



CULTURAL RESOURCE DAMAGE IN SOUTHEASTERN UT & BEARS EARS REGION

Sacred Sites Imperiled

The greater Cedar Mesa area is home to more than 56,000 archaeological sites, with the larger Bears Ears cultural landscape holding in excess of 100,000 cultural sites. Destruction of these sites and mass export of Native American artifacts from the Cedar Mesa area was part of the reason for the creation of the Antiquities Act in 1906.

After more than a century, looting and vandalism of cultural resources continues at alarming levels, causing irreparable damage to American history and great disrespect to Native American people.

Dramatic increases in visitation to cultural sites in Bears Ears, combined with a severe lack of resources for effective visitor management also create newer but no less menacing challenges.

Types of Cultural Resource Damage in Bears Ears

Vandalism on our public lands can take many forms, such as intentionally knocking down walls of prehistoric structures, burning historic hogans, self-congratulatory graffiti on rock art, and using petroglyph panels for target practice. Intentionally irresponsible off-road vehicle driving can also cause significant damage to cultural sites.



Bullet holes in petroglyph panel in Butler Wash

Looting is the removal of archaeological resources and artifacts from their historic or prehistoric resting place. Looters steal national treasures for personal gain or pocket rare artifacts for personal display.

Desecration of burials is the most disturbing form of looting. “Grave robbers” dig up burial sites to look for grave goods like ceramics that were buried with the deceased. Grave robbing is a personal affront to modern day Native American descendants.



Looted burial site in Cottonwood Canyon

Careless visitation by uneducated hikers presents a constant threat to sacred sites in the Bears Ears region. Unsupervised children climb on walls, ignorant visitors pocket 1,000 year-old pot sherds, unleashed dogs create erosion around architectural features, fires in alcoves obscure rock art, wannabe ancients grind away prehistoric grinding slicks, and even hiking poles scar surface rock art.



Wall knocked down by careless visitor or possibly a cow.

While these impacts may seem small on an individual basis, they have significant long term effects. For example, some sites that had hundreds of pot sherds on the ground just a decade ago now have no artifacts evident at all.

A Real & Persistent Problem

Vandalized pictograph panel in Grand Gulch
Photo: William Doelle

Between October 2011 and June 2016, the Bureau of Land Management Monticello Field Office **investigated at least 28 incidents** of looting, vandalism and serious damage to archaeological sites in San Juan County. Those are the incidents the BLM is aware of on lands it manages and does not include incidents on Forest Service, Park Service and State Trust lands.

Friends of Cedar Mesa estimates the actual number of incidents over this time frame could easily top 50 events on all public land jurisdictions in San Juan County. In just the **first six months of 2016, Friends of Cedar Mesa is tracking 7 incidents** within the Bears Ears area.

FCM estimates more than **50 incidents of looting & vandalism** in San Juan County since 2011, with **7 incidents in the first 6 months of 2016.**



Looter trenches at pithouse site on Cedar Mesa.



Petroglyph marred by attempted theft with rock saw and chisel.

Recent Examples of Cultural Resource Damage in Bears Ears

- In 2015, three remote sites on Cedar Mesa were the victim of pot hunters digging in burial sites.
- In June of 2015, a reckless visitor pulled down a prehistoric wall at Monarch Cave on Comb Ridge.
- Summer of 2015, significant digging was found in a Basketmaker burial alcove in Beef Basin.
- In January of 2016, locals discovered a petroglyph partially removed from the cliff with a rock saw and chisel near Bluff.

- April 3rd, 2016, rogue ATV riders intentionally tore up a hiking trail, leaving the trail to drive through

two archaeological sites in the Lower Fish Creek Wilderness Study area.

- In March of 2016, rock art in a cave was vandalized by modern signatures.
- In March of 2016, a modern fire ring on Muley Point was found to have been constructed out of building blocks from a 2000-3000-year old habitation site.
- During the winter of 2014/2015, a visitor (or possibly a cow) knocked down a standing wall at Double Stack Ruin on Comb Ridge.
- In 2014, vandalism was found at a 2,000 year old pictograph site in Grand Gulch.
- In 2013, a burial site in Butler Wash was desecrated by looters seeking grave goods.
- In 2012, a historic Navajo Hogan was torn down by campers for use in a campfire.
- In June of 2016, the Wolfman Panel in Butler Wash was vandalized with graffiti.



Hogan destroyed for campfire Photo: Comb Ridge HP