Bend relies on a healthy public lands system

By Nathan Boddie
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Public lands are an integral part of the fabric of western communities such as Bend and a major driver of local economies. As a physician and local elected official, I am constantly reminded about the positive impact that access to public lands has on our community. Not only does outdoor recreation on these public lands stimulate our economy, but it also provides a higher standard of living through access to healthy, outdoor lifestyles for our residents.

Outdoor recreation and the visitors who come to enjoy our public lands are key parts of Bend’s local economy. In Oregon, they provide billions of dollars in consumer spending, wages, and state and local tax revenue while also providing nearly 150,000 direct jobs.

More than 50 percent of Oregon land is publicly owned and varies from the rugged Oregon coast, to the high peaks of the Oregon Cascades, to the great expanses of high desert, and to the stunning convergence of mountain ranges in Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument.

The monument -- which is targeted in the Interior Department’s ongoing review of national monuments -- is a remarkable and biologically diverse area that draws visitors from around the world to hike, camp, view wildflowers, and explore the diversity of the grasslands and mountain ranges. It was expanded in January of this year after extensive public input and broad expressions of public support, and protects a beautiful part of southern Oregon for residents and visitors well into the future.

The ongoing review of national monuments -- and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke’s recent recommendation to roll back protections for places like Bears Ears in Utah and Cascade-Siskiyou here in Oregon -- threatens communities like ours that rely on public lands. If President Trump and Secretary Zinke act to reduce the size of Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, it would leave thousands of acres vulnerable to development, and significantly compromise the opportunity for
the surrounding communities to develop their outdoor recreation economies. An attack on public lands like Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument threatens local economies and our way of life in Bend and throughout Oregon.

Public lands are the most basic infrastructure upon which outdoor recreation depends. Deschutes County consists of 77 percent national public lands, drawing more than 2 million visitors per year to Bend to climb mountains and rock, ski, paddle our streams, and ride our trails.

In fact, communities such as Bend with public lands nearby perform better in several key economic factors than those without public lands, making the federal government’s attack on national public lands feel like an attack on the success of mountain communities like ours.

Secretary Zinke visited our great state earlier this month, and heard about all the benefits that local residents and businesses have seen from the Cascade Siskiyou National Monument. If Secretary Zinke listens to these local voices, I’m confident he will see that attempts to remove protections for public lands will hurt the health and economic success of communities throughout Oregon and the U.S.

The administration should leave national monuments as they are so that all Americans can continue to enjoy the resources and activities they provide, and so that communities like Bend can continue to experience the significant benefits of a healthy national public lands system.

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