

October 10, 2015

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write as historians, archaeologists, ethnographers, other scientists, experts, and leaders who have studied and value the California desert region. We urge you to use your authority under the Antiquities Act of 1906 to designate three new national monuments in the Mojave and Colorado deserts of Southern California: Mojave Trails, Sand to Snow, and Castle Mountains National Monuments.

In establishing these monuments, you will ensure the preservation of endangered desert and mountain landscapes filled with rare national treasures, archeological artifacts, and cultural features. This letter provides an overview of some of these resources that are an important part of our national heritage.

The benefit to designating these national monuments is clear – it will set aside desert and mountain landscapes to help prevent unauthorized theft and damage of those national cultural treasures. These elements belong to all Americans, not simply to those who seek to exploit natural resources, or to pot hunters eager to collect objects, steal funeral objects from burials, human remains, and associated archaeological artifacts placed in personal collections and sold illegally for profit. Significantly, the clues left in these proposed national monuments may provide insights that will help us cope with the current climate crisis, as Native Americans in the region successfully met the challenge of gradual warming and aridity of the desert. Additionally, designating these national monuments will help further our understanding of the region’s history and culture through future research, education, and interpretation.

Long before representatives from Spain, Mexico, or the United States traveled the desert trails, Native Americans traveled on foot across the deserts, traveling to and from their homes, hunting areas, and gathering sites. Along the desert trails, Native American individuals and families often stopped to pray for a successful journey, leaving offerings of stones, sticks, feathers, and foods at cairns. In this way, they asked for protection as they ventured across the desert, often singing “map songs” to help them navigate the arid desert environments. Along the way, the people built geoglyphs and ground figures, often called intaglios and rock alignments. Some intaglios and rock formations commemorated events in tribal history. Contemporary tribal elders say intaglios were (and are) tied to song, story, and personal advancement toward sacred sites.

Early travelers passed by rock art, including pictographs and petroglyphs that served as road signs suggesting maps, animals, plants, sun, moon, stars, songs, stories, geometric figures, and spiritual entities. Generations of desert dwellers and travelers also created cleared circles, rock-lined circles, and indentations in the ground once used as pit houses. Travelers visited village sites where they found fire hearths and rock shelters. Nearby villages and camps, they encountered bedrock mortars, grinding slicks, grinding stones, pestles, stone hammers, chisels, prys, spear-arrowheads, and utensils made of stone, bone,

wood, and clay. These artifacts exist today within the area of the proposed monuments, and these fragile items are in jeopardy of destruction and theft and would thus benefit from the additional protection that national monument status would afford.

We use these trails today and have labeled them Route 66 and Interstates 10, 40, and 15, as well as the smaller roads we travel today in southeastern California. At one time, only Native Americans used trails that took them in all directions across the desert and mountain landscapes. The Old Spanish Trail, Mojave River Trail, Salt Song Trail, and many others crisscross the Mojave and Colorado deserts. During the 1850s, the Corps of Engineers opened new routes in the California Desert based on old Indian trails, including Lieutenant Edward Beale who in 1858 led the U.S. Camel Corps across the Mojave Desert from the Colorado River to Fort Tejon, California.

Contemporary Native Americans enjoy rich creation narratives in song and stories. American Indians know these accounts through tribal oral traditions and practical experiences, traveling ancient trails and visiting cultural sites. Tribal scholars and elders can point to particular desert mountains and identify particular spirits that live there. The Mojave and Colorado deserts contain specific sites where spirits live. They also recognize sites where young people sought their visions and female elders performed puberty rites for young women that they placed in warming pits for coming of age ceremonies and pre- and post-natal care. Contemporary tribal scholars know the sites of former villages, human burials, and cremations. Former generations placed funeral items with the dead, including beads, shells, stone objects, often worked by humans.

The Mojave and Colorado deserts, and specifically sites in the proposed monuments, also contain features and objects related to the spiritual life of Native Americans. These sites have great value to contemporary Native Americans and scholars interested in learning more about the first peoples of the California deserts. The deserts contain the sites of ceremonial houses that served the people like modern churches and decision-making areas. People built structures they considered to be alive with spirit. They also used astrological sites to study the universe and schedule yearly events. Dance Circles exist in the proposed monument areas, sites where people tamped down the earth in circles to sing, dance, and pray. Native Americans left crystals, stone figurines, pottery images, medicine bundles, and smoking pipes that they used in ceremony. Medicine men and women, often called shaman, used sucking tubes as part of their medicine ways to heal afflicted individuals. The deserts contains these medicine items and “dream trails” that people followed physically and spiritually to learn about their purpose on earth. Contemporary Native Americans say that these dream trails provide an avenue the people used to connect with the creative forces that brought the world into being and made the first life on earth. Today, indigenous people visit these areas to gain knowledge or seek power to help others in need of healing.

Additionally, the areas encompassed in the proposed monuments contain many objects associated with the gathering and preparation of food that should be protected through the Antiquities Act. These objects provide great insight into early life in the California deserts. Native Americans left hunting and butchering tools, bone, flakes, scraping knives, agave roasting pits, garden spots, and food processing areas. Indigenous people often placed their villages and camps near springs, streams, and tinajas (natural water tanks). Evidence shows that Native Americans improved access to natural springs, created small dams, and constructed other water features.

Over time, clans owned and used specific desert areas. These areas produced mesquite, chia, ironwood seeds, yucca, agave, cacti, and other edible and medicinal plants. Clans also owned specific hunting areas where they took bighorn sheep, deer, rabbits, game birds, fish, and freshwater mussels (depositing mussel-shell middens on the shores of ancient Lake Cahuilla. Nearby this lake, indigenous people created hundreds of fish traps, still visible on the desert floor.

Native Americans stored their foods in baskets placed in certain areas, which have meaning to contemporary American Indian people since their ancestors used these areas and walked trails to conduct their seasonal rounds and trading ventures. At former village and camping sites, people left arrow shafts, atlatl darts, bows, arrows, processing tools, jewelry, dolls, cradleboards, leadership staffs, lances, baskets and other items made of fiber.

Many objects and features exist that scholars still do not understand. Archaeologists, ethnographers, historians, scientists, and others interested in the rich treasures of the Mojave and Colorado deserts need time to legally collect and analyze objects and examine features that will bring us new knowledge. The proposed monument areas contain many earth surfaces undisturbed by development and contain rich deposits of artifacts and features important for our understanding of the past. Unfortunately, the areas found within the proposed monuments contain objects that have not been covered over by the alluvium and thus are vulnerable to destruction and theft. Physical evidence of the human record is fragile and visible to pot hunters, eager to exploit national treasures on public lands. Archaeological artifacts found in the proposed areas hold secrets to generations of Native Americans who coped successfully with climate change, the gradual warming and aridity of the desert. Knowledge gained by preserving and studying features and objects may help humanity and our citizenry cope with our present environmental warming trend.

Mr. President, you have thoughtfully and carefully used the Antiquities Act of 1906 over the last four years to designate national monuments to protect and perpetuate our diverse national heritage. We hope that, through the same careful consideration, you will also act to protect and preserve numerous significant cultural features and archaeological artifacts in the Mojave and Colorado deserts. We fully support you acting to establish the Mojave Trails, Sand to Snow, and Castle Mountains National Monuments for the benefit of all citizens of the United States and the world.

(Affiliations of the undersigned are listed for identification purposes and do not imply institutional endorsement.)

Sincerely,

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