

Bear Ears National Monument **Background Information**

By Jeffery D. Nokes

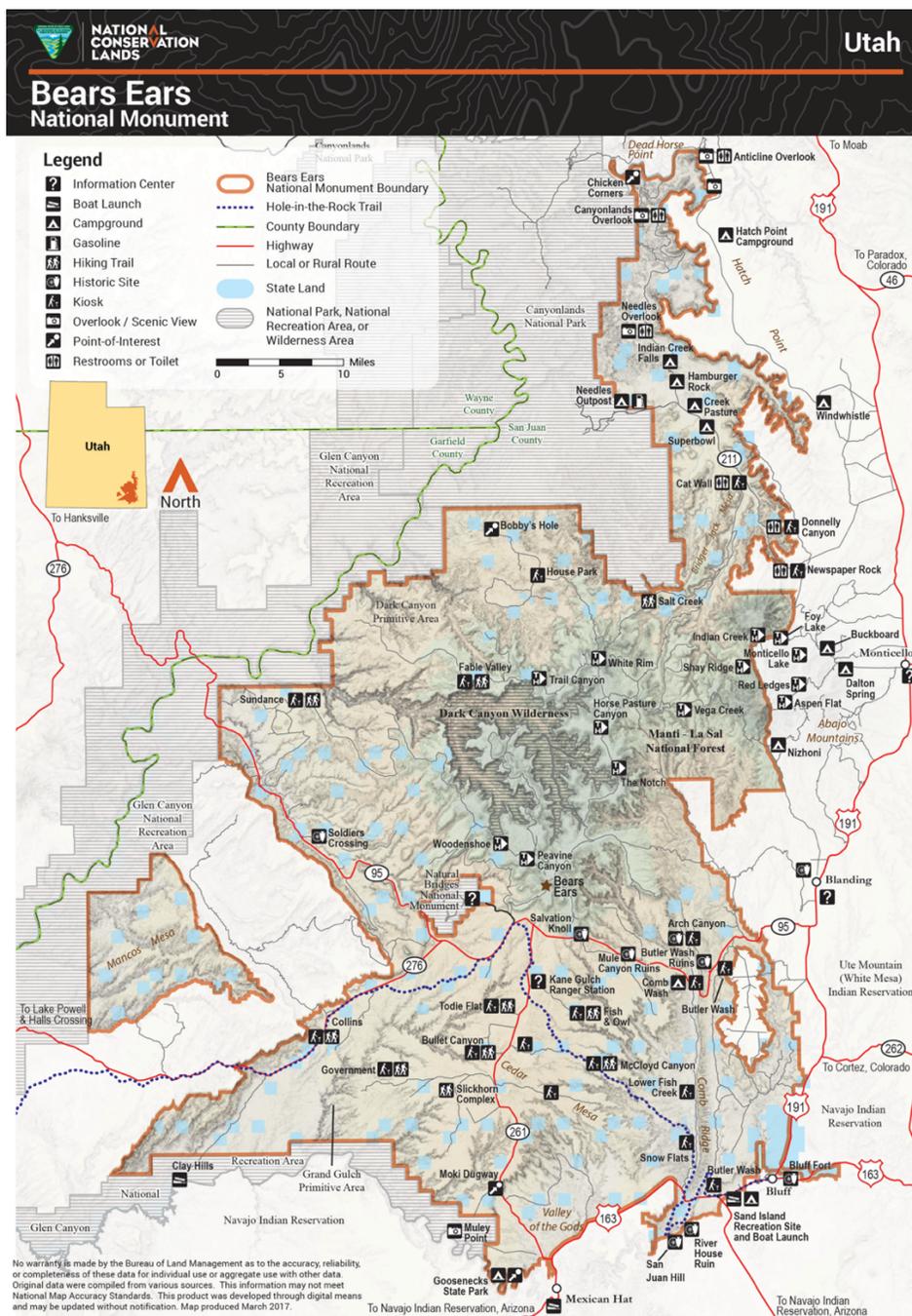
Archeologists have found evidence that people were living in what is today southeastern Utah by 13,000 years ago. Through thousands of years of prehistory, people established campsites, homesites, and villages along rivers and in resource-rich mountains and valleys. They engaged in hunting, farming, and trading. They built homes and storage areas, made baskets and pottery, and created art on the rock walls of canyons. Utah was a cooler and wetter place thousands of years ago, unlike the deserts that can be seen today in southeastern Utah. Then hundreds of years ago the climate began to become warmer and dryer. Communities adapted to the changing climate but eventually a drought became so severe that the people had to leave their homes. Physical evidence and oral histories both suggest that the Pueblo nations of modern New Mexico are the descendants of these migrants. For this reason, the ancient inhabitants of southern Utah are often referred to as the Ancestral Pueblo.

The Ancestral Pueblo people left behind a rich archeological record that included, homes, pottery, baskets, sandals, arrowheads, and scores of other artifacts. In modern times these artifacts have become of interest to many groups. Archeologists use them to study prehistoric people. Modern Native American groups engage in religious rituals in sacred places near ancestral homes. Unfortunately, private collectors have illegally taken artifacts that they keep in private collections or sell for profit. Careless visitors sometimes damage artifacts accidentally or intentionally. The protection of artifacts and ancient homesites is difficult in an area as vast and with such a small current population as southeastern Utah.

