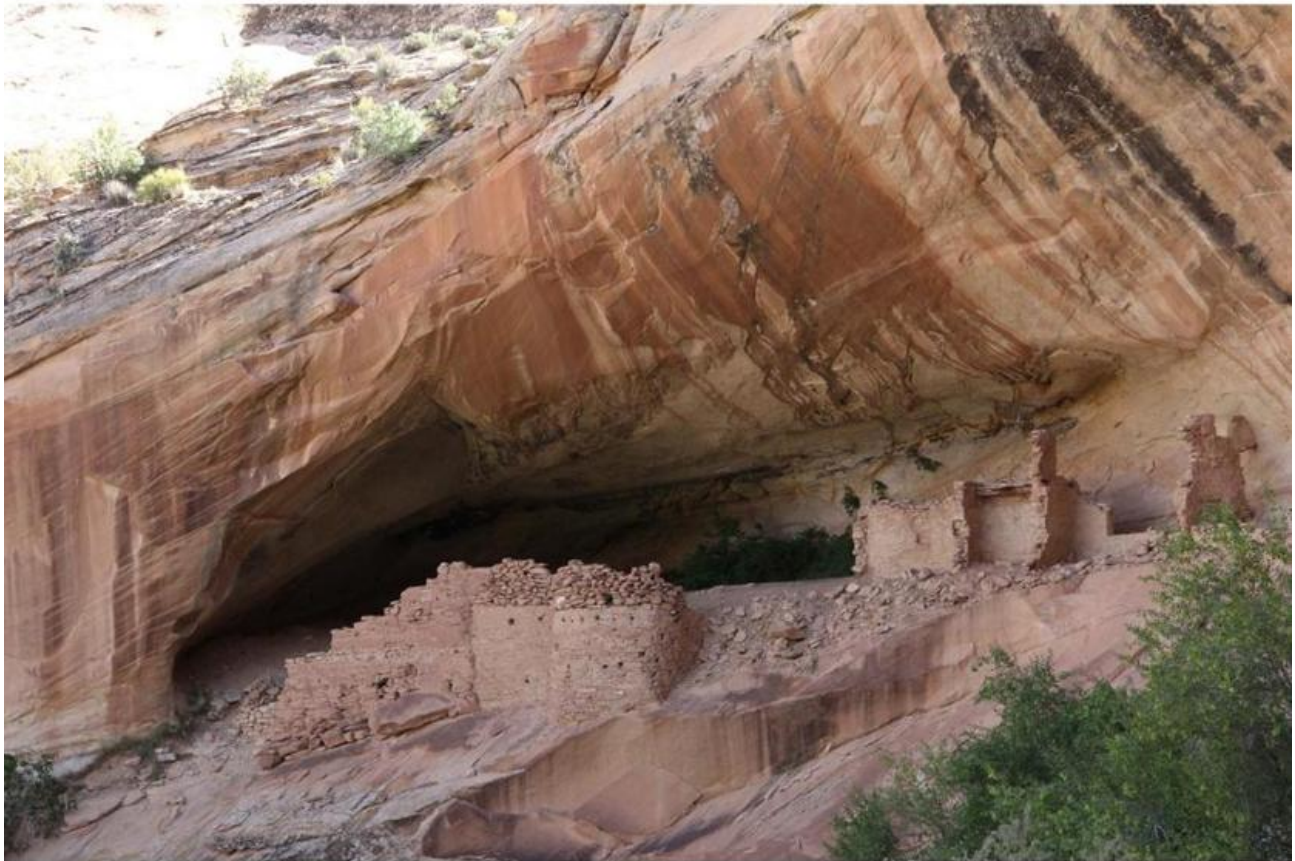




Travel

# The beauty of Bears Ears and of protecting it



**The Monarch ruin sits half hidden in the shadow of a large canyon alcove at Bears Ears National Monument.**

**By Stephen Nash** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT   NOVEMBER 17, 2017

It doesn't take much effort on the trails of the new, embattled Bears Ears

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National Monument to find a very long view — one with a twist of eerie disorientation. You can see it in a patterned shard of cliff-dweller pottery, or among the scattered stones of a multistory ancient ruin.

They carry a sense of the crosstides of human migration, competition, warfare, and abandonment. Tribal currents and conflicts that extend from a time of mammoths and mastodons right up to this moment. Among vermillion sawtooth ridgelines and wandering canyons, a turbulent story continues.

National monuments like Bears Ears enjoy a modest degree of protection from mining, drilling, destructive grazing, logging, and off-road vehicles — but nowhere near as much as national parks. And the category has a misleading name. Typically, these aren't single commemoratives, like the Washington Monument. They're natural areas, and they are vast.

The Bears Ears monument, in the southeast corner of Utah, is named for twin buttes near its center. It is all federal publicly owned land, designated as a national monument by President Obama just before he left office.

It includes, he noted, “some of our country's most important cultural treasures, including abundant rock art, archaeological sites, and lands considered sacred by Native American tribes.”

