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Officially known as the Zuni Tribe of the Zuni Indian Reservation

TESTIMONY
OF
THE ZUNI TRIBE

BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES,

LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON
EXAMINING THE HISTORY OF FEDERAL LANDS AND
THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRIBAL CO-MANAGEMENT

MARCH 8, 2022

Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Westerman, and respected members of the Committee, I am Carleton Bowekaty, the Lieutenant Governor of the Zuni Tribe and the co-chair of the Bears Ears Intertribal Coalition. On behalf of the people of the Zuni Tribe, with support from the Coalition, namely, the Hopi Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Navajo Nation, and Ute Indian Tribe, I want to thank you for inviting me to speak on the topic of tribal co-management this morning.

To begin, I would like to respectfully ask the Committee to contemplate how far the arch of Indian relations has bent that while the most enduring policies of Indian removal, bounties for Indian scalps and the painful legacies of boarding schools and criminalization of our language and culture, this arch is now bending in the direction that is very different. Now, remarkably, Presidents and members of Congress, like you, are acknowledging that our millennia-long experience living and perpetuating the environment around us, what some people call “Traditional Ecological Knowledge”, is an important

resource, no longer something to erase or subjugate, in the combined effort to take care of our shared home.

The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition and
the Bears Ears National Monument

For contextual purposes, the Zuni Tribe has almost 13,000 members, the vast majority of which live on tribal lands in far western New Mexico. Our reservation contains 600,000 acres. However, our aboriginal lands, as well as those of our 18 sister Pueblos in New Mexico and the 5 tribes that comprise our Coalition, include the lands that comprise the Bears Ears National Monument. The lands within Bears Ears are part of our history and culture, and even today they play an integral role in our traditions and religious ceremonies. It, along with neighboring Grand Staircase Escalante to the east and Mesa Verde to the west, is part of the Colorado Plateau, the region where our Zuni ancestors lived before migrating southward into present-day New Mexico.

Zuni has been actively involved in the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition since its inception. It is a unique Coalition, one that has remained focused on our mutual interest in ensuring that the remarkable cultural and natural resources found on these ancestral tribal lands are protected and preserved. Zuni recognizes that while the Bears Ears lands, though once controlled and used exclusively by tribes in the southwest, are now federal lands, owned by all Americans. However, the unique historical and cultural ties that southwestern tribes have to Bears Ears must also be recognized and given meaningful voice.

The Bears Ears Commission and
Tribal Co-Management

Today, instead of being removed from a landscape to make way for a public park we are being invited back to our ancestral homelands to help repair them and plan for their resilient future. Instead of

continuing with a policy to erase our language and way of life, we are being asked to apply our traditional knowledge to the ecological challenges (drought, extinction, erosion, etc.) that are daily becoming more prominent and unavoidable. For progressives that like to talk about “restorative justice” what could be more restorative than giving tribes the opportunity to participate in the management of lands their ancestors were removed from.

For conservatives that espouse self-determination and have consistently supported legislation providing tribes the tools to be self-reliant, creating a career path for our youth to become public land managers would establish another pillar in our government’s economically self-sufficient structure. For the Zuni People, tribal co-management gives us the means to fulfill our obligations to the land, to our ancestors, and to our children and grandchildren.

In the context of Bears Ears, a place we all agree, regardless of political affiliation, is stunningly beautiful with diverse terrain and a variety of complex management challenges, from intentional acts of vandalism to the exponential growth in tourism, Zuni along with the other four tribes that comprise the Bears Ears Commission are eager to co-create a Management Plan for the Bears Ears National Monument that will create a more durable landscape that can be enjoyed by everyone for centuries to come.

What is crucial to the success of tribal co-management and I hope to impress upon you, is that this is a brand new arrangement, together, the federal agencies and tribes, are still forging the path to tribal co-management and it will be important to problem solve together, respond to challenges creatively and fine tune the mechanism so that it can function efficiently and mutually support the objectives of each of the co-managers. The Bureau of Land Management and the US Forest Service have many policies and resources for land and resource management from a western point of view. As a Coalition we are developing and finalizing a combined land management plan that is based on, and reflects upon, our collective “Traditional Ecological Knowledge.” This tribally-led combined land management plan will be

utilized by the Bears Ears Commission for incorporation into the Bears Ears Monument Management Plan and planning process.

One of the aspects we are looking for creative solutions to is financing our work as co-managers. Through mechanisms like 638 contracts and cooperative agreements with the agencies of jurisdiction, we want to increase our tribe's capacity to do the work and be good partners to the land management agencies, which, in the case of Bears Ears, are the Bureau of Land Management and the United States Forest Service.

Conclusion

While we are grateful to President Biden for restoring the boundaries of the Bears Ears National Monument, it is now that the hardest work, making tribal co-management function and addressing the management challenges on the landscape, it is only now that the work can finally begin.

Elahkwa for your time today, I am here because our people care enormously about the Bears Ears National Monument and stand united with the Bears Ears Coalition – the Hopi Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Navajo Nation, and Ute Indian Tribe. We, along with our sister Pueblos in New Mexico and tribes throughout our country, express our appreciation for this dialogue and thank you for bringing this important topic up for discussion.