In July of 2015, a group of leaders from several Indigenous nations formed the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition and proposed the creation of a national monument to protect the natural and archeological treasures of a large section of southeastern Utah. They named the area after two large buttes that resemble Bears Ears. Their proposal invited the federal government to work with local Indigenous nations to manage and protect the land and its natural and archeological resources. Soon, environmental groups expressed their support for the proposal. But not everyone liked the idea. Many people who lived near the proposed national monument worried that the designation might prevent them from making a living. Ranchers were worried that the area where they kept their cattle might be closed to grazing. People who worked in the oil industry were concerned that oil wells on the land might be closed. Others worried that recreational activities, like hunting and four-wheeling, might be banned from the national monument. The local community near the proposed monument became very divided, with most of the White residents of the nearby towns of Blanding, Bluff, and Monticello opposing the monument and most of the Native Americans who lived in the region supporting it.

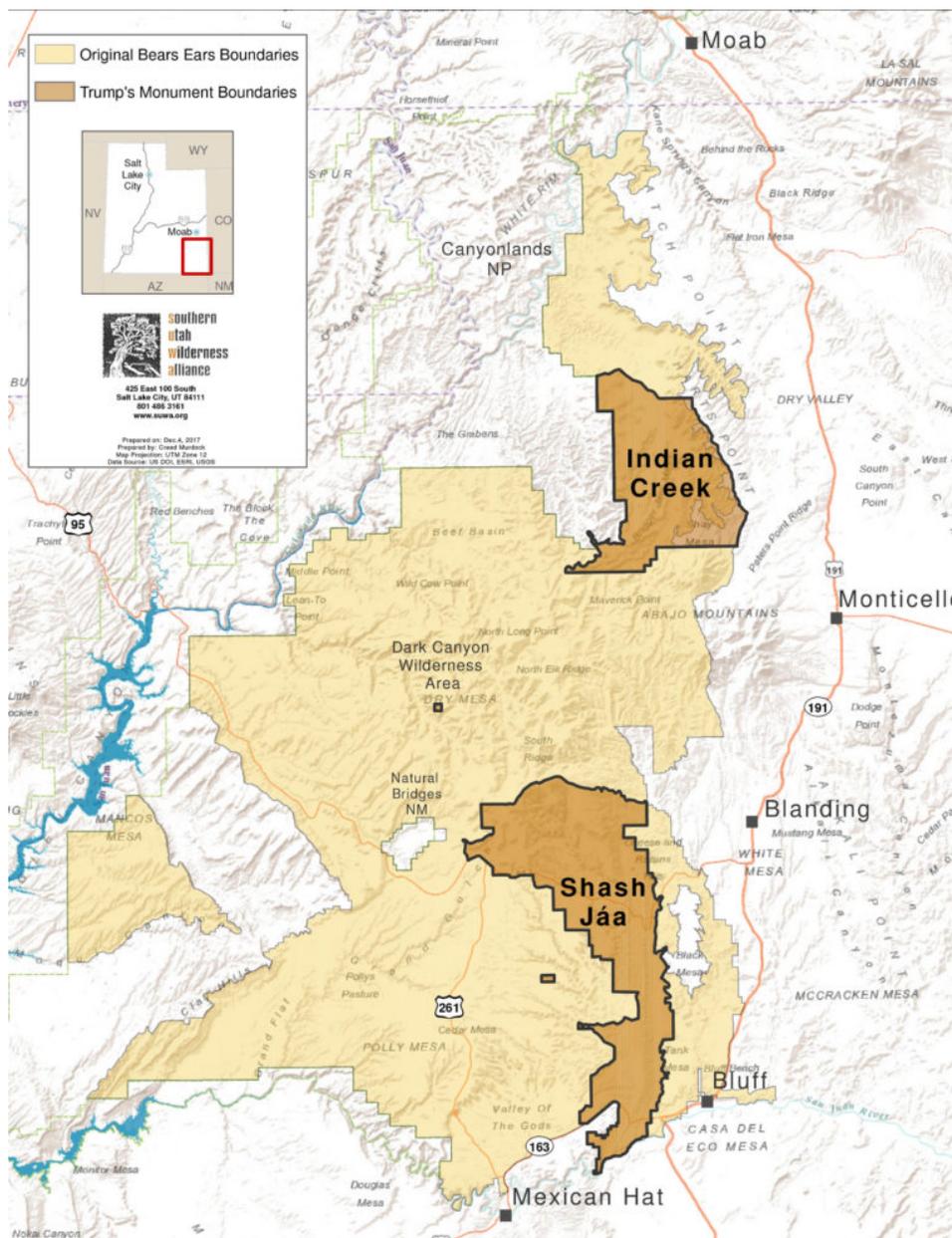
On December 28, 2016, President Barack Obama applied the Antiquities Act to formally create the Bears Ears National Monument. The Antiquities Act gave the president the authority to create such designations in order to protect important natural places. Bears Ears included over 1.3 million acres with over 100,000 archeological sites (see Map 1).

Map 1: Bears Ears National Monument as created by Barack Obama in 2016.



But opposition to the monument did not end with the formal creation of Bears Ears. Local residents of San Juan County, united with representatives of the State of Utah and convinced newly elected Donald Trump to drastically reduce the size of the monument, which he did in 2017. Trump claimed that Obama misapplied the Antiquities Act, which he said limited the president to designating the smallest area necessary to protect the objects at risk. With Trump's order, the area of Bears Ears National Monument was reduced from 1.3 million acres to just over .2 million acres and included only the Indian Creek and the Shash Jaa regions. (See Map 2).

Map 2: Map showing the original boundaries of Bears Ears National Monument and the boundaries as reduced by President Trump.



On October 17, 2021, newly elected president Joe Biden restored the original 1.3-million-acre Bears Ears National Monument that Barack Obama had created. In a lengthy proclamation he described the scenic and historic importance of the region. Today the Bureau of Land Management together with the National Forest Service and several Native American Nations manage the region. But with Biden's proclamation, opposition to the monument has not disappeared.

Is there a way that those individuals who support the monument and those who oppose it might reach a compromise and come to a consensus so that the issue might be settled once and for all?