

# Over 150 Scientists Speak Out Against Attempt to Overturn Protections for Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument

For Immediate Release

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Today, over 150 scientists, researchers, and scientific organizations sent a [letter](#) to Congress and the Department of Interior in defense of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, North America's unparalleled living laboratory. The letter calls on members of Congress to vote no on impending Congressional Review Act (CRA) legislation ([H.J.Res.151](#) / [S.J.Res.109](#)) that would overturn the 2025 monument management plan.

Grand Staircase-Escalante, established as a national monument in 1996, has been nicknamed the "science monument." Its stratigraphy, fossil record, ecological diversity, and cultural resources make it indispensable to scientific discovery and a testament to our shared history as a nation.

The CRA legislation, introduced by Utah's Sen. Mike Lee and Rep. Celeste Maloy, is the first attempt to use this blunt legislative tool to attack a national monument. Under the CRA, both chambers of Congress can expedite their votes and pass the measures by simple majorities. If that happens and the resolution is signed into law by the President, the [2025 Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Management Plan](#) – which sets expectations for how the land will be managed for wildlife, outdoor access, dark night skies, grazing, and other uses – will be undone.

The [letter](#) from the scientists states, *"As scientists, researchers, and educators from across the United States, we write to reaffirm our deep concern regarding threats to the scientific integrity, management, and long-term protection of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. Specifically, the Utah delegation's reckless gambit to toss out the monument's management plan using the Congressional Review Act risks not only the scientific objects of interest within the boundaries, but also the future of research and scientific discovery in this unique landscape."*

Guided by input from the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument Advisory Committee ([GSENMAC](#)), the 2025 plan at risk included input from scientists representing the fields of geology, botany, wildlife biology, archaeology, paleontology, education, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, history, social science, and ecology. Use of the CRA would overturn a carefully developed framework that governs how the monument is managed for scientific study, conservation, recreation, and cultural protection.

**Stuart S. Sumida, President, Society of Vertebrate Paleontology, said,** *"This proposed legislation would cause irreparable damage to Utah's, until now, pre-eminent position as one of the world's most important centers of dinosaur and other paleontological research. Further, this proposed legislative trickery is a shortsighted landgrab that will damage the burgeoning ecotourism industry which holds the potential for hugely positive impact for the state of Utah and the American West and it demonstrates an enormous lack for respect for the indigenous groups that have supported the establishment of Grand Staircase-Escalante and other national monuments."*

**President of the Paleontological Society, Rowan Lockwood said,** *"Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is one of the greatest windows into Earth's past anywhere on the planet. Scientists are making extraordinary discoveries there — from dinosaurs and ancient mammals to entire ecosystems we never knew existed — and those discoveries are only possible because this landscape has remained protected and scientifically managed at a large scale. Using the Congressional Review Act to dismantle the monument's management plan would put world-class scientific resources that belong to all Americans at risk. It sends a deeply troubling message about the value our country places on science, stewardship, and America's public lands."*

**Stephen E. Nash, President & CEO, Archaeology Southwest, said,** *"Archaeology Southwest is honored to have worked with Grand Staircase-Escalante Partners (GSEP) on a special 2019 issue of our flagship publication, which included many fervent voices from the diverse community around and about Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument and, most importantly, from Indigenous contributors speaking about their homelands. Grand Staircase-Escalante — known as the "science monument" — holds so many histories, memories, and meanings, and*

*we're proud that we helped share them with the public in an accessible format. In the process, we learned just how much this place means, and we will always help fight for it."*

**Dr. Bradley K. Esser, retired scientist from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, said,** *"The Colorado Plateau in my home state of Utah is special to me and since moving to California, the GSCENM is where I return for inspiration. The current management plan is strong and is in good hands - I have worked with the park ecologist on innovative and simple methods to prevent erosion on burnt over land. Rejecting the plan in favor of mining for low-grade minerals and fossil fuels is stealing from the American people and theft of an irreplaceable resource for very little and very short-term gain."*

