

House Committee on Natural Resources
Hearing on “Forgotten Voices: The Inadequate Review and Improper Alteration
of Our National Monuments.”
March 13, 2019
Suzette Morris, Vice President
Stewards of San Juan County

Thank you, Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Republican Bishop and members of the Natural Resources Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify at today’s hearing regarding the forgotten voices in the national monuments debate.

My name is Suzette Morris and I am a member of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe from White Mesa, Utah. When I think of forgotten voices in the debate over national monuments, particularly Bears Ears, I think of my family, my ancestors, and my tribe’s heritage. We’ve heard a lot today about antiquities and artifacts in need of preservation. My family and I are living tributes to the antiquities of the Bears Ears area.

I am that antique Native American basket that you have held in your hands or seen once in your lifetime. So, you have touched a link in a chain of history that bounds me to a generation for seven thousand years.

I am as sacred as the land my great, great, great, grandfather, Old Posey fought for in 1924. Old Posey, leader of his people, was given allotted lands to about 30 members of his family by Congress. These allotted lands are located a few miles east of the Bears Ears National Monument, in an area called Allen Canyon. This land has been ours for generations. There is no one who cares for the land more than we do. From a young age I was taught to respect and value our lands from my elders. In our community, public lands are our most valuable resource. We use the land for hunting, wood cutting, gathering sage and medicinal herbs, and for sacred ceremonies. Our way of life revolves around respect for the land and utilization of the land.

Expansion of the monument back to the size created by President Obama would once again limit our access to these allotted lands. The descendants would no longer have the freedom to utilize our lands whenever we want. The beautiful pristine, peaceful land full of harmony would no longer be.

There may be lots of rules and customs but having respect for each one of them will help you to understand character and vitality of the people of white Mesa and San Juan county, Utah.

I quote chief Seattle (Duma wash) 1786-1866

“Humankind has not woven the web of life

we are but one thread within it

Whatever we do to the web of life.

we do to ourselves.

All things are bound together
all things are connected. “

There was once a time in our Indian history that was never known to the world where the plains women were powerful warriors. Who rode along the side of their warriors. I may not have come here in such a way as long ago. But I am here to ask in a humble way to let my people keep our traditional ways, which is the key to the open land that my people walked for their Native needs.

When the Bears Ears National Monument was originally made by President Obama, it was a very upsetting day. Our voices had not only been forgotten, they had been silenced by special interest groups funded by Hollywood actors, and by tribes who do not live anywhere near Bears Ears. The leaders of my own tribe did not consult with our White Mesa community, who live closest to the area and depend on the land for survival, before choosing to support the national monument designation. They chose to ignore our voices and supported the Obama monument in secret rather than hearing our point of view. They did not ask us to support the monument, because the majority of us do not.

In a refreshing contrast, President Trump and Secretary Zinke listened to the concerns of the Native people and local residents of San Juan county. Secretary Zinke toured Bears Ears and met with the local people whose voices were ignored by the previous decision. Following this review process, President Trump reduced the monument to a much more reasonable size.

I am hopeful that this right-sizing of the monument represents a clean slate for these lands, as well as a renewed commitment to local input.

It is an honor to be here today. Thank you for listening and I look forward to your questions.