

For Immediate Release

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**Conservation Groups File Lawsuit after President Trump Illegally Axed
Dinosaur Treasure Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument**

*President's abuse of authority strips protections from iconic dinosaur wonderland in Utah
and undermines 1906 Antiquities Act*

Washington, DC —Hours after President Donald Trump issued a proclamation taking an axe to Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument in Utah, conservation organizations filed a lawsuit attacking the order as an abuse of the president's power. Earthjustice is representing eight organizations in a suit charging that the president violated the 1906 Antiquities Act by stripping monument protections from this national treasure: The Wilderness Society, the Grand Canyon Trust, the Sierra Club, Defenders of Wildlife, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, Center for Biological Diversity, WildEarth Guardians and Western Watersheds Project. The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and Natural Resources Defense Council are co-plaintiffs in the lawsuit and represented by in-house counsel.

"President Trump has perpetrated a terrible violation of America's public lands and heritage by going after this dinosaur treasure trove," said **Heidi McIntosh, Managing Attorney in Earthjustice's Rocky Mountains office**. "While past presidents have used the Antiquities Act to protect unique lands and cultural sites in America, Trump is instead mangling the law, opening this national monument to coal mining instead of protecting its scientific, historic, and wild heritage. We will not let this stand. We will use the power of the law to stop Trump's illegal actions."

The Grand Staircase-Escalante contains dinosaur fossils found nowhere else in the world. Since its designation, 21 new dinosaur species have been unearthed by scientists in the monument, leading some to call these lands a "Dinosaur Shangri-la," and a "geologic wonderland." Grand Staircase holds one of the richest collections of fossils from the Late Cretaceous Period, which gives scientists and the public alike an unparalleled window into the dinosaurs that lived in these lands 10 million years ago. In mid-October, scientists [airlifted](#) one of the most complete tyrannosaur skeletons ever found out of Grand Staircase. These fossils are largely found in the Kaiparowits Plateau, where the coal industry has long [coveted access](#) for coal mining that would wreak havoc on this dinosaur treasure trove that belongs to the American people.

"I'm a resident of Kanab, and there are a lot of local businesses that are completely dependent on tourism related to Grand Staircase-Escalante," said **Laura Welp of Western Watersheds Project, and a former BLM botanist at Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument**. "The entire 'staircase' of spectacular geological layers, with its world-class fossil resources, deserves to be protected intact from the threat of coal mining and other types of commercial exploitation."

President Trump's executive order to revoke and replace Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument came on the heels of a review conducted by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke. Over [2.7 million Americans](#) roared their support for national monuments across the country, and public participation in the comment period was overwhelmingly in favor of keeping these public lands and waters protected just as they are.

"President Trump is attempting an unauthorized remodel of the Grand Staircase, knocking out not only geologic steps but cornerstones of the evolution of species, human history, and our cultural heritage as well," said **Tim Peterson, Utah Wildlands Program Director with the Grand Canyon Trust**. "We've spent 20 years working to preserve Grand Staircase, and now we're asking the courts to help us reconstruct what was torn down today."

"The Trump administration's effort to sell out our public lands is deeply unpopular and goes against American values," said **Michael Brune, Executive Director of the Sierra Club**. "We will work to ensure our lands and waters remain open to the public and protected for future generations to explore and enjoy."

"For more than two decades, through Democratic and Republican Administrations alike, we have worked with the BLM, paleontologists, local landowners, ranchers and business owners to ensure the monument's resources are protected," said **Nada Culver, Senior Counsel for The Wilderness Society**. "This unlawful, short-sighted action by President Trump is an affront to that collaborative work happening and to the benefits the monument provides to research, the local economy, and all Americans."

"Despite the call for public comments, Trump never cared that we, the public, wanted him to keep his hands off our monuments," said **Chris Krupp, Public Earth Guardian at WildEarth Guardians**. "He's not concerned with those of us that camp, hike, fish and hunt. He'd rather give another handout to oil, gas and coal companies."

