



Voices of Bears Ears

I sit in soft red sand and squint at orange rock silhouetted against blue sky. Golden light drapes the cliff behind me. The contents of deflated backpacks litter the ground: climbing shoes with their sour smell, a tangle of metal gear, and various half-eaten pieces of fruit now resting on rock ledges. Climbers dip between sun and shadow as they try to maintain their balance on the wall. I am ready for my own attempt on the crack that rises and thins above me. I trace the shape with my eyes, memorizing each curve, each notch in the edge, each subtle change in width. I've done this before: fixated on a single route until eventually my body and mind united, and I pushed through some invisible barrier, and entered a realm as unexpected and enchanting as a delicate bloom on a cactus. The sharp desert light and the

wide-open sky have led me to believe in the power of this place.

CLIMBERS OFTEN FOCUS on the cracks that laser through the stone at Indian Creek, but there are also ancient handprints painted on curving walls and animal shapes carved into dark varnish. Brick dwellings perch on ledges and in alcoves, evidence of a long history of habitation before European explorers and settlers arrived to claim the region as their own. Many Indigenous people see this land in southeastern Utah as sacred. In 2009 the Utah Tribal Leaders Association discussed how to involve tribes in statewide land management and protection. A year later, Navajo (Diné) leaders in Utah began a cultural mapping and policy study for the area that is now Bears Ears. Around the same time, congressmen

Rob Bishop and Jason Chaffetz drafted a Public Lands Initiative to set aside portions of southeastern Utah as a National Conservation Area, but to open other places to mining and development. The representatives introduced several drafts of the initiative to Congress, but the bill was never brought to a full vote.

By 2015, twenty-five Native American tribes had endorsed the idea of conserving Bears Ears, and the nonprofit Utah Diné Bikéyah took a monument proposal for the Bears Ears region to the Obama administration. In December 2016, once it became clear that the Public Lands Initiative would not pass Congress, President Barack Obama invoked the Antiquities Act to designate Bears Ears as a national monument—encompassing 1.35 million acres of public land in southeastern Utah to be co-managed by the US Forest Service and



the Bureau of Land Management, and advised by an inter-tribal coalition composed of members from the Hopi Tribe, the Navajo Nation, the Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah Ouray, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and the Zuni Tribe.

National monument status closes this land to new leases for mineral, oil and gas extraction, and some Utah residents viewed this presidential proclamation as a federal overreach. Utah Governor Gary Herbert petitioned President Trump to reconsider the monument. In April 2017, Trump ordered a review of twenty-seven national monuments, including Bears Ears, to evaluate whether the boundaries are “confined to the smallest area compatible with the proper care and management of the objects to be protected” (as cited from the Antiquities Act). In September, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*

acquired a copy of a memo from Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, recommending a decrease in the size of Bears Ears. President Trump confirmed his decision to reduce the monument in an October call to senator Orrin Hatch. Trump intends to declare the specific boundary adjustments while on a visit to Utah in December. Meanwhile, the Navajo Nation has announced a planned lawsuit to oppose any diminishment in the monument’s originally designated area. It is likely that the future of Bears Ears will be decided in court.

Not all Native Americans supported the monument. On May 26, Ryan Benally, a member of the Navajo Nation and the son of anti-monument San Juan Country Commissioner Rebecca Benally, published an editorial in *Indian Country Today* arguing that the language of the proclamation relegates the inter-tribal

coalition to providing “guidance and recommendations,” but prevents their suggestions from being legally binding. In another May op-ed that appeared in the *San Juan Record*, Shoshone writer Darren Parry worried that the monument designation would increase the popularity of tourism to the region, and that visitors would trample sacred sites even more.

