



23RD NAVAJO NATION COUNCIL OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER

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Navajo Nation calls on President Obama to protect Bears Ears



Photo: Members from the 23rd Navajo Nation Council delivered a letter on behalf of Council to the Utah Diné Bikéyah and Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition supporting the Bears Ears initiative to declare the area a national monument on May 18, 2016 in Monument Valley, Utah. His Holiness Drikung Kyabgön Chetsang (center) joined the members at the event.

MONUMENT VALLEY, U.T. – On Wednesday during a community event in Monument Valley, Utah, members from the 23rd Navajo Nation Council provided a statement to the Utah Diné Bikéyah and Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, regarding the Navajo Nation's official position to urge President Barack Obama to establish Bears Ears as a national monument.

Elected officials from various tribes, Native American spiritual leaders, members from the Utah Diné Bikéyah and the inter-tribal coalition, and local community members gathered to celebrate

the tribes' shared connection to Bears Ears and to respond to the Utah State Legislature's efforts to oppose the tribes' proposal for permanent protection of sacred ancestral lands in southeastern Utah.

At the event, His Holiness Drikung Kyabgön Chetsang, a Tibetan spiritual leader who traveled to Bears Ears in support of cultural exchange with the tribal communities, joined Council members and the coalition to promote the protection of Bears Ears.

In a letter to the Utah Diné Bikéyah board members and the inter-tribal coalition, Council Delegate Nathaniel Brown (Chilchinbeto, Dennehotso, Kayenta) stressed the importance of the cultural exchange with His Holiness and the unification of the tribes to engage in meaningful dialogue to protect Bears Ears.

"The Bears Ears represents an important piece of our history as Diné people, as the birthplace of our leader, Chief Manuelito. The Bears Ears Buttes (Shash Jaa') are part of our identity, our past, our future, and our healing process, and should be protected as a national monument. Your work and efforts have led us to this point," said Delegate Brown.

Council Delegate Davis Filfred (Mexican Water, Aneth, Teecnospos, Tófikán, Red Mesa), who is the appointed spokesperson for the Navajo Nation regarding Bears Ears, said the alliance of Utah tribes exemplifies the strong support for the proposed national monument and its importance to affected tribes.

"Elected Navajo leaders are united in our support of a 'Bear Ears National Monument.' With the overwhelming support of local Navajo people, the Navajo Nation is proud to be working with the Ute Mountain Ute, Hopi Tribe, Zuni Tribe, and the Uintah and Ouray Ute Tribes to secure important protections for lands that represent our shared heritage."

Delegate Filfred added that the Bears Ears area is a unique cultural landscape that is considered sacred by the Navajo and many surrounding tribes, and faces constant threat of land, water, natural resource, and cultural desecration.

The coalition's proposal is supported by Navajo Nation leaders, which include the 23rd Navajo Nation Council, President Russell Begaye, Vice President Jonathan Nez, and several Utah Navajo chapters.

At the beginning of May, Council Delegate Walter Phelps (Cameron, Coalmine Canyon, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Tsidi Tó'ii) said that Navajo leaders sent a letter to President Obama expressing support for a national monument under the U.S. Antiquities Act of the Bears Ears area.

"The Navajo Nation is asking President Obama for a 'Bears Ears National Monument,'" said Delegate Phelps. "This is the first time tribal nations have come together to propose a national monument to protect our cultural life-ways, and we are optimistic that President Obama will respond to the proposal."

Council Delegate Herman Daniels, Jr. (Shonto, Naa'tsis'áán, Oljato, Ts'áh Bii Kin) said the event is a reminder that the Bears Ears area is place of substantial spiritual and cultural significance.

“Bears Ears is a grassroots effort, a cultural effort, and a spiritual effort for the Navajo Nation and our sovereign tribal partners,” said Delegate Daniels. “Our cultural connection to these lands are strong and unwavering, just like the support from the tribal governments. As we gather to celebrate and to share our cultural connections to Bears Ears, our goal is to heal the land and people to mend rifts between all, and to protect our heritage for generations to come.”

In July 2015, community members from five federally recognized tribes – Hopi, Navajo, Ute Mountain Ute, Zuni, and Ute Tribe of the Uinta and Ouray Reservation – created the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition. The coalition delivered its proposal for a Bears Ears National Monument to Congress and the White House in Oct. 2015.

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