Introduction
Landscapes are not only shaped by wind and water, but by words. Thirty years ago, in 1996, President Bill Clinton used the power of words to issue an executive proclamation that established the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

With this single act of declaration and carefully chosen words, 1.9 million acres of land under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management became protected as a national monument. The proclamation came directly from Clinton without bypassing any of the local and state government officials.

In 2016, President Barack Obama used a presidential proclamation to create the Bears Ears National Monument. With this proclamation, approximately 1.35 million acres were designated as the first national monument that is co-managed by a coalition of five Native American tribes and the BLM.

In 2017, President Donald Trump shrank the Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears national monuments by nearly 50% and split the Grand Staircase into three units.

In 2021, President Joe Biden restored both monuments' boundaries to their original size.

In June 2026, President Trump shrank both monuments once again, but this time by 90%. Bears Ears is currently 121,000 acres while Grand Staircase is about 181,500 acres.

The Antiquities Act, established in 1906 by President Theodore Roosevelt, was created to stop looting and vandalism occurring on Native American historic sites.

Roosevelt believed that the president should be able to create a monument without going through Congress in order to protect the area and resources more immediately.

Additionally, according to the congressional summary of the act, the president is required to reserve "the smallest area compatible with the proper care and management of the objects to be protected."

According to the Conservation Alliance, following the creation of The Grand Staircase, jobs in the area grew by 51%, mostly due to tourism and outdoor recreation positions.

With the proclamation, millions of acres containing unique plant life, wildlife and Native American artifacts, became protected. It was the last place in the contiguous U.S. to be mapped during the 1870s by explorer John Wesley Powell.

"The region hosts an array of unique and unusual plant species that are adapted to living in odd soils and harsh conditions," said Jackie Grant, the executive director of Grand Staircase-Escalante Partners "Native bee species abound by the hundreds, which means that the area is a hotspot for biodiversity and pollination services. Native American tribes call the

area home and are deeply connected to their ancestors, the signs and structures left by their ancestors and their non-human living relatives in the landscape."

Additionally, the area is used for scientific research because of its unique landscape and ecosystem.

"The monument's 1.9 million acres generate and purify water that travels to the Colorado River and Lake Powell," said Grant. "Light pollution is minimal across the landscape, which draws stargazers and astronomers from all over the world. The land provides services that range from the dust control by soil organisms to the study of deep evolutionary history."

Some express differing opinions on the creation of the monument.

Layne and April LeFevre are Garfield County locals who work for the Red Canyon Transit shuttle system in Bryce Canyon National Park. They also own a cattle ranch located within the monument's original boundaries. Layne is the shuttle manager, and April drives the shuttle throughout the week and owns a private tour company.

"My family has been in this area since the mid 1880's," Layne said. "We own 740 acres of private land located in the monument boundaries. With the creation of the monument, we felt like our hands were being tied and that we were losing the land that we had been stewards over for over a hundred years."

The LeFevres were affected in a negative way by the proclamation. When the monument was established, they were given an ultimatum on their family cattle ranch, requiring them to return the land to the government in 100 years.

"Frustration and disbelief were my first reactions because the declaration of the new monument was not transparent," April said. "We now watch the monument continue to be a political pawn, being reduced only to then again be returned to the original size, by leaders who most likely have never stepped foot in this area."

Due to the creation of the monument, foot traffic, especially from tourism, increased exponentially. The Grand Staircase's proximity to Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks is partly the reason for the increase.

Acts of vandalism have also increased since the 1996 proclamation. In 2005, in the southeast section of the monument, the Willow Tank Springs Cabin was intentionally burned down. It was one of the last completely intact line shacks remaining in the Western U.S.

"I remember spending time there while my dad was gathering cattle," April said. "He spent a lifetime being a steward over this God-given land by improving water sources, reseeding and rotating grazing land. To me, those who have been using this land know it best and care for it

the best. While millions of visitors come to explore slot canyons or other amazing points of interest, they do not always have a reverence or respect for this shared-use land."

Similarly, the Paria movie set was rebuilt by county residents in 2000 after it was destroyed by flooding. Six years later, the replication of the movie set was burned down by a suspected arsonist, but no one was ever caught.

"Putting a big X on the map has done nothing but increase the number of people in the area along with the abuse and vandalism," Layne said.

"The next biggest change has been the increase of visitors to the monument region," April said. "For years, many visitors come to this vast area thinking that they will see a 'staircase' land or rock formation, only to find millions of acres in between some very beautiful highlights."

"We have had people lose their lives because they come to the monument unprepared for the heat, 4x4-only roads, or even without enough water and food," April said. "Because our EMTs and paramedics in our county are all volunteers, managing the massive monument and responding to emergencies is an impossible feat and strains resources and personnel."

Regulations on the land within the borders of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument have increased significantly, particularly for the ranching community.

"Before the creation of the monument, we as ranchers could make improvements on our grazing permits (including) waterlines, water troughs, reseeding projects and vegetation control," Layne said. "Once the monument was created, we were not allowed to do anything, so the land has become overgrown with sagebrush, juniper and pinyon pine trees, crowding out the feed for deer, elk and livestock. Our permit went from 84 cows to 62 in a good year, but most years it is at 50%, so 42 cows on an 84-head permit."

Many grazing permits were bought out by the Grand Canyon Trust due to high expenses and strict regulations on range infrastructure and herd numbers. Most of the ranchers had occupied the land and held permits for over 100 years, predating the BLM and the monument itself.

The designation of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument through presidential proclamation reshaped the landscape, local life, culture and economy. Through the power of proclamation, the monument divided the community into a battle over protecting cows or canyons.