

## **Public Lands:** **Antiquities Act and National Monuments**

**Background – why now** A broad faith coalition is seeking to protect public lands—especially those places that are culturally important, like the recent Civil Rights Monuments in Birmingham and South Carolina. Now that the status of these collective gems is newly threatened after President Trump signed a proclamation in early December to drastically reduce the size of Bears Ears National Monument (by 85%) and Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument (by 50%). Trump’s action follows on the heels of an executive order that calls for a review of national monuments designated after 1996. Despite the legality of Trump’s actions, more national monuments are expected to be reduced in size.

### **Antiquities Act**

National monuments are designated to protect existing federal land so that every American can enjoy these open spaces, and benefit from their protection. But in addition to historic, scientific or ecological use, these monuments also serve as an opportunity to honor our country’s diverse national mosaic and proud heritage. National monuments like Freedom Riders, Birmingham and Reconstruction Era and Bears Ears are part of our American heritage. These places are all protected thanks to the Antiquities Act.

The Antiquities Act was the first law to establish that public lands are critical to American heritage. It obligates federal agencies that manage the public lands to preserve for present and future generations the historic, scientific, commemorative, and cultural values of the archaeological and historic sites and structures on these lands. It also authorizes the President to protect landmarks, structures, and objects of historic or scientific interest by designating them as National Monuments.

Since 1906, American Presidents from both political parties have designated national monuments under the Antiquities Act so that future generations can experience our nation’s open spaces, historic sites, and cultural treasures. Experience has demonstrated the wisdom of giving presidents this authority – nearly half of America’s national parks were originally protected by the Antiquities Act, including the Statue of Liberty and the Grand Canyon.

### **Recent Religious Response:**

Jewish leaders sent a letter to President Trump outlining the need to protect public lands and the Antiquities Act. In January, more than 40 national and state religious organizations sent a letter to Congressional leadership celebrating the Civil Rights Monuments designations and calling on Congress to support the President's use of the Antiquities Act.

Another letter, signed by some of the nation’s largest religious denominations such as the United Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. and the United Methodist Church, states: *“Our responsibility to care for Creation is coupled with our duty to preserve and honor the story of all Americans, and ensure all our children have equitable access to healthy recreation and the opportunity to find their own story in our park system... We ask that you ensure the next President has the opportunity to continue enhancing our system of national parks, monuments and other public lands, and honoring our heritage.”*

## **About Some Recent National Monument Designations**

*Bears Ears:* The Bears Ears National Monument in southeastern Utah – some 1.35 million acres, across an ecologically, culturally, and geologically unique landscape – was requested by a coalition of five Native American tribes, who consider the two buttes at the center of the Monument sacred. There are an estimated 100,000 archeological sites across the Monument, and natural wonders galore. It was so designated last year. Though a strong majority of Utah residents support its protection, a vocal minority seeks to undo its status, and open this sacred wilderness to private development. Bears Ears is both a cautionary tale about the fragility of current protections on our public lands, and a fine example of how we can preserve the stories of all Americans through monument designations.

*Civil Rights:* President Obama designated three Civil Rights sites as monuments in January 2017. The new monuments are the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument in Birmingham, Alabama, the Freedom Riders National Monument in Anniston, Alabama, and the Reconstruction Era National Monument in Beaufort County, South Carolina. All three historic sites, designated just prior to Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend, played an important role in American History and our civil rights history.

The designations followed a Presidential Memo that outlines guidance for agencies to make public lands more inclusive and reflective of all Americans. The Presidential Memorandum is directed toward federal agencies, instructing them to value diversity and inclusion in their work. The Memorandum includes guidance for broad stakeholder engagement by agencies before they make decisions, as well as to prioritize conservation of places and stories important to under-represented communities.

**Why public lands are important:** Of course the land itself, and in particular the wilderness and open spaces, have always been central in the Jewish and Christian tradition. They played a vital role in the spiritual journeys of our people, from the ancestors in Genesis to the 40 years in the wilderness, and beyond. Protected natural lands are also an essential part of our natural surroundings, which we understand as Divine creation. Through such landscapes, life is nourished, and both terrestrial ecosystems and human communities find their foundations. Such places supply blessings of sustenance like soil, water, timber and minerals; they provide critical habitat to numerous (including endangered) plants and animals; they also offer us natural space for prayer, spiritual renewal, and awe. Most importantly, these lands tell our collective stories— from Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad monument to the Statue of Liberty. As a nation, we recognize and celebrate these blessings in the 623 million acres of public lands, which are our collective public inheritance, and the legacy we leave for future generations.