



# National Monuments Are a Missing Piece in Biden’s Equitable Conservation Agenda

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## Introduction and summary

Nature and access to public lands are inequitably distributed across the United States. Communities of color are three times<sup>1</sup> more likely to live in an area deprived of nature than white communities. Despite a steep increase<sup>2</sup> in visits to national park sites over the past year, data from the past two decades show that visitors remain overwhelmingly white.<sup>3</sup> The history of segregation,<sup>4</sup> displacement,<sup>5</sup> and exploitation on U.S. lands has been a catalyst for inequity in land access and use. Furthermore, U.S. national parks, monuments, and other public lands preserve an imbalanced collection of cultures and stories.

The choice of whose history to commemorate in land conservation is one of the most visible representations of today’s nature gap.<sup>6</sup> Sites such as Stonewall National Monument, Bears Ears National Monument, and the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad National Historical Park paint a richer and more complete history of the United States while documenting the stories that are currently untold.

While previous administrations have made progress on this front, a new analysis finds that just one-quarter of national parks and monuments are dedicated to telling the stories of diverse communities. In recent years, protections for these sites have come to a damaging near standstill. While President Joe Biden ambitiously works to protect 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030, the administration is not doing enough to address inequities in past, present, and future land conservation.

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### **Defining ‘underrepresented communities’**

*For this analysis, “underrepresented communities” are defined as minority subsets of the U.S. population who have historically been unequally represented compared with their white counterparts. Groups included in this study are American Indians/Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, Black Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, Cajun Americans, women, and LGBTQ Americans.*

However, President Biden has the ability to name more representative sites via the Antiquities Act, a uniquely accessible tool for quickly actualizing community conservation without the slow approval process of Congress. President Biden should take swift action to designate culturally significant lands, such as Castner Range, as national monuments under the Antiquities Act. Making the outdoors more inclusive to people of color cannot be done without designating more national monuments to tell the history of underrepresented communities.

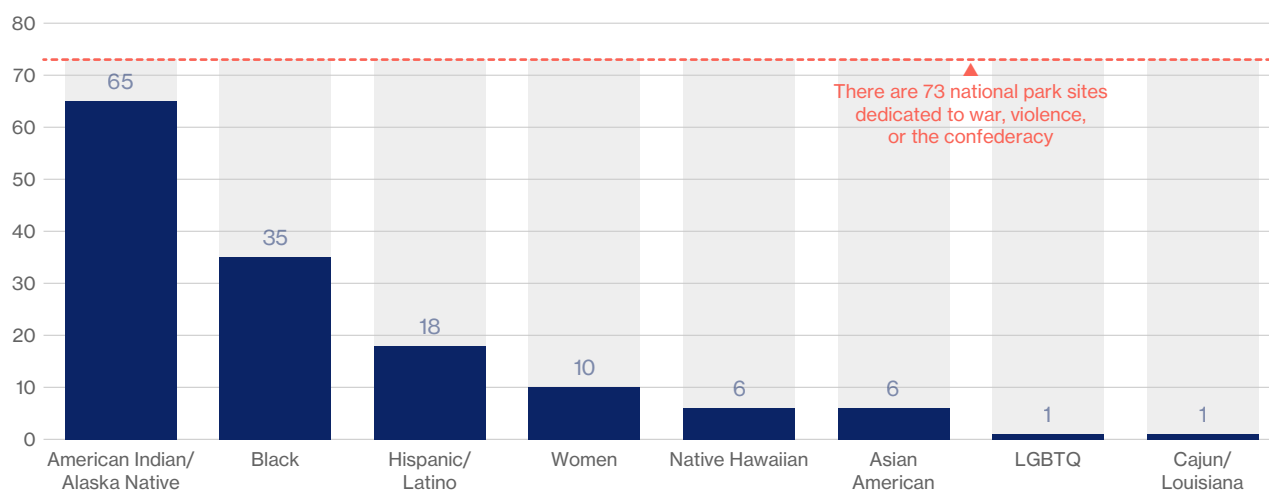
## Inequality and imbalance in the distribution and protection of nature

National parks and monuments are protected for their historical and scientific significance, and they are visited for their beauty, biodiversity, and cultural significance. However, the protection of many of these sites has come from the interests of historically white-led institutions. A comprehensive examination of 526 national park sites found that only 24.3 percent have a primary purpose of documenting historically underrepresented communities.

