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President Nez calls for the protection of 1.9 million acres of land under the Bears Ears National Monument in meeting with Interior Secretary Haaland

PHOTO: Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez speaks to U.S. Secretary of the Interior Debra Haaland in support of protecting and expanding the Bears Ears National Monument during a meeting with tribal leaders in Bluff, Utah on April 7, 2021.

BLUFF, Utah – During a meeting between U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland and tribal leaders on Wednesday in Bluff, Utah, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez was joined by Navajo Nation Attorney General Doreen N. McPaul, as he called for the full restoration and expansion of the Bears Ears National Monument to 1.9 million acres.

“It was an honor to meet with Secretary Haaland. It was truly a historic moment to have a Native American woman, serving in such a high position, at the head of the table discussing these
important issues with leaders that represent the First People of this country. Her willingness to meet personally on this issue is meaningful and shows that she is willing to take time to meet with tribal leaders as well as other stakeholders in the Bears Ears region before providing her recommendation to President Biden,” said President Nez.

He added, “This was an opportunity to share with Secretary Haaland the significance of Bears Ears to the Navajo people. This landscape is home to many historical and cultural sites, plants, water, traditional medicines, and teachings for our people. It also provided refuge for our people in times of conflict. One of our most notable leaders, Chief Manuelito, was born there, but it is more than that. Bears Ears is sacred and it deserves to be protected.”

The Navajo Nation was one of five tribes that also included the Ute Indian Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute, Hopi Tribe, and Zuni Tribe that led a coalition to advocate for the protection of the 1.9 million areas known as Bears Ears, located in southeastern Utah, from the threats of looting, vandalism, and energy development. The landscape is the ancestral home of many southwestern tribes and the birthplace of Navajo Headman Manuelito. Tribal nations depend on the land within the region to sustain their traditional livelihoods and cultural practices, such as hunting, gathering, and ceremonies.

On Dec. 28 2016, former President Obama designated 1.35 million acres of land under the Bears Ears National Monument, in accordance with the Antiquities Act of 1906. President Trump later reduced the size of the designation by 85-percent, or 202,000 acres, which continue to be contested in court by several tribes including the Navajo Nation.

“When the Obama Administration designated the Bears Ears National Monument, it involved years of careful and thoughtful discussions and consultations with various tribes and other stakeholders. However, the actions of the Trump Administration to reduce the size of the national monument were politically-driven and completely sidestepped the years of work and support of tribes and other supporters. I wholeheartedly support the restoration of the Bears Ears National Monument and the expansion of it to 1.9 million acres,” said President Nez.

Navajo Nation Attorney General Doreen N. McPaul also voiced her support for the Bears Ears National Monument and added that she looks forward to working with Secretary Haaland and other stakeholders.

“After more than three years of litigation against the federal government to reestablish national monument protections for Bears Ears, we certainly welcome the efforts of the Biden-Harris Administration to prioritize this important matter. Secretary Haaland’s visit signals that the new
Administration treats our culture, history, and way of life with dignity and honor, and respects the Nation enough to hear our views in how to protect Bears Ears going forward,” said Attorney General McPaul.

In 2015, the Navajo Nation Council unanimously approved a resolution supporting the designation. On Nov. 10, 2020, the Navajo Utah Commission also passed a resolution supporting the full protection of 1.9 million acres of land under the Bears Ears National Monument. President Nez said he will continue to support the local communities and officials and looks forward to discussing the Bears Ears National Monument with the Biden-Harris transition team.

Secretary Haaland’s visit also included meetings with other stakeholders and a planned site visit to the Bears Ears area on Thursday.

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