**Jacqueline Grant, Ph.D. Executive Director, Grand Staircase Escalante Partners, President of the Utah Native plant Society, and former Professor of Biology and Geosciences said,** *"Western science and Indigenous ways of knowing are important parts of the American identity. These approaches to understanding life, society, and Earth are reflected in the 2025 Resource Management Plan for the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The Plan thoroughly establishes the Monument as an outdoor laboratory where multiple ways of knowing and understanding our world can be undertaken by the curious and imaginative people who have had the will to immerse themselves in southern Utah. Indeed, the scientific impact of the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument is felt far beyond its boundaries because of the innumerable books, articles, stories, and specimens shared with the world. The Plan provides the guidance needed to protect scientific and cultural treasures and opportunities, while allowing for multiple uses and the continued existence of the features of the Monument that warranted its initial designation. Using the Congressional Review Act (CRA) to remove or revise the Plan is a step backward for science and understanding because it injects uncertainty into Monument management actions. Using the CRA is a step forward for wasteful spending of taxpayer dollars because it forces the country's legislators to squander time on this relatively niche issue instead of addressing their constituents' real needs and concerns. Grand Staircase Escalante Partners maintains that, while not perfect, the 2025 Plan was the most acceptable management outcome for science and Indigenous ways of knowing that could be attained given the many competing interests in the Monument."*

**Julian Reyes, PhD., Chief of Staff, Union of Concerned Scientists, said,** *"The wide variety of scientific research conducted at Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument into millions of years of Earth's history provides us with vital insights into our present and future. The Monument's exceptional landscape must be preserved and federal policies must protect, not jeopardize, the valuable scientific inquiry underway there and the richness of its cultural history."*

**Dr. Keith Watts, Retired Asst. Professor of Geology, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Boulder, Utah, said,** *"As a former Education Representative of the GSENM (2011-2018), I think that using the CRA to overturn the GSENM Management Plan would be a terrible mistake. The CRA was established to review and modify new administrative rules so they wouldn't be harmful to small businesses. Land Management plans apply existing rules to protect archeological resources and such. Having Congress step in at the eleventh hours to overturn years of careful review and compromise of the GSENM Management Plan by a broad range of stakeholders would be detrimental political manipulation aimed to benefit a few special interests and would spoil our ability to properly manage of our public lands."*

**Project Eleven Hundred, Mary O'Brien, PhD., Executive Director, Castle Valley, Utah, said,** *"With 660 native bee species growing up in their nests and pollinating the rarest and commonest of flowers in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, we humans have a moral responsibility to protect them as essential workers in their lands. Use of the Congressional Review Act on Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument would threaten species whom we barely know and whose only home - or only remaining home - is on the Monument."*

**Mark Leckie, Department of Earth, Geographic, and Climate Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst, said,** *"The Late Cretaceous age coastal deposits and offshore marine muds of the GS-ENM have provided new insights into an interval of extreme warmth and oxygen deficiency in coastal ecosystems associated with Oceanic Anoxic Event 2, a globally recognized ocean-climate perturbation about 94 to 93 million years ago. NSF funding and collaborations between multiple US universities and the USGS have generated new high-resolution records of microfossils, biomarkers (molecular fossils), stable isotopes of oxygen and carbon, which have revealed dynamic changes of*

*relative sea level, photic zone euxinia, climate cyclicality, and ocean circulation. Importantly, these valuable geological records from south-central Utah have been correlated with other select high-resolution, well-preserved sedimentary and geochemical records from around the world to provide a more comprehensive understanding of climate dynamics during an ancient time of global warmth."*

**Stephen Trimble, author of "The Sagebrush Ocean" and "The Capitol Reef Reader," Torrey, Utah, said, "Grand Staircase-Escalante's vast, interdependent, and unbroken landscape protects all the "objects" worth preserving (as required by the Antiquities Act). No telling which "object" might be the key to resilience. Using the CRA to overthrow coherent management devastates our relationship with this astonishing landscape that has revolutionized paleontology and nurtured the souls of countless visitors."**

**Joel Pederson, Fort Collins, Geosciences Department Head, Colorado State University, said, "I was honored to play a small part in the open process of developing the current science-based management plan for Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument(GSENM) through service on a federally appointed advisory committee. That plan is in imminent danger of being nullified by Utah politicians. Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument contains one of the most complete and spectacular sedimentary records of the Mesozoic Era as well as intact ecological and geological processes for us to learn about, while also hosting grasslands and recreation lands and ceremonial lands that underpin the local culture and economy. The 2025 management plan was created in extensive consultation with local, state, Tribal, and scientific partners and lays out the multiple types of use and access across the monument."**

