

The Power in Naming: the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition Against the United States

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17 March 2022

Bears Ears National Monument is known as “Utah’s politically contentious southeast corner,” due to the vast cultural and environmental richness in the area (P Company, 2019). The land holds 11 billion tons of oil and gas which led to a reduction of monument designation by 85% under the Trump Administration in December 2017, only one year after it was established under the Obama Administration in December of 2016 (BLM, 2021). The 1.35 million acres reserved by the Obama Administration were still 550,000 acres shy of the area proposed by the Bear Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, the first successful Native American-led campaign for a national monument in U.S. history (BEITC, 2021). Proclamation 9558 signed by the Obama Administration was also the first to name traditional ecological knowledge and protect sacred cultural sites (Sacred Land, 2021). The act of diminishing the monument was a “dishonor to tribal sovereignty and government-to-government relationships” and the “injustice of undoing the monument represents the atrocity, injustice, and pain the Native Americans have endured” (Lopez-Whiteskunk, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, 2017). The Bears Ears Coalition is comprised of the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, and Ute Indian Tribe and are extensions of each Tribe’s sovereign authority who continue to fight to protect the Bears Ears Landscape they call “Hoon’Naqvut, Shash Jáa, Kwiyaqtu Nukavachi, Ansh An Lashowdiwe” in each of their Native languages, respectively. **How is naming significant within the Tribes of the Bears Ears Coalition and how can it be used as a weapon against their communities?** Naming connects communities to larger relationships and cultural systems of kinship (Baca, 2018). Respecting the Native American namings of Bear Ears drastically switches the narrative surrounding the area as evidenced by a google search.

The right to self-definition and autonomy is frequently lost in Indigenous communities and the degrading process of renaming through mispronunciation, anglicization, or complete

imposition of a new name can be seen consistently throughout journalistic pieces in support and arguing against the Bears Ears Coalition (Bucholtz, 2016). Naming allows the rhetor and the content they present to be culturally recognizable as a social subject (Bucholtz, 2016, pg. 280). Historically, Native Americans were stripped of their names under colonialism and through processes of racial subjugation and could only identify with their given names in ingroup cultural contexts (Bucholtz, 2016, pg 282). These instances signaled the loss of fundamental human processes and self-determination of naming oneself (Peweward, 2008; pg. 2). The Tribal members within the Bears Ears Coalition are frequently collectivized as “Native Americans” and not recognized by their individual Tribes and subsequently, their unique stories and identities to the land are homogenized and diminished. For example, the Navajo people believe the Bears Ears buttes are a shrine to protect Diné (Navajo) while the Zuni people utilize the buttes as a touchstone to pay respect to their ancestors (Enote & Nordhaus, 2018), (BEITC, 2021). The loss of their Tribal names tied to Bears Ears is the loss of their identities and cultural practices within the region. Within the namings of the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, and Ute Indian Tribe are unique stories that require separation from one another to share, experience, and feel.

A “Bears Ears Starter Kit” is offered on visitutah.com and highlights the ancestral cliff dwellings and principles of respect, but also mention “no matter [Bears Ears] designation, no matter how you say it, Bears Ears combines profound human past with distinctive and sacred lands” (LUE, 2021). However, it *does* matter how you say it because the ancestry of the area is still alive and well and home to modern-day cultural ceremonies and traditions. The travel website reveals the rhetoric of empty words, performative activism, and the ease of diminishing culture and tradition central to Indigenous communities. An excerpt from the 2016 Bears Ears

National Monument Presidential Proclamation asks, “What’s in a name? A name is important to the identification of one’s being and existence in their respective cultural and social systems they come from.” Following the reduction, the Trump Administration renamed the monument “Shash Jáa” and Tribal officials repeatedly said it was an insult, not an honor, to choose one Native language over the others and to reduce the land to 142,337 acres (Smith, 2018).

The Salt Lake Tribune also asked if Trump was trying to divide Native American Tribes by renaming the monument (Maffly, 2018). Former Interior Secretary, Ryan Zinke, told the Tribune that they consulted with the “Navajo” living in the area and they “asked for it” and certainly wouldn’t object to having a native name rather than Bears Ears. Contrary to his belief, each Tribe separately chose the names that translates to “Bears Ears” with different stories and legends within their oral traditions about the Buttes. The only common association between the Native names, Hoon’Naqvut, Shash Jáa, Kwiyaqtu Nukavachi, Ansh An Lashowdiwe is due to the physical geography of two neighboring buttes in the area which resemble the ears of a Bear poking its head above the horizon and the bear is significant within each of their Tribes (BEITC, 2021).

