

Clash over Bear Ears land tests years of progress on Native American spirituality

by [Henry Gass](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* Davis Filfred wishes President Trump would take a page from General “Stormin’ Norman” Schwarzkopf’s playbook in thinking about Bears Ears National Monument. When Filfred served as a Marine Corps combat engineer in Operation Desert Storm, Schwarzkopf ordered troops not to target religious or archaeological sites for bombing.

Filfred, a member of the Navajo Nation Council representing districts in Utah, wants the Trump administration to take the same approach to Bears Ears, a 1.3-million-acre swath of southern Utah that has become the latest battleground between the federal government and a Native American movement of religion-infused environmental activism.

“This is the place where we worship,” he said. “This is our holy ground.”

In late April Trump signed an executive order calling for a review of almost two dozen sites designated as national monuments since 1996. The order requires Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to submit reviews of monuments larger than 100,000 acres within 120 days, with the exception of Bears Ears, for which he was to submit a final review within 45 days. The investigation will center on whether the monuments could be reduced in size or perhaps eliminated.

“What Trump wants to do, and the Utah [congressional] delegation, is they want to bomb our sacred place,” Filfred said.

The Bears Ears monument in particular—designated as such by President Obama in December—has become a political lightning rod. Utah’s members of Congress have long opposed giving the site a protected status, in part because of the land’s potential for resource extraction. They brought the issue to the Trump administration’s attention.

The 1906 Antiquities Act gives presidents the power to create national monuments, and Obama created more national monuments than any president besides Franklin Roosevelt, with Bears Ears being one of the largest. No president has ever rescinded

a national monument designation—though many have downsized monuments—and it is unclear if Trump has the authority to do so.

What is clear is that Native Americans are prepared to fight attempts to reduce or eliminate the area's protected status. The designation of Bears Ears as a national monument last year was the culmination of a years-long lobbying effort from five tribes in the region: the Hopi, Navajo, Ute Indian, Ute Mountain Ute, and the Zuni.

The designation was evidence of what academics say has been a steadily increasing awareness of Native American cultural and spiritual life.

Prior to the 1970s, there was “little governmental sensitivity . . . [to] American Indian belief systems and ritual practices,” said Peter Nabokov, an anthropologist at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Laws like the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 “have attempted to secure for them some sort of sense that their belief systems and life ways will be respected,” he said. “A lot of [religious] practices were discouraged” or had been prohibited by federal laws, “and for many tribes in some cases they lost things they’ve never regained.”

The protections have resulted in a gradual resurgence of Native American religion and a new breed of environmental action. Spiritual activism encompassing a range of indigenous religions has been developing for years, said Rosalyn LaPier, a member of the Blackfeet Nation.

“Some tribes would say that the entire landscape is saturated with both the natural and the supernatural,” said LaPier, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Montana who is currently a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School. “You have to always take that into consideration when making decisions about changing the landscape.”

That worldview, and the conflicts it can create, was on display in the debate over the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota. Thousands of people from hundreds of indigenous groups gathered for months to block the construction of an oil pipeline near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. Although the pipeline began transporting oil in mid-May, environmental activism continues.

In Montana, the Northern Cheyenne people are suing the Trump administration over another executive order that would lift a moratorium on coal leasing on public lands. Coal development in and around the tribe's lands would, among other things, adversely affect the Cheyenne people's "cultural and spiritual practices," according to the complaint.

In the Bears Ears area, people united around the land and the threat they feel from Trump's policies.

"At one time they wouldn't sit down, they never looked at each other, they were enemies," Filfred said. "But now they sit at the table."

Some fear that new policies could undermine the mutual understanding that has been developing between Native Americans and the rest of the country.

Shaun Chapoose, chairman of the Ute Indian Tribe Business Committee, said, "The part of Bears Ears which was unique was it was actually for you and for me to better understand each other."

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