

Executive Summary

Permanent protection of special cultural, ecological, iconic, and recreational lands and waters in the Southwest is necessary to preserve American heritage. The Southwest's richness of history and culture has far-reaching social and economic benefits including: fostering connections between people and the outdoors, improving mental and physical health, providing new opportunities for people to enjoy recreational activities, and increasing economic growth for regions surrounding these spaces. The designations that protect these spaces vary – national monuments, national parks, national wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, national recreation areas, national conservation areas, and national scenic areas are just some of the many designations that offer protections to the rich spaces that are core to the Southwestern United States.

Because energy production on public lands accounts for almost 25% of all U.S. carbon dioxide emissions, we must do more to strike a balance on federal lands to protect places that should be set aside for conservation. The expansion of our nation's protected public lands helps strike that balance and protects critical wildlife, water, and other natural resources from further development. The long-held concern that using the executive authority to make these designations on federal public lands is an "overreach," looks past the fact that these designations are made on existing federally-managed land.

HECHO currently supports the permanent protection designations of Great Bend of the Gila as a national monument or other protected area and Chiricahua National Monument as a national park. These landscapes in the West are varied in their importance to our history, their ability to protect critical wildlife species, watersheds, and other antiquities important to diverse communities, and they deserve protection.

Challenge

National monuments specifically protect cultural and natural resources and archeological sites on Federal public lands. Through the passage of the Antiquities Act in 1906, Congress authorized the President of the United States to designate national monuments. Over the past 117 years, the Antiquities Act has been used to designate Federal public lands by both Republican and Democratic administrations, protecting such iconic places as the Grand Canyon National Park (originally a national monument), the Statue of Liberty, and Bears Ears National Monument.

Located between Phoenix and Yuma, the Great Bend of the Gila is a beautiful Sonoran Desert landscape with tremendous cultural significance, one of the most significant rock art sites in the Southwest, three historic trails, a backcountry recreation area, and important wildlife habitat and habitat connectivity corridors. Indigenous People have called this region home for millennia, and vibrant communities have flourished there due to the Gila River's life-sustaining waters. The Great Bend of the Gila's approximately 437,000 acres of stunning landscape is one of the spaces deserving of permanent protection.

Chiricahua National Monument, situated in southeastern Arizona, showcases a breathtaking landscape of towering rock formations and diverse ecosystems. Spanning over 11,000 acres, this monument holds significant geological, cultural, and ecological importance. The striking rock formations, known as the "Wonderland of Rocks," attract visitors with their unique shapes and vibrant colors.



25%

Percentage of U.S. carbon emissions that come from public lands

250

The number of times presidents have used the Antiquities Act

100+

National Parks that had their start via the Antiquities Act



Chiricahua is home to ancient lava flows, pristine woodlands, and rare plant and animal species. The area has also been inhabited by Indigenous Peoples for millennia, with a rich cultural legacy. Exploring the monument's numerous trails reveals the rich history of the area. Chiricahua National Monument is a space that is designated a national monument, but would further benefit from the value of national park designation to further promote tourism.

HECHO supports these locally-led efforts and advocates to help realize the goal of protecting these special places.

There is opposition from some groups towards the executive authority granted to the President to designate national monuments by the Antiquities Act. In Utah, this is the case specifically in response to President Obama's designation of Bears Ears National Monument and President Clinton's designation of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The concern of federal government overreach is valid perhaps in other contexts, yet unfounded in the executive authority granted under the Antiquities Act, which has been widely used in a bipartisan matter and is established by law.

Solution

Designating new permanent protections for special lands and waters in the Southwest is a direct means of safeguarding our history, telling a more diverse story of the peoples of this country, protecting invaluable wildlife and water resources, and protecting land from development to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. We must move forward in combating the climate crisis by conserving more of our public lands, and we must do so in a more equitable way that honors racially and ethnically diverse landscapes and antiquities. Permanent protections for Great Bend of the Gila and Chiricahua National Monument are immediate steps in this more just direction that we must accomplish.

Policy Recommendations

- Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Act
- Chiricahua National Park Act

