Sacred and Threatened
The Cultural Landscapes of Greater Bears Ears
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Ancient North America was a fully inhabited, socially integrated, multicultural tapestry. Visitors today may see the Greater Bears Ears as some of the last wilderness in America, but in the ancient past it was a human wilderness. Space—large expanses of it—is crucial to understanding the cultural resources of the region. Every place was used, and even places of slight use were symbolically charged with imagery on the rocks. Time, too, is bigger than we think. America’s history is over 430 human generations deep, more than 13,000 years. This is also represented in the Greater Bears Ears landscape.

Images on stone are conveniently, but misleadingly, collapsed into the term rock “art,” which risks turning a name into a thing. Then those particular “things” become isolated from the social tapestry of the ancients and a supernatural world that may only be understood on landscape scales over deep time. Surely all of us can take inspiration from the individual panels of imagery, but our modern boundaries of reality and names hold little logic for the past without knowing something about the societies who lived those pasts. That knowledge may only come from a collaborative anthropology, and a broad context of space and time, not just from the rock art itself. Thus, from a management perspective, the context, breadth, and expanse of the Bears Ears as a region are necessary for visitation, education, and science.

As for rock art as a cultural resource, it is not a distinct phenomenon to be understood in isolation. Nor are rock art images unique to the individual artists who created them. The ancient images are physical referents of a social geography, and as such they reflect a historical dynamic. Rock art is not frozen in time, with each panel amenable to a particular interpretation. The intent of the original maker may fade as rock art is supplemented or altered by later artists living in dramatically different times. Even when rock art remains in its original form, future users and caretakers interpret the meaning of the rock art for their own times, regardless of the heritage or ethnicity of those subsequent users and caretakers.

Neither archaeological cultures nor rock art are badges for a “people.” Instead, it is best to think of them as expressions of peoples over time. Multiple artistic expressions may be adopted and reworked through interactions among peoples, especially during times of cultural change. Thus, the dynamic of rock art reflects persistence and reformulation of society, iconography, and ideology among peoples over spans of time that transcend the lives of individuals.

In order to know the rock art of the Greater Bears Ears, one must know something about the lifeways of the different peoples who have interacted with this landscape over the millennia. Archaeologists have given those groups names, but those names are not a real thing—in the sense that they are archaeological cultures, defined differently than the way people actually saw themselves or the languages and dialects they spoke.

The expanse of space and time represented in the rock art of the Greater Bears Ears evokes a fundamental reminder that rock art was integrated into the societies of the ancients, and these were societies with an ideological perspective unfamiliar to Western, modernist sensibilities.

The ancestors are alive, history is with us now, and the past is with us in the present.