Yet it seems that a majority of local Native Americans believe the monument will bring necessary protection to the area. Five sovereign tribes worked together to draft its proposal, and on June 10, during Zinke’s review of Bears Ears, an inter-tribal gathering took place beneath Comb Ridge to celebrate the monument and Indigenous peoples’ relationships with their ancestral lands. “The Bears Ears region is not a series of isolated objects, but a connected, living landscape that must be

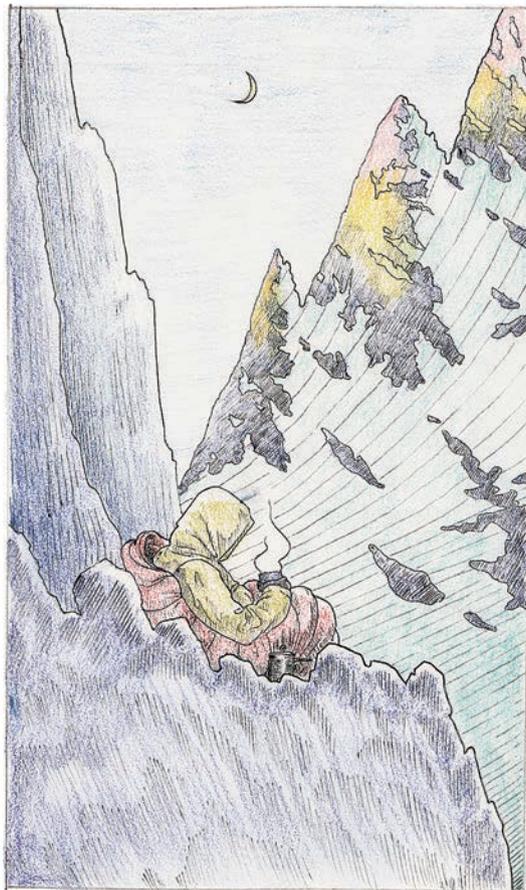
protected,” the president of the Navajo Nation, Russell Begaye, told Native News Online in August. “You cannot reduce the size without harming the whole.”

By the time Bears Ears became a monument, I had been climbing in Indian Creek for seven years and had spent months camped under the uncommonly bright stars. As the area appeared in national headlines, I read newspaper articles with convoluted discussions of dates and policy details and the official objections of politicians engaged in the arguments. For me, these debates sounded far removed from the visceral experience of being in the desert; layers of pink sand stuck to sweaty skin in imitation of a sunburn; a shroud of dark clouds gathered on one side of the sky while bright rays pierced the other. I wanted to know how people who woke up to the desert every morning felt—people who were not climbers, and who would have their own passionate opinions about the future of this place.

IN MAY, AS I READ about Secretary Zinke’s “listening tour” through Utah’s monuments, I saw a link to a personal video that had gone viral. In the clip, Secretary Zinke is shaking hands with onlookers at the Butler Wash Trailhead when a dark-haired woman wearing a “Protect Bears Ears” T-shirt approaches. “When are you going to meet with the tribal leaders? It’s kind of unfair that you have only met with them for one hour. Sir, is there a reason that you are not listening to them more?” she demands. Zinke shoves a finger in her face, and scolds, “Be nice. Don’t be rude.” He turns and walks off.

I decided to talk to her. In June, I finally reached Cassandra Begay on the phone, and as we spoke a GPS navigation voice squawked in the background. “I’m so sorry.... I’m driving for Lyft at the same time that I’m talking to you,” Cassandra said. “You don’t make a lot of money in activism.” She told me that she used to work in the corporate world, but, she explained, “Since I went to Standing Rock, for me as a Native American woman, that was the first time I actually felt like I belonged somewhere. I’ve kind of had to live in two different worlds: the way I was raised traditionally and then in the more modern world.”

Cassandra is a member of the Navajo Nation, and she grew up on a reservation near Bears Ears. “As a Native American people,



we have always been one with the land,” she said. She described memories of growing up in a traditional *hogan*, eating deer meat that her stepfather hunted, and walking with her grandmother along a red-banked creek, where they collected willow branches to weave into baskets. “We see that land as a living organism with a heartbeat and a pulse.”

Cassandra explained that the monument designation is the result of large-scale tribal cooperation: protecting this land was an important-enough cause to unite tribal groups that hadn’t typically worked together in the past and to bring them to action. To her, the designation of Bears Ears was also a symbolic gesture by the US government to return stolen land to Native Americans. “We were the first caretakers of these lands and it’s an absolute must that we have a seat at the table in every decision regarding these lands,” Cassandra said. “The monument is a way for healing.”

