Why is Bears Ears so important?

The Bears Ears National Monument is an internationally significant cultural landscape and a pivotal place in American conservation. Bears Ears is at the forefront of significant national debate about the Antiquities Act, landscape scale protection, preservation of American history, and Native American rights.

Bears Ears is the first national monument specifically created at the request of a coalition of indigenous tribes seeking to preserve ancestral lands, cultural sites, and ongoing traditional uses. These are sacred lands that contain places of immense spiritual importance to many Native American people.

The Monument protects more than 100,000 archaeological sites. In fact, Bears Ears has more cultural sites than any other US National Park or National Monument. These are fragile resources that require special visitor education to ensure they are preserved.

In a very real way, the future of Bears Ears is critical to the future of American conservation. This monument is the epitome of what the Antiquities Act was created to protect. If Bears Ears is defended and its management is successful, all future and current monuments will benefit, while also elevating Native American people in the management of public lands. By contrast, if the Monument’s resources are denigrated due to a lack of educational resources, conservation will be given a black eye for generations. If we truly believe in protecting these lands, we need to take ownership of the on-the-ground education needed for real preservation.
The Biggest Threat to Bears Ears: Skyrocketting visitation

The challenge of under-educated or careless visitors

Bears Ears National Monument is an exceptionally fragile cultural landscape. Not only is the desert environment sensitive, but the archaeological resources are easily damaged and irreplaceable. Threats to these resources including looting, vandalism, grave robbing, and irresponsible motorized use. However, the most significant threat is visitation by uneducated and careless visitors.

Visitation Trend
Cedar Mesa & Comb Ridge

In the decade prior to 2015, visitation to the Bears Ears area easily doubled and likely tripled, without corresponding increases in resources for visitor management and education. Since then, no National Monument in history has ever received more publicity due to the significant controversy generated by Utah politicians. This continuing debate continues to thrust the area into the news. In fact, 2016 saw more visitors to Cedar Mesa than all of 2014 and 2015 combined. And the first half of 2017 saw more visitors than all of 2016. Due to the continuing political debate, significant government resources for a pragmatic approach to this visitation issue are likely a long way off.

Proactive Solution: Bears Ears Visit with Respect Center

While the political and legal fight over Bears Ears will play out slowly over the next decade, the biggest threat to the monument's archaeological resources requires urgent, immediate action. We simply cannot wait for politicians to solve the visitor education crisis.

Our goal is to reach large numbers of visitors with behavior-changing information. We will strategically direct tourists to visitor-ready sites and equip them with practical knowledge about how to visit respectfully and avoid damage to sensitive cultural and natural resources.

Transforming a historic bar into a community-powered visitor center

Friends of Cedar Mesa is working to have a functional visitor center open in Bluff for the Spring 2018 visitor season. The first step is to purchase a historic bar, which is conveniently located on Highway 191. Ironically, the bar was frequented by uranium miners in the 1950s & 1960s. FCM has the building under contract, with an option to purchase the property that expires December 31st.

After purchasing the property, significant upgrades are needed to meet modern code standards and provide visitor bathroom facilities. The building will be transformed into a practical place to provide visitor information in a comfortable and friendly - but not fancy - setting. The Center will also be a great venue for hosting educational events, lectures, and presentations to inform the public.
Inspiring respect for the sacred

Teaching tourists the specifics of how to visit archaeological sites and the land with respect is critical. Bears Ears is not a playground, and special care is needed, beyond basic Leave No Trace principles, to preserve such a sensitive cultural landscape. FCM has developed a first-of-its-kind Visit with Respect tool kit to teach visitors these behaviors.

However, we know we cannot simply tell visitors what to do without providing them with what they want – valuable information about how to enjoy the monument, where to go, and why the area is so sacred to the Native American tribes who worked together to see the area protected.

Collaborating with Tribal leaders

Native American leadership was absolutely essential to the permanent protection of the Bears Ears National Monument. The presidential proclamation that created the Monument initiates a first-of-its-kind process for empowering indigenous people in the management of Bears Ears. FCM is committed to working with and assisting the Tribes as they bring traditional ecological knowledge and good common sense to managing these lands for the benefit of everyone.

Visit with Respect

To accomplish this, Friends of Cedar Mesa plans to work with the Bears Ears Tribal Commission to give the tribes a voice in telling the story of the monument and inspiring visitors to respect. As such, a significant part of the project budget is funding for interpretive displays and materials.

New research from Northern Arizona University shows the service visitors value most at National Monuments is a visitor center with restrooms.

Sustainable staying power

FCM knows the goal of visitor education is a long-term project. New visitors will come every year, and each new visitor needs friendly guidance. While we hope this visitor center will be replaced by a state-of-the-art center for indigenous knowledge sooner rather than later, political and economic realities likely mean FCM will be in the visitor education business for the foreseeable future.

The Visit with Respect Center will employ volunteers, interns, and students to a high degree. However, we know our small community and staff will need professional support to avoid burnout and make the Center sustainable. Part of our project budget includes funding to hire a Center manager for a three-year start up period.

The Visit with Respect Center building will also provide much needed office space for the growing FCM team. Having our offices co-located with visitor center will ensure educational efforts are fully integrated with other FCM programs.
Project budget

The capital campaign to create the Bears Ears Visit with Respect Center is by far the largest fundraising effort Friends of Cedar Mesa has ever undertaken. However, we are optimistic donors and foundations will see the long-term value of proactively preserving the unique cultural resources of Bears Ears and the importance of success of this embattled Monument.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main building (visitor center) purchase</td>
<td>$310,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Auxiliary building purchase (storage + additional office space for conservation partners)</td>
<td>$65,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bathrooms, plumbing &amp; electrical upgrades</td>
<td>$110,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remodeling for visitor center transformation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational/Interpretive exhibits/materials/signs (includes A/V)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintenance, utilities, administration &amp; insurance for 3-year start-up period</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visitor Center Manager staff for 3-year start-up period</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part-time, seasonal visitor center help for 3-year start-up period</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solar installation &amp; energy efficiency retrofits</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total project budget</strong></td>
<td><strong>$840,000</strong></td>
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Bluff, the Gateway to Bears Ears

For decades, Bluff has been the gateway for responsible exploration of the Bears Ears area. The town supports protection and is conveniently located close to tribal partners. It’s the perfect place to interact with visitors and it is home to one of the few buildings in southeast Utah than can be quickly transformed into a visitor center.

Friends of Cedar Mesa: Our backyard needs your help

Friends of Cedar Mesa is uniquely positioned to open the Visit with Respect Center because of our on-the-ground knowledge of local archaeology, our keen awareness of the impacts occurring from visitation, and the Visit with Respect education tools we’ve developed in response. But we’re also a small non-profit based in a tiny town of 100 people. We need support from far and wide to make this center a reality and ensure the Bears Ears National Monument is a success.

Billboards illustrate the difference in attitudes toward visitors to Bears Ears National Monument in Bluff (above) and Blanding (below).