

Testimony of the American Geosciences Institute

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**To the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands**

**Regarding the Legislative Hearing on
H.R. 4532, the Shash Jáa National Monument and Indian Creek National Monument Act**

February 10, 2018

Chairman McClintock, Ranking Member Hanabusa, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate this opportunity to provide written testimony on H.R. 4532, the Shash Jáa National Monument and Indian Creek National Monument Act. My name is Allyson Anderson Book, and I am the Executive Director of the American Geosciences Institute.

The American Geosciences Institute (AGI) is a nonprofit federation of 52 scientific and professional societies that represent more than 260,000 geologists, geophysicists, and other Earth scientists across the nation. Founded in 1948 under a directive of the National Academies, AGI's mission is to connect Earth, science, and people. AGI provides information services to geoscientists, serves as a voice for shared interests in our community, plays a major role in strengthening geoscience education, and strives to increase public awareness of the vital role that the geosciences play in society's use of resources, resilience to natural hazards, and the health of the environment.

Our member societies have expressed deep concern about any attempt to reduce the status or size of the Bears Ears National Monument, which was designated in large part due to its outstanding vertebrate fossil resources. Many fossils discovered in this region are the only examples of their kind known to exist in the country or the entire world, including many species of extinct fish, amphibians, mammal-relatives, and reptiles. Its rich fossil record is crucial to understanding how dinosaurs once dominated land ecosystems, how vertebrate life transitioned from sea to land, and how our human ancestors evolved.

The Bears Ears region is also considered one of the most significant cultural landscapes in the United States. For hundreds of generations, the area was populated by Native American tribes, many of which still consider the land profoundly sacred. Abundant remains of rock art, dwellings, ceremonial sites, granaries, and many other cultural properties throughout the region reflect its historical and cultural significance to the native peoples. In addition to its breathtaking topography and invaluable cultural and paleontological resources, the diverse soils and microenvironments in the area provide habitat for a wide variety of vegetation, which, in turn, support a variety of wildlife species.

The Bears Ears National Monument provides a major source of economic opportunity for the region, attracting visitors from across the world who wish to experience its natural wonders and partake in a variety of outdoor recreation activities, including hunting, fishing, rock climbing, hiking, and whitewater rafting. By passing the legislation under consideration at this hearing – solidifying President Trump’s reduction to the Bears Ears National Monument and establishment of the revised monument units – Congress would be putting at risk a majority of these protected federal lands and their significant contribution to the local economy and to the nation as a whole.

Designation of the Bears Ears National Monument

President Obama's original designation of the Bears Ears National Monument protects 1.35 million acres of land in southeastern Utah. The 2016 presidential proclamation was made following years of public input and various proposals to protect the area, including legislation and a proposal from tribal governments in and around Utah.

A partnership of Native American governments, known as the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, formally called upon President Obama to use his authority under the Antiquities Act to establish a larger 1.9-million-acre national monument for Bears Ears.¹ Nevertheless, the final monument boundaries designated in President Obama’s proclamation reflected a compromise considering the interests of various stakeholder groups, and were confined to the smallest area compatible with the proper care and management of the objects to be protected. Parts of the Red Canyon region, which has an existing mine that produces a concentrated form of uranium, were excluded from the final monument designation following push-back from mining companies which had an interest in the area’s uranium deposits, even though it also contains a trove of Triassic fossils.²

Implications of the proposed boundary reduction for natural and geologic treasures

All areas of the Bears Ears National Monument contain world-renowned fossil sites, many of which are just beginning to be explored, spanning the Pennsylvanian through the Cretaceous Periods that lasted from approximately 320 to 145 million years ago. The central Dark Canyon and Cedar Mesa regions, which are removed from the national monument protected area under President Trump’s proclamation and H.R. 4532, contain scientifically invaluable records of terrestrial vertebrate life prior to the Permian-Triassic extinction.³ Also removed from within the monument’s boundaries, the Valley of the Gods includes some of the earliest vertebrates to walk on land in America, as well as exquisitely preserved leaf fossils and petrified wood, and the Red Canyon region preserves one of the best records of the Triassic-Jurassic transition in the world, providing crucial information for paleontologists seeking to understand how dinosaurs came to a position of ecological dominance in North America.

¹ Bears Ears Intern-Tribal Coalition, “PROPOSAL TO PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA FOR THE CREATION OF BEARS EARS NATIONAL MONUMENT” (October 15, 2015). <http://bearssearscoalition.org/proposal-overview/>.

² Society of Vertebrate Paleontology, Comments on the paleontological resources at the 21 U.S. National Monuments established since 1996 (July 9, 2017). <http://vertpaleo.org/GlobalPDFS/SVP-Repsonse-to-National-Monument-Review-July-2017.aspx>.

³ Ibid.

In a recent statement reacting to the President’s decision to revoke the national monument status for approximately 85 percent of the area protected by the Bears Ears National Monument, David Polly, President of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology, one of AGI’s member societies, explained the importance of protecting the landscape for scientific discoveries: “Some of the first vertebrates to walk on land have been found in the Valley of the Gods region, and packrat middens that reveal the climatic history of the west are scattered across the entire Monument.”⁴ Removing protection from these places where published paleontological research has been conducted opens the possibility that “type localities” – sites where new species were first described – will be ransacked, the geological context of sites will be destroyed, and future research will be rendered impossible.⁵

As such, we recommend that any legislation should support and strengthen, rather than reduce, protections to safeguard the important paleontological and archaeological localities encompassed by the boundaries of the original Bears Ears National Monument designation.

Conclusion

On behalf of our community, representing over a quarter-million geoscientific professionals nationwide, AGI strongly urges the subcommittee to preserve and protect the rich geological, historical, and cultural resources that are present at Bears Ears and that hold immense value to the entire nation. We must continue to protect the Bears Ears National Monument area in order to preserve its cultural, prehistoric, and historic legacy, and to maintain its diverse array of natural and scientific resources for the benefit of all Americans and future generations to come.

Thank you for considering this testimony submitted by the American Geosciences Institute. Please contact Maeve Boland, Director of Geoscience Policy (mboland@americangeosciences.org) with any further inquiries or comments.

⁴ Society of Vertebrate Paleontology, “Broad Coalition Sues to Stop Trump Administration’s Unlawful Dismemberment of the Bears Ears National Monument” (December 7, 2017). <http://vertpaleo.org/Society-News/SVP-Paleo-News/Society-News,-Press-Releases/SVP-files-second-lawsuit-against-Bears-Ears-reduct.aspx>.

⁵ Ibid. “Comments on the paleontological resources at the 21 U.S. National Monuments established since 1996”