

THE STORIED PAST AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF
AMERICA'S NATIONAL MONUMENTS

THIS CONTESTED LAND

A photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, a large yucca plant with many long, pointed leaves is illuminated by warm sunlight, casting long shadows. Behind it, the dark, jagged peaks of the Superstition Mountains rise against a clear blue sky. The lighting suggests either sunrise or sunset.

MCKENZIE LONG



Q&A WITH MCKENZIE LONG

Author, *THIS CONTESTED LAND: The Storied Past and Uncertain Future of America's National Monuments*

Q: WHY IS THIS CONTESTED LAND IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW?

A: I was writing this book when then-President Donald Trump initiated a review of twenty-six national monuments that culminated in the modification of two popular national monuments in Utah and the removal of fishing restrictions on a marine monument in the Atlantic. It felt extremely urgent to tell the stories of these often-misunderstood places as they were losing protection. President Joe Biden has now restored all three monuments that Trump altered, and things feel safer on the surface, but I think these land issues are still urgent. Disagreements about how monuments should be created and managed still simmer, and it is possible that the next administration will further modify the same monuments. I don't think these issues have been resolved, and as a people we need to think more deeply about the ways that we value and relate to the land and what we want our future relationships to the land around us to look like.

The climate is changing rapidly. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change just released a report stating that we need to make drastic and urgent changes right now to maintain livable conditions on this planet. Scientists believe that one part of the solution is to protect and conserve much more land in the coming years. President Biden and Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland have been promoting a "30x30" plan to protect thirty percent of American land and water by 2030. National monuments could be an incredible tool to reach this preservation goal. I suspect that national monuments are going to become even more important and be more discussed in the years to come.

Q: WHAT IS A NATIONAL MONUMENT AND HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM A NATIONAL PARK?

A: The first thing that comes to mind for many people when they hear the term “national monument” is a statue or memorial, but this is not what I discuss in this book. Sometimes statues, such as the Statue of Liberty, are classified as national monuments, but most national monuments are actually park-like natural land areas.

Even though they are similar, national monuments differ from national parks primarily in the way they are created. Congress approves national parks by vote, which requires broad public support. Under the authority of the Antiquities Act, a president declares national monuments by proclamation. This does not require consensus and therefore can be done more quickly.

Congress establishes national parks to protect remarkable landscapes, with emphasis placed on scenic beauty and tourism. National monuments are established to protect something specific, and, unlike a park, this protection is prioritized over tourism.

Q: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO FOCUS YOUR BOOK ON NATIONAL MONUMENTS AS OPPOSED TO OTHER TYPES OF PUBLIC LAND?

A: National monuments are often overlooked or forgotten; national parks get almost all the public land attention. When I began this project, I couldn’t find much written about monuments, yet I was fascinated by their complex and layered stories.

National monuments bring the most difficult and important debates about public land to the forefront. Since they are created without a vote, almost every time one is designated there are some people who are thrilled and other people who are furious. Similar arguments occur with every monument over the importance of conservation versus the economic value of using the land for mining, logging, or development.

Each monument raises important questions about who the land really belongs to. Indigenous people were the first caretakers of the land that is now considered the United States. They have lived in these lands for centuries and continue to have profound emotional and spiritual connections to place. The

fact that the United States government now makes most of the decisions regarding the land's future is relatively new. With some recent monuments such as Bears Ears, decision-making power is being given back to Indigenous groups.

Other groups have different stakes of ownership in land that has become monuments: state politicians, ranchers, recreationists, and conservationists. All of these groups have valid connections to the land, yet it is difficult to reconcile the wide range of uses that each group thinks is best. There aren't easy answers with any of these places. I wanted to write about monuments because they highlight the most urgent and existential questions about how people relate to the land in today's world and in the future.

Q: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO TELL THIS POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL STORY FROM YOUR PERSONAL POINT OF VIEW?

A: This book discusses pressing environmental concerns such as climate change and nuclear waste storage, and it touches on the social and cultural implications of land protection, but it was extremely important for me that readers get a tangible sense of what being in each of these places is like. So many people have intense personal connections to each of the thirteen national monuments I visited, and that comes across in discussions I had. I wanted readers to also build a personal connection to some of these places, even if they haven't been there. The best way I could do that was to bring the landscapes to life through the physicality of my own experience.

