

My Turn

## Support the legal battle to save our national monuments

Rev. Virginia Bairby Rev. Pamela Shepherd

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As Taos pastors and as people of faith, we are deeply concerned about the current federal administration's actions and recommendations regarding our national monuments.

We believe the earth belongs to God, and it has been cared for and protected for thousands of years by native peoples.

Today, many faith and cultural traditions – indigenous and newcomers to Taos – share a common commitment to caring for God's creation and honoring the land. We come to spaces like the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument to be closer to our Creator. Members of the Pueblo gather sacred herbs, Christians gather to celebrate Christ's Resurrection on Easter morning, and people from all spiritual paths stand in the presence of all that is holy and awe-inspiring. This is what our monument means for us: an opportunity to connect to that which is holy.

The Rio Grande del Norte also supports our livelihood.

The Taos economy is fueled largely by tourism, and has experienced economic growth since the monument was established in 2013. Lifting vital protections on the monument will serve the interest of out-of-state energy companies, not Taos citizens. If the monument is degraded and tourism declines, that will hit Taos County hard – not just the 'outdoor industries' (fishing, rafting, mountain biking, etc.), but also restaurants, shops, and all businesses. Less tourism means less business, and less business means fewer jobs. Our community already faces high levels of poverty, homelessness, and unemployment. As Christian pastors to this community, we cannot abide Secretary Zinke's decision, which will only increase these struggles.

When Secretary Zinke visited New Mexico to conduct his 'review' of the monuments, he did not once step foot in the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. He declined meetings with local businesses, public officials, and tribal groups. If he had come, we would have told him what we've said time and time again: This land is sacred, and we need to protect it.

In November, we joined spiritual leaders from many traditions on a delegation to Bears Ears National Monument to learn about the land and the people who hold it sacred, and to pray together for this holy piece of God's good earth.

Bears Ears National Monument is made up of land that is held sacred by five tribes in the Four Corners area: the Hopi, Pueblo of Zuni, Ute, Mountain Ute, and Navajo Nation.

When former Navajo Nation Council Delegate Woody Lee spoke with our delegation, he described how these five tribes, who historically have been at war with one another, came together to protect land that is sacred to them all. The Monument contains petroglyphs and artifacts that tell the stories of their ancestors, canyons and wildlife that are sacred to us all.

Mr. Lee told us that Bears Ears is a place of healing. In 1864, the US government deported Navajo people from Arizona and New Mexico to Fort Sumner, an event remembered as the Long Walk of the Navajo. Many died along the way, and those who survived were rounded up into internment camps at Fort Sumner.

This trauma still resonates, Mr. Lee told us, in the people and in the land.

During the Long Walk, Bears Ears became a refuge.

Many Navajo people escaped to Bears Ears, where they could hide themselves and their families in the winding canyons and survive on stream water and wildlife.

Bears Ears is a place of healing from the generational trauma of the Long Walk and from all the sorrow and struggles that indigenous people have faced and continue to face.

But it doesn't stop there. With its designation as a National Monument, the five tribes offered this sacred land to our whole nation as a place of healing for all peoples, whatever illness, trauma, or sorrow we may hold.

We in Taos who treasure the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument know this to be true. From veterans to Native Peoples to cancer survivors to tourists to people facing any grief or sorrow, the open spaces and beauty of God's creation offer us healing, comfort, and joy.

Since our visit to Bears Ears, the Administration has officially reduced the monument by over 80 percent, and Secretary Zinke has recommended lifting vital protections on the Rio Grande del Norte.

We invite you to join us in contacting our elected officials to let them know you support our National Monuments.

And please consider adding your financial support to the environmental groups and five tribes who have already filed lawsuits to preserve this sacred land. Donations can be made at: <http://bit.ly/standwithbears>, <https://www.gofundme.com/NavajoNationBearsEars>, and <http://utepac.com/donate/>.

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**In November, spiritual leaders from many traditions and congregations, including Taos, met at Bears Ears National Monument to learn about the land and the people who hold it sacred. They oppose efforts by the Trump Administration to reduce the monument more than 90 percent in size and open it to mining and fossil fuel development.**

**Courtesy photo**

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