Even amid political contention, Bears Ears remains a place of refuge and safety to the coalition. Many Navajos sought shelter under the Buttes after American frontiersman Kit Carson placed a brutal and violent siege of the Navajo Nation’s southern lands, forcing them to relocate. The rugged landscape protected the Navajo Nation and represents the resistance against colonial invasions today. The Ute Mountain Ute and Ute Indian Tribe also sought out the area for protection after off-roading vehicles had depleted irreplaceable cultural resources and disrupted their livestock in other regions. The Ancestral Puebloan groups, the Zuni, identified their ancestral presence in the area through rock art, ceremonial plants, and cliff dwellings. Notably,

the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, and Ute Indian Tribe have established their footprints, homes, kivas, cliff dwellings, and poetry that represent the stories deeply connected to Bears Ears today for thousands of years (BEITC, 2021).

Place-as-Rhetoric is foundational to Native American oral tradition and inseparable from naming (Schmitt, 2015, pg. 5). The Bears Ears battle over monument designation landed in federal court and was on its way to the Supreme Court before the Biden Administration restored the monument to the 1.35 million acres protected under the Obama Administration, plus an additional 50,000 acres. However, mining claims staked during the reduction still threaten the area, which may lead to a Supreme Court case questioning a breach of the Antiquities Act. Utah's congressional delegation including Governor Spencer Cox and former Governor Gary R. Herbert criticized the monuments as being federal government overreach (Yachnin, 2021). The Antiquities Act allows presidents to, "set aside existing public land as monuments to protect areas of cultural, scientific or historic interest," however, the land must "be limited to the smallest area compatible" (Congressional Research Service, 2019). In the interest of mining, Utah legislatures aim to prove that sacredness within Bears Ears can be preserved, even if specific Tribal cultural sites are no longer available.

This would not be the first time that Indigenous Communities vs. the US/State have entered the Supreme Court battling over land rights and usage. In 1971, the result of *Alaska v. Native Village of Venetie Tribal Government* led to the enactment of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, which extinguished all aboriginal claims to Alaska land after the Native Village of Venetie Government sought to collect taxes from non-tribal members doing business on tribal land. (Oyez, 1998). The unanimous opinion decided that the Tribe's land did not satisfy the

requirements for ownership and could not be claimed as “Indian Country” therefore stripping the respondents of their land usage rights.

The case of Bears Ears demonstrates the importance of space through stories told by Tribal leaders as they aim to prove that the destruction of their land is the destruction of their identity. Shaun Shapose, Chairman of the Ute Indian Tribe Business Committee and Inter-Tribal Coalition on Bears Ears Representative details:

Our creation story never begins any place else. I’ve been protecting this land long before this was a state. But only through sovereign governments, elected officials, can you have a government-to-government discussion, and that’s what the Bears Ears Coalition represents. Our value system is unique. What you may see as a weed, I may see a medicinal plant. These are cultural differences, and the part of Bears Ears that was unique was, that was actually for you and for me to better understand each other. It wasn’t about just protecting the artifacts, it wasn’t just about protecting the rights of the indigenous people. It’s a living landscape. It has a pulse. It has a heartbeat. We all see it in different eyes, but we all have an obligation to protect it.

The power of place, identity, and connection to a native landscape for Indigenous communities rely on the shared English name of “Bears Ears,” and different Native namings are not typically spoken by Indigenous speakers representing the coalition. As a way of connection, Native Americans saw a need to exclude the significance of naming to a general audience outside of written text, most likely recognizing the rhetoric enlisted by visitutah.com and the Trump Administration, among many others, to reduce the power in naming. However, the Bears Ears

Coalition vehemently refers to Bears Ears in each Native language on their website and shares the stories that connect each Native American community to the region through storytelling. Deliberate decisions to use common names to reach a larger audience occur frequently within Native American rhetorics, and can be an appropriate strategy if chosen by a rhetor within the community (Peweward, 2018, pg 3).

Ultimately, the value of naming at Bears Ears must be assigned by members of the Inter-Tribal Coalition and their decision should be honored as would be expected with any European-American name. The Bears Ears fight over monument designation is more than land rights, more than naming, and words. The injustices unfolding at Bears Ears are battles of identity for the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, and Ute Indian Tribe. The definition of each Tribe is often collectivized to only mean Native Americans when in reality, they were Native to the land long before America was ever established and operate as separate community groups. Monument designation is not just about who physically owns the land, it is about the proper representation of identities, cultures, and stories as they exist within each separate Tribe. The weaponization of renaming or dismissing the names of each Tribe is the main factor contributing to the suppression and dismissal of voices within the Coalition today. Shaun Shapose has sacrificed the importance of his Tribal name to connect to non-Indigenous citizens who identify with “Bears Ears,” but he cannot lose his identity and sovereignty connected to his Tribal name through his efforts to unify communities around him.

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