

Landmark Venture to Co-Manage Bears Ears National Monument Digs Up History of Southeastern Utah “border towns”

By **Natasha Thomas**

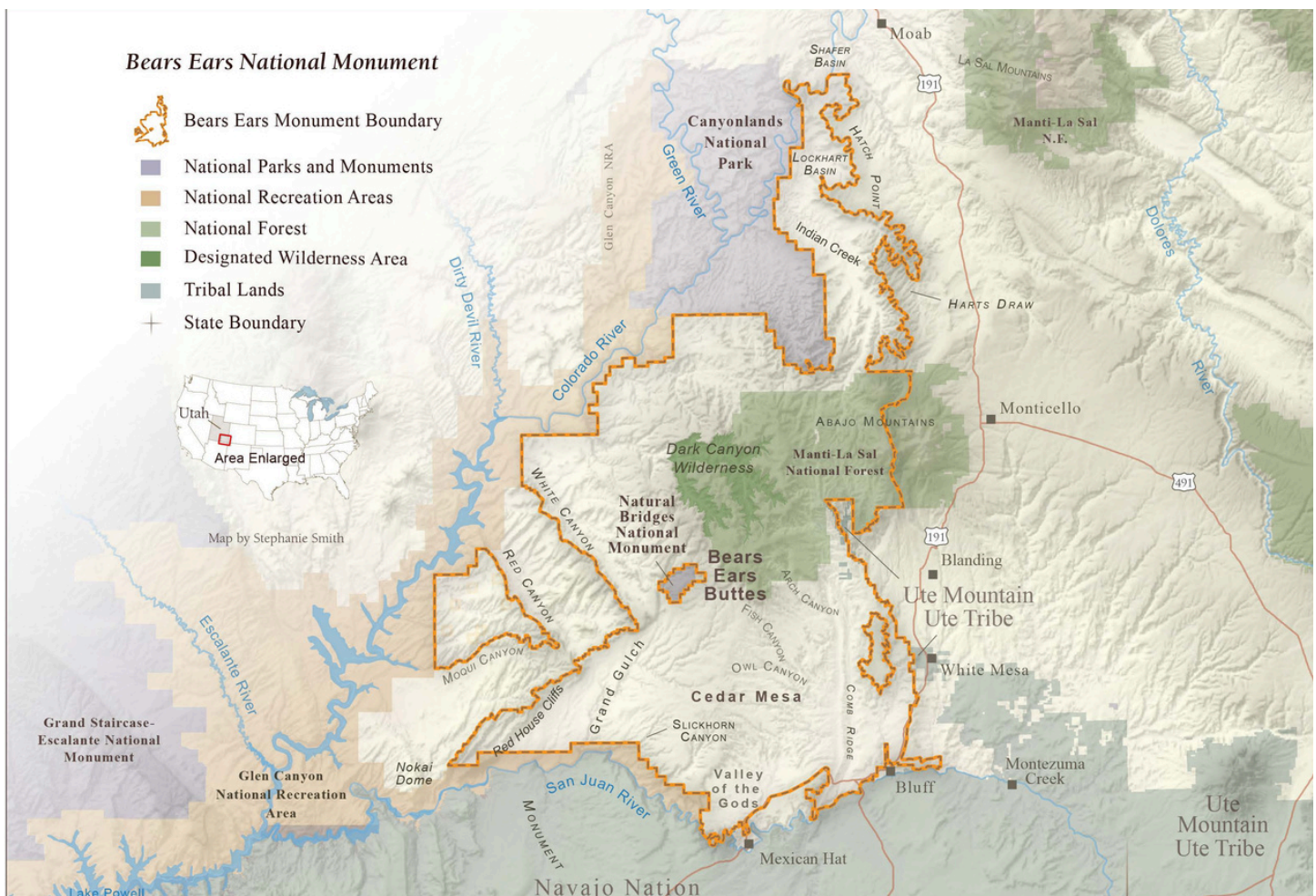
Once dismissed as “wasteland” by the US government, Bears Ears became home to those marginalized by mainstream culture: namely, the Latter-day Saints and Native Americans. Southeast of Bears Ears, three towns—Monticello, Blanding, and Bluff—border the Abajo Mountains. In these border towns of Bears Ears National Monument, centers our story: one of people fighting to protect what they hold dear.

