

US rollback of protected areas risks emboldening others, scientists warn

Trump slashed size of two protected wilderness areas

Pace of rollbacks for development projects accelerating

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Sandstone buttes rise from the Valley of the Gods under a full moon in Bears Ears national monument, Utah, which Donald Trump reduced in size by 85%. Photograph: Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA

America's reputation as an international conservation leader is under threat in the wake of unprecedented rollbacks, according to the most comprehensive effort yet to track the erosion of protected wilderness areas and national parks around the world.

The **report**, published on Thursday in the journal *Science*, found that the pace of proposed rollbacks in the US has accelerated, with 90% having taken place since 2000. Nearly all of those proposals (99%) were associated with

industrial-scale development projects, including infrastructure construction and oil and gas extraction. The report specifically calls out Donald Trump's downsizing of Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments, the largest protected area reductions in US history, as highlighting "the increasingly uncertain future of US PAs [protected areas]".

The study, authored by 21 international scientists, warns that US efforts to cut back protections could embolden other countries to follow suit. "The recent legal changes that have scaled back protections in the US are just unprecedented," said Mike Mascia, a senior vice-president at **Conservation** International and the report's senior author. "And they send a dangerous message to the rest of the world."

In December 2017, Trump **slashed the size of Utah's Bears Ears** national monument by 85%, while the nearby **Grand Staircase-Escalante national monument** was cut by half (51%). The president's authority to shrink those protected areas is currently facing **legal challenges**. But his ability to so quickly tear down environmental policies that took years of debate and community discussion to develop is worrying, local conservationists say.

"Until now, we never really considered that the monument designation was flexible or frankly meaningless to some elected officials," said Nicole Croft, executive director of the environmental advocacy group Grand Staircase-Escalante Partners. "The idea that our public lands and our most precious landscapes are going to become political footballs is terrifying."

The report placed the US within an international picture, tracking attempts to diminish protected areas in 73 countries between 1892 and 2018, and found that the

majority (78%) were enacted since 2000. Many of those policy changes were proposed to make way for industry, such as the construction of hydro-powered dams in Amazonian countries including Brazil.

Around the world, protected areas appear to be facing increasing threats from industrial-scale developers, said Lisa Naughton-Treves, a geographer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who wrote **an editorial** accompanying the new report.

“When I started, the threats were largely from the uncontrolled expansion of agriculture or hunting,” explained Naughton-Treves, who has worked on protected areas for nearly 30 years. “Now it’s more about dams, mining, natural gas exploration – these high-investment, industrial threats.”

Commenting on the findings, Mark Lubell, an environmental scientist at the University of California, Davis, who was not involved in the research, said that Trump’s environmental protection rollbacks generally follow the ebb and flow of conservation policies under Republican and Democratic administrations.

But he also said that opening up wilderness areas to industry can cause long-term ecological damage and risk their ability to be protected in the future. “When you open up roadless, wilderness areas to oil and gas extraction,” he said, “those areas can lose the qualities that made them eligible for wilderness designations and protections in the first place.”