

The Salt Lake Tribune

Utah Navajos will join debate on public lands in San Juan

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Published: December 27, 2010 05:38PM

Updated: December 27, 2010 11:49PM

Utah Navajo leaders, in what may be a first, plan to become involved in the debate over the use of nontribal lands to protect ecological and cultural values in San Juan County.

The Utah Navajo will propose a San Juan National Conservation Area that would cover large tracts of land outside their reservation administered by the federal Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service.

Their involvement would be a stark departure from the past when Navajo voices, for any number of reasons, have been muted in the debate over public lands in the West.

Navajo have been reluctant to discuss land issues with anyone outside the reservation, said Mark Maryboy, a former San Juan County commissioner and former member of the Navajo Tribal Council, because they have not felt welcome.

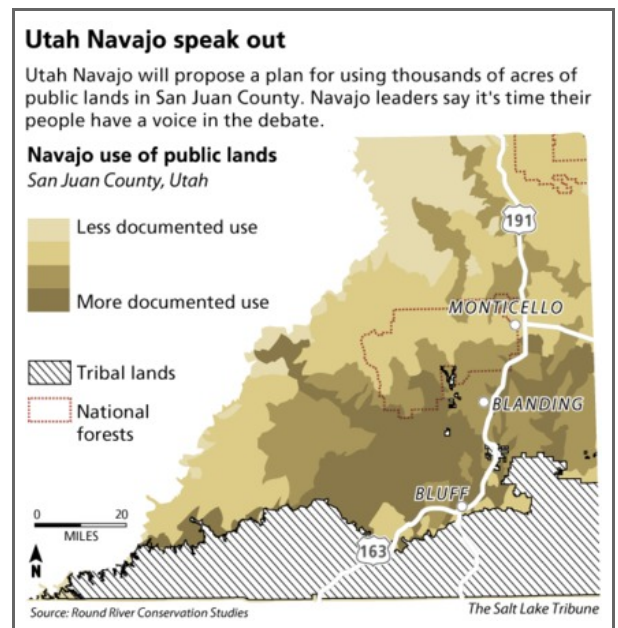
"Native people felt like they could not participate like any other person," he said. "It was like [nontribal] public lands are for white folks, not Navajos."

But there are numerous sites on public land outside the Navajo Reservation in San Juan County that are sacred to Navajo. And the Dineh, as they call themselves, are hesitant to identify those sites to non-Navajos for fear they'll be ravaged.

But that is changing, Maryboy said. Among the reasons for his push to get Utah Navajo involved is that many of the elders are very old and he wants them to have a say before they die. Also, the Navajo believe outsiders have misused and damaged public lands through extractive industries, like mining, drilling for oil and gas, and logging.

"Now it's time to say enough is enough," he said.

Since Utah Sen. Bob Bennett shepherded a public lands bill through Congress for Washington County, other jurisdictions, most notably San Juan County, have sought to do the same. With Bennett's ouster by Mike Lee, however, the process has slowed. That has given Maryboy and other tribal members an opportunity to engage in



the debate.

The Navajo plan is still in its developmental stages, but most likely will encompass tens of thousands of acres. Maryboy said he has convinced Utah Navajo communities to back the proposal.

In their effort to map valued lands, Utah Navajo have collaborated with the Salt Lake City-based nonprofit Round River Conservation Studies, which is dedicated to preserving wild places and ecosystems.

“So much of the land debate in Utah surrounds roads and wilderness designation,” said Dennis Sizemore, the organization’s executive director. “But there hasn’t been a lot of discussion on sustaining wildlife populations and water. Native people want healthy populations and a healthy land.”

American Indians also seek to protect their heritage on public lands, said Gavin Noyes, Round River’s Colorado Plateau director.

“The Navajos want to put forward a proposal to help protect one of the best cultural sites in the world,” Noyes said.

Officials of San Juan County and the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, who are often seen as opponents in the land use debate, say they welcome Navajo input.

Outgoing San Juan County Commissioner Lynn Stevens said he likes the idea of American Indians taking a seat at the table.

“They are absolutely, totally welcome,” he said. “I think it’s great.”

SUWA also approves of including the Navajo point of view, said executive director Scott Groene.

“All individuals, including tribal members, have a right to be involved,” he said. “The Navajo view has been ignored in San Juan County for some time.”

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