www.canyoncountryzephyr.com/blog/2016/04/26/san-juan-record-bears-ears-national-monument-designation-disastrous-for-utah-grassroots-navajos/>

Benally urged caution noting, “Environmental groups trying to sell the idea of a Bears Ears monument purport that the government will agree to allow both a continued access to our sacred lands and management by a Native American Advisory Council....While the lure of a potential job managing the monument may be appealing to some Navajo, empirical evidence would suggest we should not be so quick to believe these promises.”

Benally referenced just a few of the many broken promises that Native Americans have faced in the last century. She has no interest in being fooled again. And when it came to collaboration with the environmental/recreation community, Benally did not mince words...

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Benally’s comments were immediately dismissed by many environmentalists and some even claimed she’d become a puppet of the other San Juan County commissioners--I can’t think of a comment more insulting than that.

In the end, while the idea of a national monument sounds like a dream come true to many, the fact is, the issue is far more complex than most are willing to consider. NM designation decisions made in the rush to beat the January 20, 2017 deadline---Obama’s last day in office---could create problems and environmental impacts and alter the very future of this sacred land in ways even the monument’s most ardent supporters have completely failed to consider.

*“...preserved in its current state?” Lets’ hope so.*