FIGURE 1

### There are more national sites dedicated to preserving military history than to documenting historically underrepresented communities

Only 24 percent of national park sites were designated with a primary purpose of documenting historically underrepresented communities



Source: National Park Service, "National Park System: Units/Parks," available at <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/national-park-system.htm> (last accessed June 2022); National Parks Conservation Association, "Monuments Protected Under the Antiquities Act," June 8, 2021, available at <https://www.npca.org/resources/2658-monuments-protected-under-the-antiquities-act>.

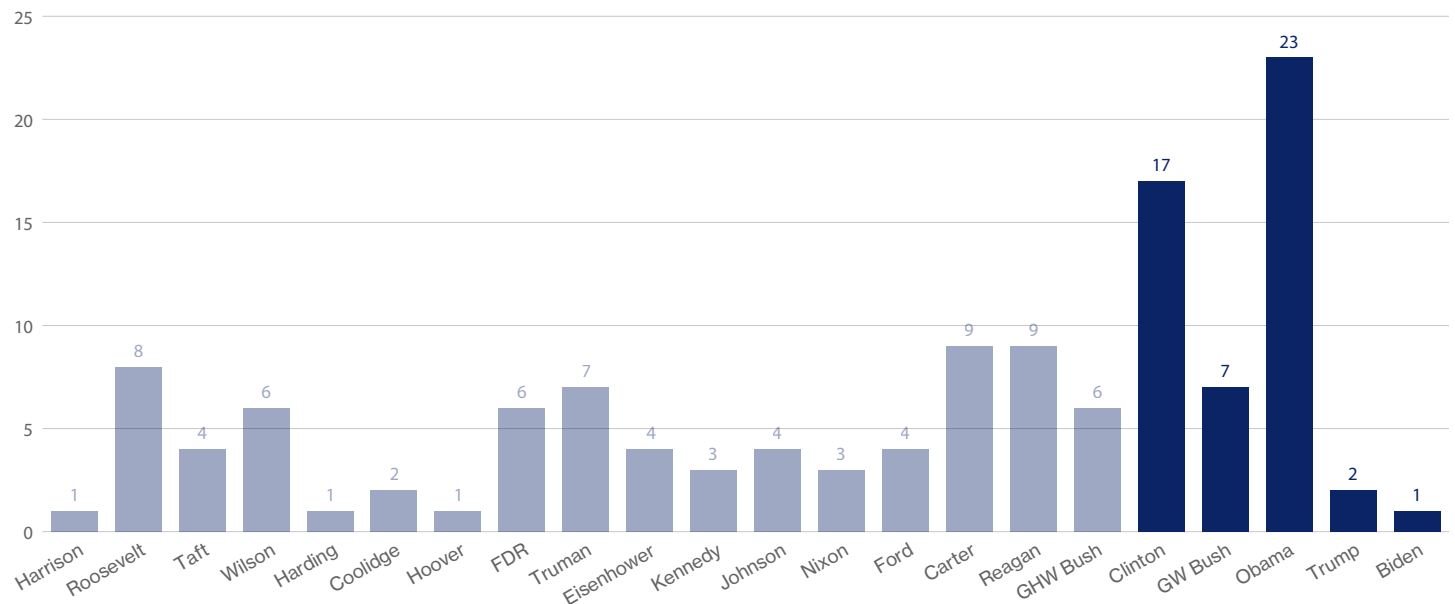
As it currently stands, public lands do not proportionally represent U.S. demographics, with Asian, Black, Latino, and LGBTQ Americans, and women all represented at less than half of their share of the U.S. population. While most Americans hold at least one minority identity, few monuments tell their story. There are more national

sites dedicated to preserving white Americans’ military history—often honoring and perpetuating violence against marginalized groups—than to any of the community groups studied. By prioritizing the nation’s history of brutal conflict over the place-based cultural significance of underrepresented communities in the designation of national monuments, U.S. history and lands remain divided.