The rocks themselves are alive. Colonies of microbes live on the surface of the stone, where they secrete manganese and iron, forming a tawny varnish. Early desert inhabitants scratched pale, intricate shapes into this medium. In a pamphlet advocating protection of the land, Malcolm Lehi, a Ute Mountain Ute, says, “Native People relate

to rock art with our hearts.... We do not view these panels as just art, but almost like a coded message that exists to help us understand...our life and reality as humans.”

SURROUNDED BY open sage-covered hills, the small town of Monticello, population 2000, is less than 20 miles from the Bears Ears National Monument border. A year ago, Monticello city council passed a resolution stating the town’s official opposition to a monument designation. Last February, I contacted the city council members to ask why. George Rice, the former chair of the Recreation Committee, greeted me enthusiastically over the phone. “It’s a nice, beautiful day, and we’re just enjoying life,” he said. He told me that he grew up in Monticello and left to join the Marine Corps, but he eventually moved back. “It’s definitely home. You know, it’s a beautiful area. I love it.” He mentioned that he enjoys camping, hiking, and off-road motorcycling. I imagined him bouncing through hidden canyons on his dirt bike, the knobby tires digging into crimson dirt.

“As a city council, we did vote on a resolution opposing the monument. Part of that was talking to the people that live here, talking to my neighbors, my friends, and the people we live with,” he said. “If you look at the rules and the regulations of other monuments in the country, they are very restrictive as to the type of activities that you can do.... I think that’s how a lot of us feel, that it is more of an overreach and a restriction than it is really a protection.” George and his neighbors are concerned about access to land in order to hunt game, graze cattle, and drive off-road vehicles. He thinks that the new rules could make it difficult for them to earn a living from the land and could diminish some of the ATV-driven tourism business. “If the land is restricted to the point where no one can use it, then it hurts us worse than it hurts someone else.... We live here. We would like a little bit of a say in how the land is managed,” George said.

George feels that the land was already well-maintained and that the added protection was unnecessary. “The sad thing is, what I think is going to happen, is once a lot of people know about an area and a lot of people go there, whether they’re in vehicles or hiking, just by the sheer numbers of people, an area quickly becomes kind of trashed.”

The living varnish also creates the clean surfaces of the best climbs. I look up at my chosen climb, place my hand on the smooth stone, and feel the pulse of the desert. I've been attempting this route now for several seasons with no success. As the crack jogs horizontally, my feet slip on the featureless stone and I fall. One morning I wake up with the sand two shades darker from rain and sweet sage fragrance in the air. The stone is wet; I can't climb. Instead I let my mind clear as I hike through freshly scrubbed air along a pink slab, long views of ochre earth patched with dark green juniper on either side of me. Water fills potholes in the rock slab, reflecting pale blue from the clearing sky. Isolated from the rest of the world, these ephemeral pools contain unique ecosystems that come alive when it rains. Thunder rumbles in the distance while I crouch with my nose near the water's surface, watching the swimming shadows of desert life.

"I'VE BEEN COMING TO THE BEARS EARS area for sixteen years to spend time in the outdoors," Josh Ewing told me last February over the phone. "It's a place where I can find a break from the busy world around me and just be intrigued...by the scenery and the culture and the remoteness. And that's what has motivated me to work so hard to protect it." Josh is a resident of Bluff, a tiny town built beneath tall red towers with a population of only 258. "I can see the Bears Ears National Monument from my backyard," he explained. "I can walk to it in about three minutes."

He is also the executive director of Friends of Cedar Mesa, a grassroots nonprofit that aims to conserve natural and archeological areas. We had to reschedule our first conversation because looting was reported at a cultural site, and Josh had to hike out and assess the damage.