5. ONE OF THE MAIN THEMES OF YOUR BOOK IS HOW PEOPLE AND LAND ARE CONNECTED. YOU SPOKE TO MANY PEOPLE CLOSE TO THESE PLACES AS YOU RESEARCHED THE BOOK. COULD YOU DESCRIBE A PARTICULARLY INTERESTING INTERACTION?

A: When I visited Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks in New Mexico, I reached out to a man named Angel Peña, who at the time worked for the Conservation Lands Foundation. He surprised me with extreme generosity with his time and a very touching openness about what the land means to him. He organized an evening out in Las Cruces with numerous people who had advocated for the monu-

ment's designation and played a part in the monument's early management. This allowed to me hear from many different people about their connection to place, why they thought the monument designation was important, and what made that part of the Chihuahuan desert special. Then the following day, Peña drove me out to his favorite place in the monument and brought his daughter with us so we could hike and experience it together. It was so obvious that his connection to that desert really affected him. He cares very deeply about sharing that experience with others, particularly with people of color in New Mexico who might not otherwise have the means to "recreate" on public land. His enthusiasm for public land and his desire to share a special connection to the land with others really brought home for me the importance of national monuments and why I was working on this book to begin with. People like Angel Peña help protect precious places and make them accessible to others, which in turn makes these places even more unique and extraordinary.

Q: WHAT SURPRISED YOU MOST WHILE WORKING ON THIS BOOK?

A: I make no secret of the fact that I am overall pro-national monument, even though I don't always agree with every decision regarding monuments. Some of the most surprising and interesting conversations I had were with people who are avidly anti-monument. I spoke with a man named Ken Watts who founded an anti-monument group in Idaho. He very strongly opposes the designation of a proposed monument in the Island Park region of Idaho, and he disagrees with the idea that monuments can be designated by presidential proclamation under the Antiquities Act. Yet, at the core, what he really wants is for the beautiful area around his home to stay the way it is. Watts thinks that Island Park is most likely to stay the same by being left alone. He thinks that wildlife and watersheds can flourish under the protection already afforded by the U.S. Forest Service and does not require further interference. He believes recreation can and should continue without regulation. In his view, a monument designation would bring more tourists and more destruction to this place he loves. People on the pro-monument side say that visitors are already coming to the area and there needs to be more regulation and formal protection to ensure that wildlife and habitat are not destroyed by overuse. Both sides ultimately want the same thing: to keep that special place special. However, they passionately disagree about the ways to achieve that goal. To me, I think this shows that this highly contentious issue is not unsolvable. Perhaps with a lot of listening, appreciation of nuance, and willingness to understand opposing sides, common ground and compromise can be found.

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“In *This Contested Land*, McKenzie Long reframes national monuments in the American consciousness. With painterly language, superb historical research, and engaging boots-on-the-ground storytelling, this book explores crevices for meaning and truth in what for many is a gray area between politics and place. This is a vivid, smart, and overdue book.”

—**KATHRYN AALTO**, author of *Writing Wild: Women Poets, Ramblers, and Mavericks Who Shape How We See the Natural World*

“*This Contested Land* takes readers deep into debates over national monuments. Through interviews, exploration, and vivid history, McKenzie Long unearths conflicting attitudes about human relationships to land and wildlife, tensions that go to the heart of our relationship with our country. This insightful book is essential reading for anyone who wants a better understanding of these fraught areas’ past and future.”

—**KIM TODD**, author of *Sensational: The Hidden History of America’s “Girl Stunt Reporters”*

“With intricately woven stories and stunningly artistic prose, *This Contested Land* invokes the intense power of relationships between humans and landscapes—a force that not only influences what people think should happen to a specific place but what the future of our Earth itself might become.”

—**KATIE IVES**, editor-in-chief of *Alpinist* and author of *Imaginary Peaks: The Riesensteink Hoax and Other Mountain Dreams*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

McKenzie Long is a rock climber, graphic designer, and writer who lives in the Sierra Nevada. A former managing editor at OutdoorGearLab.com, she is the coauthor of two climbing guidebooks and author of an award-winning essay, “The Alphabet Effect,” published in *Nowhere* magazine. She was a writer in residence at Mesa Refuge in Point Reyes, California, where she was named the 2019 Terry Tempest Williams Fellow for Land and Justice.



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