FIGURE 2

**The number of presidential designations that document underrepresented communities has increased over time**

Average rate at which presidents have protected these national sites has tripled since 1981



Source: National Park Service, "National Park System: Units/Parks," available at <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/national-park-system.htm> (last accessed June 2022); National Parks Conservation Association, "Monuments Protected Under the Antiquities Act," June 8, 2021, available at <https://www.npca.org/resources/2658-monuments-protected-under-the-antiquities-act>.

The use of presidential power to designate national monuments that tell the story of underrepresented communities has increased over time, and some presidents have attempted to establish a more representative American history on national protected lands. Data from this analysis found that the average rate at which presidents have protected these national sites has tripled since 1981.

However, after peaking during the Obama administration, these types of inclusive historic designations were backtracked under President Donald Trump, who significantly rolled back<sup>7</sup> protections for Bears Ears National Monument. Thus far, President Biden has restored three monuments whose protections were rolled back by the Trump administration and oversaw the protection of the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historical Park<sup>8</sup> and the establishment of Amache National Historic Site.<sup>9</sup> However, the needle has barely moved since the Center for American Progress last conducted<sup>10</sup> a similar analysis in 2016. Despite the administration’s ambitious 30x30 goal and a commitment to closing the nature gap, there has been little progress toward inclusive designations.

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## Why the Antiquities Act is an effective tool for the job

Signed into law in 1906 by President Theodore Roosevelt, the Antiquities Act grants presidential authority to designate national monuments. It was the first law in the United States to establish<sup>11</sup> a national historic preservation policy, making it an essential policy tool for heritage preservation and historical storytelling. Created out of the need for the expeditious protection of lands with scientific or historical significance, it has been used by 18 presidents of both parties to proclaim 158 national monuments.<sup>12</sup> It is worth acknowledging outright that all public lands—including national monuments—sit on lands violently dispossessed from Native Americans and that the Antiquities Act, as a tool of colonial conservation, did not always serve as the equitable tool of land protection that it can serve as today. Public lands are, in essence, Tribal lands, as seen by Tribes. Although many communities of color are not being recognized for their history or presence in conservation and national monuments, Tribes are still being misrepresented and left out of the discussion, due in large part to a lack of knowledge regarding Tribal sovereignty.

However, more recently, the Antiquities Act has been used to tell the story of historically underrepresented communities in the United States. It has helped protect more than 40 percent of all representative monuments, and over time, it has been used more frequently to designate monuments for underrepresented communities. It is a crucial presidential tool for bridging the gap in storytelling that has been biased toward white history and top-down conservation.

The Antiquities Act serves as an opportunity to actualize community conservation. New monument designations can be a critical vehicle for local advocacy efforts and for the government to engage underserved communities early on. For example, the formal protection of Chimney Rock<sup>13</sup> in Colorado is attributed to the work of the local community, including dozens of Tribes and Pueblos;<sup>14</sup> business owners; archaeologists; tourism and conservation organizations; county commissioners; the mayor of Pagosa Springs; and bipartisan members of Congress. This community action signaled to President Barack Obama that the area urgently needed protection as a monument. This type of engagement, which authentically engages the community for which the land tells the story, is necessary for Antiquity Act designations.

Monument campaigns, which appeal directly to the president, are more straightforward for the public to engage in than the more bureaucratic forms of conservation that involve tracking the *Federal Register* or waiting for bipartisan efforts in an increasingly gridlocked Congress to prevail. Moreover, voters favor executive authority to protect national monuments, with nearly 70 percent of Western voters<sup>15</sup> in support. The inception of national monument campaigns in many places reflects the priorities and desires of underrepresented communities. This should become the standard model. Even now, local Tribes, businesses, campaigns, and locally elected officials across the country are calling on President Biden to use the Antiquities Act to name new national monuments.