"There are a lot of threats to the Bears Ears area," Josh explained. "There's extractive use that's a threat, there's the growing visitation that's unmanaged that's a threat, you have irresponsible motorized recreation that's a real challenge, you have continued looting and vandalism of sites which has been an issue for more than century. So there are many reasons why a place that's this special, this beautiful, this full of archeology ought to receive some special attention and be set aside for future generations to enjoy the way we do today."

One of the arguments some people make against the monument—which George had talked about—was that most of the land was

already managed by the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. Josh said that this level of protection wasn't enough. "Employees working for those two agencies have done a heroic job of trying to manage this area with very limited resources," Josh explained. "Back in the 1970s, there were seven full-time rangers just for the Cedar Mesa area, which is one of the more archaeologically rich areas. Now there are two part-time rangers. So funding over the years has been cut, and there is only so much the agencies can do without more resources and help." In response to increased recreation, the BLM hired additional seasonal rangers in the summer of 2017, but Josh's point remains valid: "We should all work together to preserve this area, and it's gonna need some resources to do that."

I mentioned George's concerns about access and about visitors overrunning the area. "No one here locally wants to see access restricted. We just want to see people using the area responsibly," Josh said. "Obviously if you get more and more people coming to an area, you are going to have to do some things to manage those people and to make reasonable restrictions to make sure that the area is protected, but that would have happened with or without a national monument. That need was there with or without a monument."

I remember the first time I drove into Indian Creek. A narrow canyon edged with pale green shrubs opened to a wide basin rimmed with round red cliffs, each lined with shadow-filled cracks. Cliffs and cracks multiplied to the horizon. It felt endless. I parked and leaned against the tailgate as the day cooled into evening. A car rattled over a cattle guard on its way to Canyonlands National Park. I watched the sunset turn the cliffs from bright pink to brick red to blood orange. My heart stuttered.

THE REDD FAMILY RANCH is a startling patch of green surrounded by dry, ruddy sand. I have driven past it countless times on the way to the Super Bowl Campground, sometimes waiting as their cattle crossed the road. The first time I talked to Matt Redd last summer, I caught him by surprise. It was evening, and a chorus of crickets chirped in the background of our phone conversation. I pictured him sitting at the Dugout Ranch, in the heart of Indian Creek, as the night sky purpled the sandstone cliffs. He seemed wary of the media, so I spent our first call explaining my

passion for Indian Creek and what I hoped to achieve by talking with different people.

The second time I talked to Matt Redd he was sitting in his car in Moab's early summer heat. The windows were open and I could hear the occasional car drive past. He was in town buying supplies for his summer cattle drive, when he moves herds from Beef Basin in Indian Creek to the higher elevation, cooler grounds of Elk Ridge, west of the Abajo Mountains. Matt spoke in slow, thoughtful sentences, using the reverent language of religion to describe the landscape. "This place is very, very special to me... It is my church, my temple."

Matt referred to himself and other ranchers as "mature land users" because they come from a line of people who have worked on this land for over a century. He told me about Al Scorup, one of the first cowboys to raise cattle in the area. In the 1890s Scorup ranged his livestock throughout southeastern Utah, over land that is now Canyonlands National Park, Bears Ears National Monument, and the Redd family's Dugout Ranch. After Scorup had spent years living in the intense heat and numbing cold of the desert, navigating canyons on horseback, and sleeping in caves, he was asked by a journalist what he thought of the land. "It has been my worst enemy," he said. Then after pausing a moment he added, "And my best friend too."

"Talking to other ranchers who operate on Bears Ears, I would say we've all felt that way," Matt said. Over the years Matt has observed a sharp rise of visiting climbers and tourists. He never stated an opinion for or against the monument designation to me, but he expressed concern for the welfare of the place. "In my lifetime I have seen parts of the landscape that I hold sacred degraded by recreation," he said. "It is subjective, but what I consider to be the experience that people should have in the landscape isn't available anymore. What I consider an intact landscape, unpolluted by noise or excessive vehicles or traffic or people, is not available. Part of the reason for that is the [Canyonlands] National Park infrastructure put in to make things accessible for the public. As you do that you remove a fundamental aspect of the landscape that you are trying to preserve and protect." Matt explained that outdoor companies advocate for access and formal protection of places, but are hesitant to acknowledge their own impact. "We [humans] are part of a long history of exploitation of natural resources," Matt said. "Just because it is not extractive does not