President Bill Clinton protected the lands of Grand Staircase [as a national monument](#) on September 18, 1996 using the Antiquities Act, a century-old law that has been used by 16 presidents since Theodore Roosevelt to protect some of our nation's most cherished landscapes and cultural heritage. Congress enacted the law in 1906, granting presidents the authority to create national monuments on federal lands to protect significant natural, cultural, historic or scientific features. The Antiquities Act does not, however, grant presidents the authority to diminish or rescind the monument designations of their predecessors.

"Grand Staircase is a cradle of biodiversity and losing even an acre would be a crime," said **Taylor McKinnon of the Center for Biological Diversity**. "Scientists have identified nearly four dozen new species of butterflies here. We must protect this monument's wildlife, stunning landscapes and cultural treasures for future generations. Trump and the fossil-fuel industry have picked the wrong battle."

"If the Trump administration thinks Grand Staircase-Escalante can be sold out without a fight, they're in for a huge surprise," said **Jamie Rappaport Clark, president and CEO of Defenders of Wildlife**. "We'll be seeing them in court."

"The Trump administration has ignored overwhelming support for the monument. It's a punch in the face to local businesses who support it, and all of us who treasure it," said **Shelley Silbert, Executive Director of Great Old Broads for Wilderness**. "Our organization got its start in the Escalante Canyons nearly three decades ago and we've worked tirelessly for proper management of the national monument since its designation. We will fight this illegal action to take any portion of this monument away from the American people."

"Americans from across the nation should be outraged by President Trump's unlawful attempt to eviscerate the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, one of our country's wildest and most scientifically significant federal public landscapes," said **Stephen Bloch, legal director for the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance**, Utah's largest conservation organization. "No one will look back on this decision in 15, 25 or 50 years and say Trump did the right thing by protecting less of this magnificent place. And by promoting this illegal act,

Utah's parochial congressional delegation and local politicians have firmly come down on the wrong side of history.”

After President Clinton designated Grand Staircase, an intricate land swap between the state and federal government was completed. Congress passed legislation modifying the monument’s boundaries in 1998 and then approved a land swap in which the state of Utah received 145,000 acres of mineral-rich federal lands and \$50 million from the federal treasury. That \$50 million has since gone to support Utah’s public schools, and the swap would be [incredibly difficult to unravel](#). The Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration established the Land Exchange Distribution Account to dole out the proceeds from these state-federal trades. At least [27 Utah counties](#) have since received a total of \$441 million.

Grand Staircase-Escalante has proven a [tourism and economic boon](#) for Southern Utah since its designation. Between 2001 and 2015, the population in the two counties bordering Grand Staircase grew by 13 percent, jobs increased 24 percent and real personal income grew 32 percent. Travel and tourism boomed in the region, offering 1,630 jobs around Grand Staircase. In the big picture, recreation from adventure-seekers, hikers, amateur geologists and families simply getting outdoors now funnels more than [\\$12 billion](#) into Utah’s economy.

Resources for reporters:

Read the legal document [\[add link\]](#) for our lawsuit filed with the United States District Court in Washington, D.C.

Earthjustice materials: [“Utah may be trading a dinosaur wonder for a coal mine”](#) and [“Trading fossils for fossil fuels at Grand Staircase-Escalante”](#) video

Headwaters Economics: [Summary of the local economic benefits of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument](#) and economic report [“The Value of Public Lands”](#)

New York Times: [“Utah’s ‘Grand Staircase’ Leads Back in Time to Dinosaur Shangri-La”](#)

More on the Antiquities Act:

When President Theodore Roosevelt signed the [Antiquities Act](#) into law in 1906, he established a legal framework for the protection of national treasures. The law gives presidents the power to designate monuments on federal lands and waters—an authority granted by Congress that has for more than a century protected landscapes of extraordinary cultural, scientific and ecological value.

The Antiquities Act has been used more than 150 times by presidents of both parties.

Every president since 1906—with the exception of Presidents Nixon, Reagan and George H.W. Bush—has used the Antiquities Act to protect iconic places. The law has also been used to protect cultural heritage sites—from Stonewall to Birmingham to Cesar Chavez’s family home—that tell the more complete story of our nation.

The [Congressional Research Service](#) has found that the Antiquities Act does not authorize the President to repeal national monument designations. [Only Congress](#) has that authority. [Numerous legal scholars](#) have reached [the same conclusion](#).

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