But authentic and robust community involvement in national monuments cannot end at their designation. Communities surrounding new monuments should be regularly included in the management of their lands. The Antiquities Act must continue to engage communities in dialogue about land conservation in order to build equity and justice-based relationships.

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## Opportunities for the Biden administration

Stark underrepresentation in national monument designations suggests a valuable avenue for more inclusive land protection. Already, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland enacted a secretarial order<sup>16</sup> to review and rename derogatory place names in an effort to ensure that the titles of federal lands honor the groups they represent. However, the Biden administration has more opportunities to expand the stories and histories that national public lands tell. President Biden should designate more representative national monuments and ensure they are properly managed.

### Designate national monuments

There are several community-led campaigns worthy of national monument status. One such site, Castner Range, has been endorsed by Monumental SHIFT,<sup>17</sup> a coalition aimed at repairing historical inequities in place-based conservation and identifying diverse, community-led monuments with the hopes of honoring sacred lands and better representing the United States. The designation of these sites could serve as an initial opportunity for President Biden to increase equity in the pursuit of the America the Beautiful initiative.

#### *Castner Range*

Located in the largely Latino and low-income El Paso, Texas, the 7,081-acre Castner Range<sup>18</sup> is valued for its ancient cultural deposits and rock imagery, as well as historic military importance. Secretary Haaland visited the site on March 26, 2022, to hear from the grassroots organizations leading the monument proposal. Rep. Veronica Escobar (D-TX) has also called on President Biden to use the Antiquities Act to protect Castner Range.<sup>19</sup>

There are countless other sites across the country with strong community advocacy efforts calling for national monument designation. In places such as the Springfield Race Massacre Site<sup>20</sup> and Numu Newe,<sup>21</sup> support is seen in the form of bipartisan legislation,<sup>22</sup> media columns authored by Tribal leadership,<sup>23</sup> community advocacy, and more. These are just some examples of culturally valued, community-led conservation sites that deserve national protection and would serve as good starting points for the Biden administration to equitably apply the Antiquities Act.

## Monument management

As essential as it is to designate more representative national monuments, their management—and proper funding—is equally important in order to ensure they are durable. Monument co-management between federal agencies and Tribes is one way to fight the continued erasure of Native history and significance on U.S. lands. One recent example is the finalized co-management partnership<sup>24</sup> between the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service, and the five Tribes of the Bears Ears Commission for Bears Ears National Monument. This co-management will allow federal organizations and community stakeholders to build shared priorities and engage in collaborative decision-making. The commitment to collaboratively manage a monument honors the origins and cultural significance of public lands while ensuring that communities who rely on these lands are able to access and utilize them. The Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument Expansion Act,<sup>25</sup> which has been publicly supported by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management,<sup>26</sup> would lay the framework for Tribal co-management of the culturally significant California monument.

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## Conclusion

To honor community conservation efforts and begin to resolve inequities in the stories told by the country's national parks and monuments, President Biden should utilize the Antiquities Act to meet and exceed President Obama's legacy in the designation of national monuments for historically underrepresented and excluded communities. Through fierce advocacy, communities across the nation continuously make it clear to the administration what stories they want told through their protected lands. To continue to grow as a justice and equity-oriented administration and to meet 30x30 goals, more land designations are urgently needed. Use of the Antiquities Act will assist President Biden in his continued effort to champion environmental justice and tell a more complete and accurate account of American history.

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## Methodology

The authors created a database of the 526 sites<sup>27</sup> managed by the National Park Service, categorized by location, purpose of designation, community represented (if any), year and presidential administration,<sup>28</sup> and whether they were designated using the Antiquities Act. The purpose of designation was determined through review of monument campaigns, site history and significance, and press release details published upon designation. These clarified data were utilized to quantify the underrepresented communities recognized in monument designation, as well as the increase in presidential designation of national monuments that honor underrepresented communities using the Antiquities Act.

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