[Photo] On the day that we prepared to go to press, we learned of the passing of Fred Beckey at age ninety-four. One of the world's most prolific mountaineers, he spent much of his life on a quest for wild summits, as if piecing together an ever-growing ascent that could stretch on forever. Look to *Alpinist.com* and to *Alpinist* 61 for stories of the man we loved to refer in the magazine to as "the indomitable Fred Beckey." He will be deeply missed. Dan Doody / Fred Beckey Collection

mean it doesn't have as much potential to alter or damage landscapes as mining or agriculture or forestry has."

I stare up at the cliff and take a breath, inhaling clean desert air. A bead of sweat rolls down my forehead. I think about purple flowers that bloom in spring and cottonwood trees that glow yellow in autumn. I think about lumpy cryptobiotic soil, a community of fungi, algae, bacteria, and lichens that takes many years to grow and protects the desert floor from invasive species. I think about wind and sudden rain, sand dunes from long ago and the heated pressure that formed these rocks and cracks. In comparison, climbing seems so trivial.

FOR SOME, THE DEBATE about the monument embodies a longing to preserve this place

exactly as it is, like a diorama in a museum. But the desert is different every day. Erosion slowly shapes the mesas, buttes and towers, while humans inscribe their own histories into the landscape. These layers are composed of rock art and cliff dwellings, but also now of paved roads and signed trailheads—and of mines that chewed up chunks of earth. Climbing, too, leaves traces on the stone. For safety and convenience, climbers drill permanent bolts into rock. Over time, sandstone cracks slowly widen. Every hand placed inside, every foot that scrapes the edge removes a few particles of sand, until the climbs feel different. Even a casual onlooker can see the white stripe on the wall where climbers have worn away the protective varnish. Ways to minimize visitor impacts exist: refusing to climb when the rock is wet and fragile; camping only

on established sites; avoiding petroglyphs and pictographs. These measures, while important, still feel inadequate. Climbers often come here with goals of conquest, their vision narrowed to the pursuit of ticklists and a mythic lifestyle of unlimited freedom. I'd fallen in love with the initial splendor of the desert, the challenging cracks and flashy sunsets. But as I returned again and again, my selfish, inward view expanded. I began to experience this place more intimately, glimpsing more of the complex ecosystems that knit together the larger landscape. Similarly, the more I listened to people, the more I recognized the tangled human history here, the distinct pasts and ideas, uses and dreams that sometimes clash. United or not, this community could shape the future of this place.

"It wasn't just for the tribes," Cassandra said of the struggle for monument designation. "It was for people in general...so that we can move forward together as people and as a community and respect each other, and... respect our shared home.... The tribes want people to be able to be a part of the sacredness and the beauty of that landscape out there. Those wide open spaces where you feel like you can reach up and touch the sky."

I tie in with the end of a dirty rope, double-check my knot, fist-bump my belayer, and go. The first part of the climb is familiar: my hands flex and stretch to fill out the crack, then shrink to a solid jam. I focus on staying relaxed, not over-gripping or expending extra energy. At the last rest I shake out the fatigue in my arms. Then I lunge and stack my fingers into the flared openings that are just too wide for an easy grip. The rock edges scrape my skin, my feet slip on the smooth stone, and I feel my sweaty fingers slide. A bubble of fear rises in my chest.

In a flash I feel the landscape surround me, encompass me: red dirt, vibrant as crushed pastel crayons; delicate towers that rise under menacing clouds; hardy fairy shrimp that hide in potholes; rusty varnish that thickens and darkens with time. I think of oil rigs bobbing on the horizon and of desolate, empty mines, some already here and others planned. I think of the painted handprints of the past, of people who touched the roughness of the rock with their palms, who felt the desert change them. My body sways in the space above the ground. I cling to the side of this wall, tiny among uncountable cliffs. I reach to make my next move.

—McKenzie Long,
Mammoth Lakes, California