Half a century after Mormon settlement, the forgotten land received new attention

from the US government, when uranium deposits were discovered. Subsequently, its many other resources of “market” value were recognized: livestock grazing, mining, and recreation, to name a few. Bears Ears also holds immense “non-market value” for the Native Utah Tribes, for its traditional, cultural, and spiritual uses. In the past 10 years, the rich value of this land holds has led to a battle of resources — tribal nations, corporations, and environmentalist orgs. have fought over what should be done with Bears Ears.

Until now, US government agencies have been at the helm of federal land management — under these agencies, land usage is evaluated by one big equation: X, Y, and Z resources get divided according to their value. But one problem arises with such methods: how does one assign relative importance to spirituality, livelihood, and longevity of the human-land connection?

Such division of land and its resources is not a practice shared by every culture. Western, Euro-centric thinking tends to



Map by the Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition (<https://www.bearscoalition.org/>)

Did you know?

“Non-market value” is the term used in the land management documents created by the US Department of Interior to represent that which holds value beyond the US dollar.

treat land as an object of ownership, a concept imposed by colonizers on Native Americans. Because this ideological view of land ownership and rights is still dominant, Native Americans are forced to live under this societal construct, out of alignment with their own.

In 2024, we have reached the first-ever attempt at co-management: sharing the responsibilities of land between the US Government and Tribal Nations, carried out through the Resource Management Plan. This is a divergence from the typical equational approach — Traditional Indigenous Knowledge is cited over a hundred times as reason for certain management decisions.

Historically speaking, this move is radical for the US. The United States has made space for Traditional Indigenous voices land management; quite the contrary — tribes have been violently forced to vacate land, assimilate, and be silent.

MONUMENT IN THE MAKING

In the 1980s, U.S. policies began shifting from enforcing assimilation of Native Americans to promoting their autonomy. This change reflected a growing recognition of self-determination as an inalienable right for all, akin to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

This mindset spurred former President Obama to support the plan brought to him by a Native American Nonprofit: the Utah Diné Bikéyah. The organization's name means "the people's sacred lands" in Navajo; they seek to turn the Bears Ears Region, which was the place of cultural and spiritual connection for tribes around it, into a protected monument.

Kenneth Maryboy, a Navajo Council Delegate and San Juan County Commissioner, was instrumental in this movement. In a 2010 letter to R-UT Senator Bennett, he reasoned: "One or more tribes occupied each county in the state for thousands of years, prior to pioneer immigration to the region. Because of this, the tribes of Utah each have strong cultural and spiritual ties, treaty rights, and interests in places throughout Utah that lie outside of reservation boundaries."

The Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition, representing the five major tribes connected to the area—the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, and the Pueblo of Zuni—joined forces with Utah Diné Bikéyah. Despite their efforts, the San Juan County Commissioners in February 2015 opposed the monument proposal, advocating instead for the designation of parts of

Bears Ears as "Energy Zones" for agricultural, mining, and energy development.

The roadblocks these Tribal Nations faced to protect Bears Ears mirror many other challenges that hinder native healing, ever since they were pushed off land that the US deemed too valuable — time and again, for US policy, economy trumps "non market value". Despite this, the coalition's persistence paid off in 2016 when Obama approved the designation of Bears Ears as a national monument, supported by a broad coalition of Native Americans, their allies, and outdoor gear companies. Thus, it was extreme whiplash, and heartbreak, when only months after Obama's BENM institution, Trump's administration called for an investigation of the monument's adherence to the Antiquities Act.

The Antiquities Act is a law written in 1906, and it was originally intended to protect cultural sites like Bears Ears. Unfortunately, it had one sticky clause: the monument must occupy the "smallest area compatible" with protection.

The land would undoubtedly be more profitable if tapped for its oil and mineral resources; even if that resulted in extreme changes to the landscape, and all the health risks for neighboring towns that come about from industrial mining. Under Trump, Bears Ears did not "pass" the smallest-area-compatible investigation. The monument was reduced in size by 85%, with many important cultural sites not protected. Ten years of work, taken down with the scratch of the Executive pen.

LOCAL DISCONTENT

It's no surprise that the monument's fluctuating status has impacted the economy and daily lives in the small towns surrounding it.

Rallies were held in hopes that Biden would re-establish the monument, which he did in 2021. The controversy over Bears

Ears—its establishment, de-establishment, and eventual re-establishment, supported by major groups like Patagonia—has brought significant outside influence to these typically quiet towns.

