



THE WILDLANDS CONSERVANCY

Behold the Beauty

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Key Private Property in Bears Ears National Monument to Be Protected Forever

Conservancy Acquisition Could Set New Standard for Private Lands Conservation in Utah

BLUFF, *Utah*— After a 16-month effort, the most important parcel of private land surrounded by Bears Ears National Monument has been permanently protected by The Wildlands Conservancy. The conservancy owns and manages the largest nonprofit nature preserve system on the West Coast.

The 320-acre Cottonwood Wash property controls access to thousands of acres of the surrounding public lands inside Bears Ears National Monument. The property is critically important to the management of those lands, including access for cultural site stewardship and ceremony, research, restoration, education, hiking and nature enjoyment. It also has enormous biological significance: A spring-fed pond, hanging gardens, and riparian forest along Cottonwood Wash support endemic plants and a variety of resident and migratory birds.

“As soon as we stepped foot on the property and recognized its incredible importance, we were dedicated to saving it,” said Frazier Haney, executive director of the California-based conservancy. “While it is surrounded by Bears Ears, the property was drawn out of the monument’s boundary, so acquisition by a private organization is the only real way to see it permanently protected.”

After years of collaborative efforts among Tribal nations, conservation organizations, archaeologists and other stakeholders, on Dec. 28, 2016, President Obama used his authority under the Antiquities Act to designate Bears Ears National Monument. The

Inter-Tribal Coalition — Navajo Nation, Hopi Tribe, Ute Indian Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe and Zuni Pueblo — played a leading role in advocating for the monument’s protection. Tribal leadership continues in its management, formalized in the signing of a June 2022 cooperative management agreement.

“The entire Bears Ears region is the ancestral landscape of the Zuni people,” said Anthony Sanchez, Jr., head councilman and Bears Ears commissioner for the Zuni Pueblo Tribe and representative of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition. “We are a part of this place because our songs, prayers, and stories connect us to various landmarks across the region. We know our ancestors resided and traveled through here because various places, plants, and rock markings in Bears Ears are embedded in our cultural memory.”

The Wildlands Conservancy closed escrow on the Cottonwood Wash property on July 14. A cultural conservation easement over the land will be created in favor of the five Tribes of the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition. The easement will end future development rights, returning the right of access for ceremony and plant gathering, and providing for co-management of the property.

“The Cottonwood Wash property is an important part of the greater Bears Ears landscape; not only does it hold beautiful scenery, but also instills in time the cultural significance of learning and connection we have as Pueblos,” said Sanchez. “Protecting these connections ensures that our children can have the whole experience, echoing our continuous existence since time immemorial, thereby allowing the protection of our cultural and spiritual values.”

The cultural conservation easement is the first of its kind in Utah and one of the first such partnerships in the nation. It brings together a private nonprofit and Tribal nations, each with a real interest in the property, to protect the land. This builds on many cooperative efforts already established by nonprofit groups and Tribal nations to protect the area’s public lands.

“Because of our unique model of permanent land stewardship that engages visitors and partners, our preserves benefit the public lands that often surround them,” said Dave Herrero, who will manage the preserve for the conservancy. “Over the last year, we’ve been working to cultivate relationships in the region and are humbled by the generous support from more than 200 organizations, foundations, and individuals, for not only the acquisition of the Cottonwood Wash property, but also the future stewardship of the land.”

The town of Bluff, its residents and the Bears Ears Partnership were integral to building momentum and gathering support for the project. Additional funding for the conservancy's acquisition of Cottonwood Wash came from the Kisco Cares Foundation, Earthwalker Fund, Alnoba Lewis Family Foundation, David Kelby Johnson Memorial Foundation, the Conservation Alliance and Grand Canyon Trust.

"The importance of the Cottonwood Wash property can't be overstated. The canyon is not only stunning, it cradles hundreds of generations of human history within its walls," said Tim Peterson, cultural landscapes director for Grand Canyon Trust. "Given that it could have been closed off and peppered with luxury homes, we are grateful that it will be forever preserved and co-managed with the Bears Ears Tribes."

The Center for Biological Diversity was an early supporter of the conservancy's purchase of the property, the third acquisition in recent years in which the two nonprofit organizations have partnered. The Center and other conservation groups sued the Trump administration to protect Bears Ears and intervened to stop Utah's efforts to gut the Antiquities Act.

"We're thrilled to support the conservancy's bold step to expand its preserve system into Utah and build a meaningful partnership with Tribal nations to protect this extraordinary place," said Peter Galvin, director of programs and a cofounder of the Center. "The Center has been fighting for years to safeguard Bears Ears and protecting spectacular Cottonwood Wash is a critical step."

The conservancy is now focused on next steps, including securing the property, providing pedestrian access, planning ecological restoration, and engaging with local partners.

More about the [Cottonwood Wash acquisition](#) is on The Wildlands Conservancy website.

Founded in 1995, The Wildlands Conservancy is dedicated to preserving the beauty and biodiversity of the earth and providing programs so that children may know the wonder and joy of nature.

In working to achieve this mission, the conservancy has established the largest nonprofit nature preserve system on the West Coast, comprising 24 preserves encompassing nearly 200,000 acres of diverse mountain, valley, desert, river, and coastal landscapes. These preserves are open to the public free of charge for passive recreation and host free outdoor education programs for underserved youth.