

Macker: Attack on public lands threatens economies, quality of life

July 7, 2017

--

National public lands are the fabric of western communities and driver of local economies. Through tools such as the Antiquities Act, the federal government can act to protect and enhance the American public land system that has enabled us to protect the beauty of Wyoming for over 100 years.

The ongoing Department of Interior review of national monuments and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's recommendation that the boundaries of Bears Ears National Monument in Utah be shrunk threaten communities that rely on public lands. The Antiquities Act, passed by Congress in 1906, allows presidents to set aside nationally owned land to receive increased protections but not to reduce or rescind monuments established by previous presidents, making such a widespread review unprecedented. An attack like this on public lands threatens the local economies and the quality of life of communities in Wyoming surrounding public lands.

As a county commissioner dedicated to maintaining the vitality and diversity of Teton County through commitment to conservation and public lands, I see firsthand every day the positive impact that public lands and outdoor recreation have on the people who live here. On any day, regardless of the season, local families are disconnecting from the fast-paced digital world and tuning into the renewal that the natural world provides while hiking, biking, picnicking, fishing and more. Most important, these opportunities are – and should be – available to everyone, regardless of economic status.

Grand Teton National Park in Teton County was first created by Congress in 1929 and protected solely the Teton Mountain Range. However, in 1943, Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the importance of the lands in the valley and designated this as Jackson Hole National Monument. Finally, in 1950, Congress combined these lands to form the present-day Grand Teton National Park. FDR's use of the Antiquities Act added over 200,000 acres to the now 310,000-acre national park. Without this use of the act, two thirds of the stunning GTNP may remain unprotected today, reducing the biodiversity and the expansive beauty that draws visitors.

Devils Tower National Monument in Crook County was the first national monument designated in 1906 after the passage of the Antiquities Act, due in large part to the efforts of Rep. Frank W. Mondell from Newcastle. In addition to providing opportunities for outdoor recreation, this landmark is spiritually and culturally relevant to a variety of populations, including Native communities.

Last year marked the third year in a row of record-breaking visitation to GTNP, with 4.8 million visitors. These visitors come from all over to climb mountains, explore lakes and rivers, and view diverse wildlife. While they are here, they spend money at local restaurants, gear stores, guide agencies and overnight accommodations. Devils Tower National Monument also saw a record 496,210 visitors in 2016. These spectacular and world-famous national parks and monuments contribute greatly to the overall economic success of our counties; our experience in Teton County tracks with a recent study that found that rural counties near more public lands perform better in several key economic factors than rural counties close to fewer public lands.

Today, public lands and recreation continue to draw millions of visitors to Wyoming every year. This provides billions of dollars in consumer spending, wages and salaries and 50,000 direct jobs in Wyoming. Visitor spending across the state generates \$171 million in local and state tax revenues. There can be no question that Wyoming's tourism and outdoor recreation economies are a critical part of economic diversification in the state. Our residents and businesses rely upon tourism generated by outdoor recreation taking place on public lands.

Our residents and visitors also rely on the freedom to explore these public lands, to breathe the fresh air, to challenge themselves physically and mentally and to connect with each other. Future generations must be given these opportunities as well. The administration's misguided attempts to degrade our national public lands will in turn hurt the health, beauty and economic success of counties in Wyoming and across the country. I take my job as a steward of these public lands seriously and challenge this administration to do the same. The administration needs to leave national monuments as they are.

Natalia Macker lives at the Hoback Junction in Teton County with her husband and 3- year-old son. She serves on the Board of Teton County Commissioners and the Land Quality Advisory Board for the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality.

--

Originally available at:

https://trib.com/opinion/columns/macker-attack-on-public-lands-threatenseconomies-quality-of-life/article_1cacfebb-da60-559a-be34-69de423bfef4.html