Now that the land was being regulated as a monument (on and off and on again), locals of Blanding and Monticello were fired-up to stop certain changes. The restriction of ATV access to the locally beloved Arch Canyon, for example, is one of the most contested changes our team heard when interviewing locals.

Blanding has a history of passionately protecting ATV routes — it's a core battle fought by San Juan County Governor Phil Lyman, who was arrested in 2014 for leading an ATV ride through closed canyons. This was in protest of federal overreach — an underlying fear for many living in these Bears Ears border towns.

If you ask your average Blanding Local how they feel about the monument, you

are bound to get one of two responses: Either extreme opposition to government/outsider interference, or hesitancy to speak on the matter. You would be hard-pressed though, to find someone who had no opinion at all -- willing to share it or not.

If you go to the Blanding Library, you'll likely be greeted by some friendly, bubbly women at the front desk. I was looking to research the area's cultural and economic past, and they were accommodating to help me find historical reports on the town. When I shared my intentions to investigate the town's attitude towards the monument, Ginny Brooks shared this: "Everybody who's local is against it, and everybody who's not local is like, 'Yeah, let's do it!'" The two gals working with her chimed in in agreement.

Ginny is white, like about half of the population in Blanding; but she felt that those with Native ancestry, who comprised the town's other major ethnic group, tended to feel the same. "The

[native] people that I do know would go up on the mountain, chop down wood, collect native herbs and things... and now with the protection they are putting on the [monument], they aren't able to do that anymore".

Other white residents shared similar views. Mike Larson is a young man who grew up in Blanding, left for a few years in his adulthood, and returned to work as a social worker and farmer.

"First of all, I feel that the expansion of Bears Ears was a huge overstepping for the Federal Government. Second of all, it had a huge negative effect on the local economy. A lot of people in this area are ranchers and farmers, and they count on that land to graze their cattle. It also blocked off access for the Native Americans in this area to go and gather their sacred herbs, plants, all sorts of stuff. It put a complete block on that."

Sixteen other non-Native individuals from Blanding, Bluff, and Monticello echoed Larson's view of federal overreach, with



Bears Ears National Monument.
Photo by Megan O'Brien, '25.

the belief that Native Americans share this sentiment. To understand the Native perspective, I spoke directly with those living in these border towns.

Robert Cly is a Navajo who grew up around the trails of Bears Ears, and in his adulthood, he worked in those same canyons as a cattle rancher. He says, “they just need to leave it the way it is so people can enjoy, and have their families go up and use Bears Ears.”

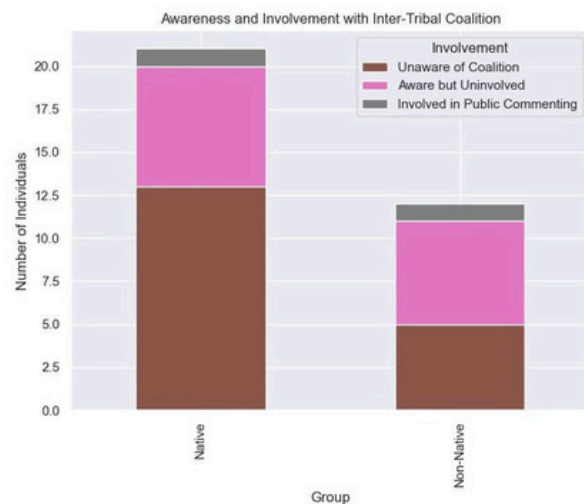
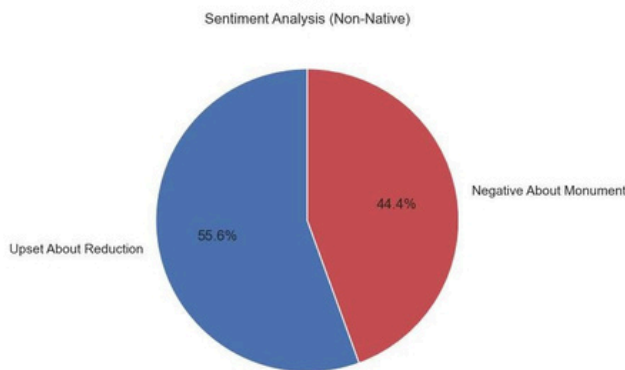
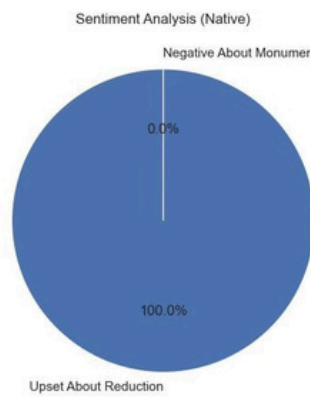
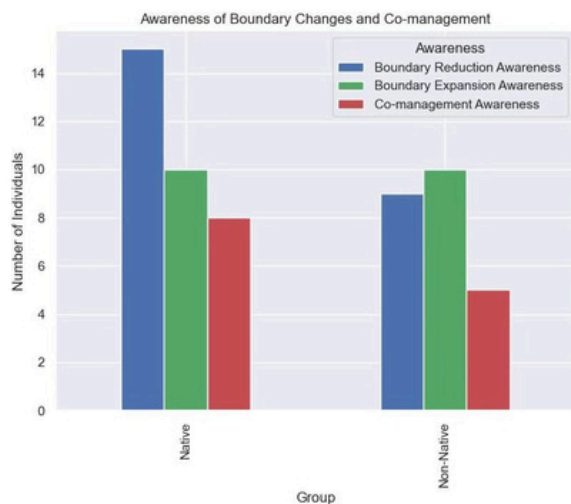
Cly’s viewpoint is common among Native individuals in these towns. While they support protecting Bears Ears, they are frustrated by external directives. On the matter of co-management with the Inter-Tribal Coalition, he simply voiced: “yeah... there’s some stuff that I didn’t like [about the Inter-Tribal Coalition].”