In fact it shelters one of the highest concentrations of archeological sites in North America. His back-of-the-envelope estimate, veteran archaeologist Bill Lipe told me, is that there are several hundred-thousand sites here — and the area has only been partially surveyed.

Lipe, coauthor of a book on these finds, told me that “there are so many cliff dwellings and rock art panels here. Visitors can get a first-hand, personal

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understanding of how people lived in the past, in an environment that's really quite spectacular. You're attracted to the mesas and the canyons and the cliffs — and well-preserved remnants of the lives of those who lived there for several thousand years.”

I mulled that summary, as my wife Linda and I set out on one of the mostly gentle trails that follow watercourses in this otherwise arid region, because President Trump has called Bears Ears and some other national monuments a “massive federal land grab” that “should never have happened.” His interior secretary, Ryan Zinke, has reportedly recommended that its boundaries be redrawn and its area reduced by 88 percent.

Here along the Upper Butler Wash trail we found the Target and Ballroom Cave ruins. They are silent and spectacular, dating from a period when the ancestral Puebloan residents moved off the more vulnerable mesas to live in more easily defended, and harder to find, canyon alcoves.

In other Southwestern destinations — Grand Canyon, for example, or Canyon de Chelly — seeing these kinds of ruins usually requires arduous hikes, and they're rare. Bears Ears, by contrast, offers a long list of accessible ruins. It's common to find 1,000-year-old pottery shards on many of these trails.

But access also makes this national monument open to looting and to casual damage by ardent but heedless visitors, as their numbers grow. Marauding off-road vehicles and GIS coordinates shared on the Internet make these fragile remnants even more vulnerable. Federal enforcement personnel are in short supply, according to the Bureau of Land Management. In practical terms, on this broad, remote terrain they're nearly nonexistent. A long history of illegal pot-hunting and vandalism was one of the reasons why the monument was

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established.

Local opponents, however, contest what they see as a meddlesome federal presence that frustrates gas and oil development, grazing, and mechanized recreation here.

One of the most complex ruins we found was high up in a canyon cul de sac, half hidden in the shadow of a large alcove one late afternoon. We had followed a sinuous, sandy trail among cottonwoods and crags. A final climb upward along the cliffs brought the imposing Monarch ruin into view. On that last stretch of trail were a series of flat “museum rocks,” as they’re often called, laden with brightly patterned pottery shards found by earlier visitors.

The intent, of course, is innocent. It’s to share a beautiful remnant, a signal from an ancient culture. Archeologists warn, however, that while picking up these puzzle pieces is OK, they should be put back where they were found, as precisely as possible. Once yanked out of their context, they can no longer be used to reconstruct a more complete picture of the lives that were once led here.

Less innocent were the bullet holes we saw later that afternoon. They defaced a magnificent rock art display called the Wolfman Panel, farther up the canyon. Many, perhaps most, of the ruins at Bears Ears show evidence of digging by pot-hunting plunderers over the years.

The earliest traces of human settlement that have been found in this area were left by the Clovis people, big game hunters during a much colder era as the last Ice Age waned. That was 12,000-13,000 thousand years ago — a comparatively short time after humans first arrived in North America.

Then came a succession of arrivals and abandonments. responding to climate or

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conflict, culminating around the year 1500. Archeologists have named the waves of occupation and characterized their lifeways — Paleoindian, Archaic, Agricultural, Basketmaker, Pueblo — based on decades of painstaking reassembly and analysis of bones, spearpoints, pots, rock art, and feathers.

There is more for them, and us, to discover about those lives if the remaining artifacts are left alone and protected. “It’s a great place for research,” Lipe told me. I hiked down one canyon with the archeologist Benjamin Bellorado, a doctoral candidate at the University of Arizona. He has conducted research in this area for 20 years. But, he told me, “This is all so untouched, in terms of research. In southeast Utah, we’ve barely scratched the surface.”

A good first stop on a visit to the area is the Edge of Cedars State Park Museum, in the town of Blanding. Its skillfully interpreted archaeological treasures make sense of the human story in the region. Rooms full of pottery and other artifacts can quickly lose their intrigue unless they’re arranged and explained to keep the imagination moving.

Jonathan Till’s archeological research dovetails with his job as curator of the museum. He brought me up to date on the latest chapter of that story: the conflict over the future of the national monument.

Whatever becomes of it, he told me, “I feel quite strongly that two things should happen. First, American Indian peoples should have greater say in the lands around these parts.” And, he said, the archeological and law enforcement staff of the federal agencies managing these public lands should be beefed up, though that of course will add to their budgets.

“Man, it is so worth it,” Till said. “When you consider that this is one of the most

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Making contact with those ancient lives is what visitors come to discover, he points out, but without more education and protection, their ardor is also the sharpest threat.

*Stephen Nash is the author of the book “Grand Canyon For Sale: Public Lands versus Private Interests in the Era of Climate Change,” published by the University of California Press. He is a visiting senior research scholar at the University of Richmond and can be reached at [snash@richmond.edu](mailto:snash@richmond.edu).*

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