Public Lands Under Attack

National public lands are an integral part of the fabric of western communities and a major driver of local economies. Through tools such as the Antiquities Act, the American government can act to protect and enhance the American public land system. However, President Trump signed an executive order today requiring Secretary Zinke to review all national monuments that have been created in the past 21 years in order to establish whether or not these designations are within the size limitations outlined by the Antiquities Act. President Trump’s action to start this review has the potential to undermine one of the nation's most important conservation tools. An attack on the Antiquities Act is an attack on all American public lands and the communities and economies that rely on them.

What is the Antiquities Act?

In 1906 the Antiquities Act was passed by Congress as a response to looting in the Southwest, and has since been used by every President except for Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, and George H.W. Bush. The Act states that the President is authorized to:

"declare by public proclamation historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest that are situated upon the lands owned or controlled by the Government of the United States to be national monuments, and may reserve as a part thereof parcels of land, the limits of which in all cases shall be confined to the smallest area compatible with proper care and management of the
Using this authority, 16 presidents—eight democratic and eight republican—have established 157 national monuments since 1906. When a national monument is designated, it is designated on land that is already owned by the American government, it cannot take land from private landowners, it just shifts the level of protection given to historically or scientifically important resources. Since their designation, many of these national monuments have been established as national parks by Congress, including some of today’s most famous: Grand Canyon National Park, Olympic National Park, Zion National Park, and Grand Teton National Park. Former President Obama used the Antiquities act to protect more than 550 million acres of land throughout his eight years in office, including the highly publicized 1.35 million acre Bears Ears National Monument. The creation of this monument has sparked a new wave of challenges from lawmakers who claim that nationally managed public lands, and the further establishment of such encourages federal overreach.

Attacks on the Antiquities Act
Some lawmakers have been attempting to dismantle the Antiquities Act through legislation for decades, calling it an encroachment on state sovereignty; attempting both to rescind the Antiquities Act as a whole, as well as introduce bills that would rescind or diminish existing national monuments.

The Antiquities Act has become the new focal point for those who have called for the transfer of national public lands to the states (primarily so the states can increase extraction activities). These calls have been largely unsuccessful due to a combination of land transfer being widely unpopular with western communities and because both President Trump and Secretary Zinke have spoken out against it. In response, many of the anti–national public lands voices have chosen a different tactic to reduce national management of public lands, by once again focusing their attacks the Antiquities Act.

Importance of National Public Lands to Western Mountain Communities
The outdoor recreation economy annually contributes $887 billion dollars to the US economy, and 7.6 million direct jobs. Most of this recreation takes place on national public lands, and in the west 46.9% of land is managed by either the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Department of Interior. These national public lands are an integral part of the success of our communities due to the tourism they bring, as well as the competitive advantage that being close to open spaces and outdoor recreation provides when attracting businesses and employees. In fact, studies have shown that communities close to national public lands perform better in several key economic measures than communities close to fewer public lands.

The Antiquities Act is an important mechanism for public lands protection, enabling Presidents to establish national monuments. Conservation of ecologically, culturally, and scientifically important lands is a necessary component to the American way of life, as well as to the communities (e.g. mountain towns in the Intermountain West) that rely on these lands for economic growth and prosperity. If President Trump chooses, and is allowed to, revoke monument status of recently designated monuments such as Bears Ears -- even though it has been widely accepted that once established, Presidents do not have the right to rescind or revoke monument status -- this would set a dangerous precedent for the future of national monuments.
Here at The Mountain Pact we intend to fight for the continued protection and restoration of national public lands and the laws that allow these culturally and economically important places to be created. Stay tuned for more relevant public lands policy information and advocacy opportunities.

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