Navajo and Ute Native and Blanding local Miles Harrison used to know every trail in Bears Ears; when he was young, he would go exploring the different offshoots through those endless canyonlands. Through the years, he’s had buddies come back from adventuring, and report that some of their old trails got closed off. He wants the trails to be used, loved, and taken care of; not shut off to the people.

He, like Cly, expressed concern at the inter-tribal coalition’s venture to co-manage the monument. “I think [the inter-tribal coalition’s] minds are twisted, in ways they don’t know.” Harrison believes the government will ultimately disregard the coalition’s input once they are on board. Cly says many in his social circles share this skepticism about the monument’s management.

Cly and Harrison were some of the few Native people living in the border towns who agreed to be interviewed; but it was more common that Native individuals were hesitant to speak on the matter. We found folks who would share some opinions, but not want their name recorded or to be interviewed in an official capacity.

These individuals tended to share opinions that didn’t align with that of the average Blanding local’s. Often, Native Americans living in the border towns had conflicting feelings of wanting protection for the sacred space, but seeing issues with restrictions the monument would bring about. A statistical fact of our team's investigation was that non-native people living in the San Juan County border towns were much more likely to share



Data from N.Thomas, ‘24, summer 2024 southeastern Utah. Graphics by Mustafa Sameen, ‘26.

their opinions than those with native heritage — this is not a fact to be ignored

THE FACTS:

I have itemized the concerns we heard from locals about the monument: (1), reduction of OHV access to certain beloved canyons, such as Arch Canyon. (2), loss of access to timber collection. (3) inability for natives to engage in cultural-specific practices, such as collecting herbs and visiting sacred locations. (4) loss of ability to graze animals on the land.

Every single alternative in the Co-Management plan allows livestock grazing; Alternative E, which is that most supported and favored by the Inter-Tribal coalition, would leave 87% of the land available for grazing.

Under Alternative E, forest and wood products would be available for harvest on a seasonal or year-to-year basis, based on close monitoring of the health of the wildlife and its needs. Similarly, vegetation gathering would be allowed with wildlife health monitoring and potential rest periods for vegetative growth or to allow for ceremonial uses.

Finally, 58.8 percent of land will have managed OHV access — for comparison, this is more access than 2 other alternative plans, the same access level as another plan, and 9% less access than the alternative that gives the most OHV allowance.

Alternative E additionally plans for invasive species management, healthy soil maintenance, protective measures for artifacts that have been the target of looting, and implementation of the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Program to clean up waste associated with abandoned mine lands. We find that many local fears seem to be based on misinformation rather than the reality of the co-managed monument. Timber access, cattle grazing, and herb collection remain possible. Although some OHV trails may be restricted, 800,000 acres will still be available for off-highway vehicle exploration.

At this point in research, there is one facet I was still very uncertain of: the frequent repetition I heard, in these San Juan County border towns, of distrust towards the Inter-Tribal Coalition. If this collaboration aims to enhance Native American autonomy, their representatives should be a trustworthy reflection of their needs.

