

I lived, worked, played, and learned in Chaco Culture National Historical Park for 34 years as a Park Ranger in the Interpretive Division. As an Interpreter I constantly witnessed the effects the canyon had on visitors, many of whom were new to such an austere environment as the American Southwest. To experience the massive sandstone buildings constructed by the inhabitants and the incredible undertaking necessary to establish a cultural center a thousand years ago can be overwhelming. It opens the door to a great admiration for what the ancient people did where extreme temperatures swing wildly from summer to winter, and the rainfall is unreliable from year to year. Legislation to protect Chaco began in 1906 with passage of The Antiquities Act, a law protecting archaeological sites on federal lands. A year later the creation of the Chaco National Monument in 1907 brought Chaco into protected status. In 1980 the National Monument was upgraded to Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Public Land Order No. 7923 (2023) that establishes the withdrawal of over 336 thousand acres surrounding the park from gas and oil extraction joins legislation that has been hard won to protect the park from the worst impulses of our modern world. I have native friends on both sides of these issues and understand what's at stake. In 1987 the importance of Chaco on a global scale led to the park becoming a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Since 1916 the National Park Service has been the U.S Government's steward for protection but also the management of visitor services making available to the public at large an opportunity to experience an alternate culture, one based on intimacy with the environment, rather than one ruled by expansion at all costs. To stand under the still pristine night sky in the canyon seeing the same almost unchanged dance of the seasonal constellations brings the viewer into a direct connection to the world of the ancients. For this reason in 2023 the International Dark Sky Association designated Chaco as an International Dark Sky Park. The air and light pollution inherent in the gas and oil industries will further obscure what little remains of Chaco's legacy available to modern people. Lest one think the Chaco Culture is relegated to the past with little relevance today to be written off as another of the failed societies of the past, consider the fact that the great monumental structures, the remains of which can be visited today, took longer to construct than the United States has been in existence. We have yet to meet their track record! The descendants living in the general regions of the canyon live lives based on what they learned from their times in the canyon. Their connections to Chaco are deep and help them identify who they are today. For many of them Chaco is among their most sacred memories, and they hold the canyon in the highest regard imaginable. Also, lest one think the canyon is the extent of the physical boundaries of Chaco, consider that the culture expanded out into the Four Corners for over 60 to 70 thousand square miles, most of which has been destroyed by modern development. Leaving the seed that originated in the canyon to be protected takes on a special urgency for those of us who wish to preserve some part of that ancient world. The BLM's decision to leave open the public comment time to only 14 days exposes the lowest standards of consideration for input from citizens who deserve something more from a government agency charged with serving its people. In the end if POL 7923 is revoked or radically changed it will be by people with little connection to the land who will decide the thirst for a dying resource is worth the rape of a cultural legacy that still lives among the land and the people of southwestern America. David G B Cornucopia retired ranger from Chaco Canyon gbcornucopia2001@gmail.com