

National monument status for Sedona is flawed in many ways

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The proposed Sedona Verde Valley Red Rock National Monument is a bad idea. A monument status will increase tourism, yet is designed to protect the area from the impact of tourism. It can't do both.

There are a host of reasons why the monument proposal is a poor idea and will fail:

The monument is ill-timed to succeed and will not be ready to be signed into permanent law by the time President Barack Obama leaves office.

The area is not uninhabited and untouched, but rather one occupied by a bustling city under no threat of mining or destruction, but rather just from heavy use. No current official higher than some Sedona City Council members have backed the proposal.

In July, U.S. Rep. Paul Gosar [R-District 4] maneuvered Congress to block funds to federal agencies from being used to manage monuments in Western states where there is a public debate over land management, so even if Sedona's monument is approved, funding would not just be hard to secure, but actively blocked.

Monument status will not protect American Indian sites.

The national monument's keystone is to prevent vandalism at American Indian heritage sites. In 2015 alone, there have been more than 50 cases of vandalism at existing national monuments, ranging from paint, etching, carving, graffiti and arson defacing petroglyphs, historic buildings, statues, plaques, graves, ruins and tombs.

Short of rangers permanently stationed at every ruin in the monument area, vandals can strike regardless of the sign at the entrance. A name change does not stop vandalism.

Additionally, archaeologists have not come out in support in part because status does not protect any sites without more funding.

Monument management is problematic.

There are 117 national monuments in the United States. Of those, only seven are managed solely by the U.S. Forest Service and none surround a city like Sedona with millions of visitors a year. The USFS is not pushing for national monument status, so it's uncertain if forest managers have the budget or resources to take on the added responsibilities under a national monument.

If Sedona residents and the U.S. Forest Service want to make changes to forest lands, such as new trails, we work mostly with the Red Rock Ranger District staff in the VOC, occasionally with Coconino National Forest staff in Flagstaff and rarely with the Southwestern Region staff in Albuquerque, N.M. Under monument status, we would also have to include bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., many of whom have never set foot in Sedona, let alone know the will of our rural community.

The Red Rock Ranger District is already short on funds to manage Sedona's forests, hence the reason groups like Keep Sedona Beautiful and Friends of the Forest volunteer to clean up local lands.

The monument faces an uphill battle to garner local, state and national support. It not only lacks public support but faces overwhelming opposition.

At the first presentation with Sedona City Council, proponents asked for an immediate vote of support, which council members bristled at without more information. If approval eventually comes from Sedona City Council, it will be later rather than sooner.

There is no need for change, according to the proponents themselves. The current management plan of land use, recreation and property rights is apparently working so perfectly well that the monument proponents state they will not change any aspect.

So if nothing changes at all and the system works, then why demand a change into a national monument?

We have yet to hear a legitimate, detailed and rational argument in favor of a national monument other than "wouldn't it be nice if" platitudes. Perhaps in a few years, with grassroots effort, overwhelming public support and robust debates, some similar proposal may be possible, but this is not the time.