**Len Broberg, PhD, Biology and Professor Emeritus, Missoula, Montana said, "I just returned from three days in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. During my visit, the critical scientific value of the National Monument was emphasized. From unique, high scientific value fossil deposits, to irreplaceable archaeological and cultural sites, to critical populations of plants that may yield medical discoveries and provide knowledge to deal with our planet's increasing temperatures, the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument has rare and vital scientific value to benefit human communities. These resources are found throughout the Monument and should continue to be protected."**

**John Anderson FLS, W.H. Drury Professor of Ecology/Natural History, College of the Atlantic, said, "Grand Staircase Escalante is of tremendous importance to all Americans for three primary reasons: the wealth of fossils and geological formations found in the area provide us with a unique window into deep time, it serves as a remarkable "teaching laboratory" for Geology, Ecology, and the Natural History of place, and, finally, it is a place of stunning beauty and awe that should cut across any partisan divide. I have taken Maine students to Grand Staircase multiple times because I can think of no other place that presents such an array of lessons waiting to be absorbed by rising generations. Where else can you find petroglyphs from the original human inhabitants juxtaposed with the signatures of Mormon pioneers, near rocks that contain Jurassic fossils? Once you have become immersed in the cavalcade of a history that reaches across millenia, you can climb to the edge of the escarpment for a view unparalleled in this continent. Time after time students leave Grand Staircase with a deep sense of humility and awe. As one student put it "here, I can see forever."**

**Christa Sadler, geologist, paleontologist, and author, Flagstaff, Arizona, said, "As a scientist, I know that Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument is unique in the world for its scientific resources, from dinosaur fossils to endemic plants and an astonishing diversity of bees and other pollinators. People come from around the globe to study and learn here. But the monument is also unique in the world for the diversity and beauty of its landscapes, and people also come to recreate and savor the extraordinary nature of the land. Our responsibility as citizens of this country is to protect and preserve this land for the benefit of all, not reduce those protections at the behest of or for the profit of a very few."**

**Georgia Lattig, University of California, Amphibian Disease Research Technician, Mammoth Lakes, California said, "I visited GSENM during my undergrad while taking a course that explored land use and management, public policy and conservation in the West. I will never forget the passion of the paleontologists we spoke with and our encounter with deep time there: brushing my fingers across the imprint of dinosaur skin in rock and placing my foot in an**

*eons-old footprint. It is a land of history and fossils, burgeoning with discovery and wonder. The monument has a lot to teach us. To protect it is to safeguard both future discoveries and past lessons."*

**Daniel L. Dustin, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, University of Utah** said, *"The controversy over Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, a 'geologic wonderland,' epitomizes the clash between the advance of the Western industrialized world and a vanishing landscape of unspoiled vistas. What will become of it depends on the will of the people."*

**Gary Nabham, Franciscan Brother, Sacred Plants Biocultural Recovery Initiative, Patagonia Arizona**, said, *"Let anyone in Congress who really cares about the sanctity of Creation pray for forgiveness the rest of their lives if they fail to safeguard the sacred landscape of Grand Staircase-Escalante. For many of us, it is an expression of our religion to dwell there in sanctuary, and that right is protected by the Constitution. Unless your version of the Creator God is someone who only dwells inside buildings--something Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus would disagree with you about--you'd better step up and demonstrate your reverence for Creation."*

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## **Background**

Grand Staircase-Escalante, established as a national monument in 1996, is understood to be one of the most important living laboratories in North America and has been nicknamed the "science monument." Grand Staircase-Escalante's stratigraphy, fossil record, ecological diversity, and cultural resources make it indispensable to scientific discovery and a testament to our shared history as a nation.

Research in the monument continues to yield extraordinary findings including previously unknown species; fossils from the monument have also revealed unique ecosystems from the Late Cretaceous period, including highly diverse dinosaur communities; and new insights continue to be found about climate change, evolution, extinction dynamics, planetary science, archaeology, biodiversity research, and dark-sky science.

Yet despite its global scientific value, shifting federal actions — including boundary reductions and restorations of the monument — long-term planning for research and funding have been difficult. Previous efforts to reduce the size of the monument and fragment the protected landscape jeopardized hundreds of scientifically important fossil sites and active research areas.