

Native Leaders Tell Congress How Trump Trampled ‘Spiritually Occupied Landscape’ to Carve Up National Monuments

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House Democrats, indigenous tribal leaders, and public land protection advocates all rebuked the Trump administration's downsizing of two national monuments Wednesday, arguing that President Donald Trump and former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke acted illegally by conducting what at least one critic called a "[sham](#)" review process.

The administration acted in the interest of pro-fossil fuel lawmakers, the oil and gas industry, and other monument opponents when they conducted a hasty review of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monuments in 2017, critics argued.

The House Natural Resources Committee invited several witnesses to [testify](#) at a hearing entitled "Forgotten Voices," including three representatives from native tribes which had vocally opposed President Donald Trump's decision to shrink the two monuments by about two million acres in 2017, citing their sacred connection to the lands.

"To Hopi people, the Bears Ears National Monument is a spiritually occupied landscape," [said](#) Clark Tenakhongva, vice chairman of the Hopi tribe, at the hearing. "This land is a testament of Hopi stewardship through thousands of years, manifested by the 'footprints' of ancient villages, sacred springs, migration routes, pilgrimage trails, [and] artifacts."

Clark W. Tenakhongva, Vice Chair, Hopi Tribe: "Bears Ears National Monument is spiritually occupied landscape ... a testament of Hopi stewardship through thousands of years, manifested by the footprints" of ancient villages and cultural sites. [#StandWithBearsEars](#) [#MonumentsForAll](#) pic.twitter.com/AEPeeGTMj

— Wilderness Society [@Wilderness](#) [March 13, 2019](#)

Rep. Deb Haaland (D-N.M.), one of two Native American women who made history when they were elected to Congress last year, expressed solidarity with the Hopi and other tribes.

"I can say the bones of my ancestors are buried in Bears Ears," Haaland said. "It's easy to get emotional about tribal land when your ancestors have lived

there for generations and it's only because of them that you're able to sit here today...I appreciate local tribes for coming so far to explain why this land is important."

"I can say the bones of my ancestors are buried in Bears Ears ... I have a strong say in it also." We all have a shared interest in protecting the land - [@RepDebHaaland #MonumentsForAll pic.twitter.com/CpKtr54qU0](#)

— Wilderness Society 🌲 (@Wilderness) [March 13, 2019](#)

Committee Chairman Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.) noted in his opening remarks that the Interior Department's own inspector general had found the review conducted by Zinke to be unsatisfactory, and Zinke himself to be apparently unconcerned with whether the process was "legal, whether it was improperly influenced, or whether it best protected public lands."

"When my colleagues read the full report they will say administration's process was hollow and improper," Grijalva said. "Industry was given special consideration in this process...and the voice of the American people was ignored."

In 2017 Trump & former Sec Zinke perpetrated the largest public lands protection rollback in modern American history. They ignored sovereign tribes, local communities & public opinion. Today this illegal action by the Trump admin gets the scrutiny it deserves. [#MonumentsForAll pic.twitter.com/7VdDVIPFCd](#)

— Natural Resources (@NRDems) [March 13, 2019](#)

In addition to Tenakhongva, two other witnesses at the hearing—Tony Small, vice chairman of the Ute Tribe, and Carleton Bowekaty, lieutenant governor of the Pueblo of Zuni—described how they were given just an hour of Zinke's time during the review process, while monument opponents were able to join the secretary on his four-day tour of the lands. The inequity amounted to a violation of the Antiquities Act, they argued.

"The current administration," Bowekaty [said](#), "conducted a National Monument review that largely ignored tribal interests and concerns. It appears that this so-called review was conducted with a pre-determined objective of justifying executive action—action which we are now challenging in federal court—to greatly reduce the area protected by the Bears Ears National Monument so that excluded lands can be available for mineral exploration and development."

"President Trump's unprecedented proclamation revoking Bears Ears and replacing it with two small monument units violates the Antiquities Act and exceeds the power delegated to the president by Congress," testified Small.

"The Antiquities Act does not authorize a president to rescind or modify national monuments created by their predecessors, and certainly does not authorize them to revoke and replace existing monuments with smaller ones as has been attempted here," he added.

As the hearing was underway, the Western Values Project released an analysis of documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) by the Utah Bureau of Land Management, which showed that the Interior Department misrepresented findings regarding the monuments' effects on Utah's economy.

"The Trump Administration steamrolled expertise on the ground in Utah in order to push a narrow political agenda from Washington, D.C.," said the group's executive director, Chris Saeger, in a statement.

"It is my firm belief that this was a pre-destined outcome and everything since has been to justify that outcome," Grijalva concluded at the hearing.

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Featured image: Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument's boundaries were reduced by about 47 percent after the Interior Department's review last year. (Photo: Bureau of Land Managment/Flickr/cc)

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