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TOP STORY

Guest opinion: Zinke must protect public lands

ROBERT KEITH Feb 12, 2017



Tribune News Service

Moon House, in southeast Utah, is within the Bears Ears National Monument.

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As co-founder and managing principal of Beartooth Group, a Montana real estate investment firm that restores agricultural and sporting properties across the American West, I have seen firsthand how our national parks, forests, monuments and other public lands drive economic growth.

That's why I am a member of the Conservation for Economic Growth Coalition, a group of investors and entrepreneurs who believe that public access to these public lands lures entrepreneurs to Montana and helps employers here and across the West recruit and retain the talented, driven

people we need to grow our companies and our economy. Our employees work hard and they play hard, and the spectacular landscapes of our public lands provide the inspiration they need and value to give American companies a competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

I want to congratulate Ryan Zinke on his upcoming confirmation as secretary of the Interior. This is an immensely important job for the future of our national public lands and American jobs. I am not only pleased that the president has selected a Montanan for the post, but also one who has taken some courageous stands in the U.S. Congress to protect our national public lands, including supporting the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

I urge Zinke to continue on this path and to work to preserve the integrity of the Bears Ears National Monument. This issue matters to Montana. If we cannot protect the Bears Ears National Monument from a partisan, political attack, what does that mean for our own wild places such as Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks, or the Badger-Two Medicine, or the Smith River, or Bighorn Canyon?

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Led by the Hopi, Zuni, Ute Mountain Ute, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray, and Navajo, and supported by over 25 tribes across the Southwest, the Bears Ears Intertribal Coalition was the dominant force in the designation of these national public lands as a national monument.

The Bears Ears are two prominent buttes that rise high above Cedar Mesa in southeastern Utah, surrounded by a living cultural landscape of mountain peaks, verdant high plateaus and rough-hewn canyon country that is home to cliff dwellings, prehistoric villages, graves and rock art panels of ancestral Puebloan peoples, as well as Ice Age hunting camps. Adjacent to Canyonlands National Park, Natural Bridges National Monument and Glen Canyon NRA, this landscape is significant to all Americans and indispensable to tribal peoples of the Colorado Plateau who continue to rely on these sacred lands as a place of subsistence, spirituality, healing, and contemplation. Efforts to repeal the designation or change the boundaries of the monument would again make it vulnerable to looting and vandalism of its irreplaceable Native American artifacts and many sacred sites.

The Bears Ears region also has a wealth of recreational opportunities. By preserving Bears Ears as a national monument and access to great hiking, hunting, mountain biking, climbing, and off-road vehicle use, we also protect the growing \$646 billion U.S. outdoor recreation economy.

We should be looking to grow new jobs and economic opportunities from our public lands – not aiming to undo the preservation of beautiful landscapes, unravel the protection of lands important to the very identity of Native American tribes, or undercut the health and growth of our innovative companies and the growing tourism and outdoor economy of the American West. I urge Zinke to ignore the partisan attacks intent on undoing the Bear Ears’ monument status.

Robert Keith lives in Bozeman.

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