(DIS)TRUST: Historically speaking.

Why do such fears fester and spread through a place like San Juan County?

Spend any time in Blanding or Monticello, and I imagine you'd form the same impression that I did — that many of the locals seeked to lead a quiet and happy life.

I never felt that they aimed to be oppositional about the monument; rather, they had genuine fears — fear that this was all happening to them, not with them or for them. And it was out of their control.

San Juan County is home to two significant groups: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and Native Americans. About 38 percent of the county's population are Mormons, whose ancestors faced severe persecution in the 1830s and 40s. Driven from Illinois, Missouri, and Ohio, Mormons endured violent attacks and forced relocations before settling in what is now Utah. This persecution includes the Hawn's Mill Massacre, where 17 Mormons were killed.

In 1880, Mormons undertook the arduous "Hole in the Rock" expedition, descending 1,200 feet down sandstone cliffs to settle in San Juan County. The Hole in the Rock Foundation now works to preserve this pioneering history.

Native Americans, who make up 46 percent of the county's population, also

have a deep connection to the land. Ancestral Puebloans originally inhabited the land, and Southern Utes arrived around 1300. It has also become home to many Diné (commonly known as Navajo): the Long Walk of the Navajo is an unforgettable atrocity committed against the Diné from 1864-1868, one in which US soldiers "burn Navajo hogans to the ground, kill livestock, and destroy irrigated fields". The Diné were then forced to march from various places in Arizona and New Mexico to Fort Sumner NM, and quarter there without enough food and water.

Hundreds of Navajo died during the grueling, sometimes 300 mile journey, and more deaths followed.

It was upon arrival to Fort Sumner when warrior hero K'aayelli led a band of Navajos to Bears Ears, escaping to the mountains of Southeastern Utah.

The ancestors of San Juan County have endured significant hardships and injustices; stories have been passed down of the cruelty brought upon them. Unfortunately, there is ample reason for San Juan County citizens to be fearful of outsiders managing their beloved trails, open spaces, and spiritual sites. The 1860's, marked by Mormon persecution and the Navajo Long Walk, was not so long ago. These traumas are a powerful deterrent of the trust such a collaboration aims to operate within.

COMMUNITY HEALS:

How do we heal such deeply cut wounds?

A lot was illuminated for me inside the monument itself. When our research team was welcomed into the Bears Ears Gathering held deep into the monument, we witnessed kinship and togetherness that permeated to everyone present. Hundreds of Native people had

gathered the first night of this weekend event. Circled under a big tent, Native Americans from various tribes spoke into a microphone about their connection to this land. Gourd songs and dancing were centered in the circle. The energy was starkly different from those towns of Blanding and Monticello, and even Bluff.

The focus of this gathering was not on meeting economic needs. It was a spiritual engagement. This became clear when three young women tearfully spoke in their native language about grandparents who had passed away. Their stories were part of why they felt compelled to connect with their larger family at this gathering.

A gentleman in a Vietnam Veteran vest, adorned with a Purple Heart, spoke of friends lost in the war, who would have been at the ceremony had they not perished. Tears flowed. The drummers and dancers set a tone that aligned everyone present to the same wavelength: the space was sacred, for all to connect on this special ground of their ancestors.

Only miles away were the two buttes that came to be known as the Bears “ears”, where Navajo Warrior K’aayelli once took refuge.

Utah Diné Bikéyah member Meredith Benally spoke on what the ceremony means to her. “This place being sacred and this place being safe is incorporated into the relationship with my ancestors [...]. Not just language, not just ceremony, not just the food source and the dependency that we have on the national resources here, but also knowing where I stand in all of that timeline.”

To her, the spiritual connection is so important to maintain because it’s about everyday well-being.

She described the cyclical and connected way things work, and how humans have to be intentionally in touch with that.

“Nature itself has its responsibilities without having to remind each other, like the trees to the deer or the deer to the water or, you know, to the universe.”

“Nature itself has its responsibilities without having to remind each other, like the trees to the deer or the deer to the water or, you know, to the universe. Like, hey, don't forget, you've got to bring us rain. It's just a naturally occurring relationship. Whereas with us as humans, we have to be reminded. That's why the seasons change.”

Benally and her partner also spoke on the Utah Diné Bikéyah’s work with the Inter-Tribal coalition, and addressed the mistrust I’d been hearing about.

The closer the people are to border towns, they become biased, because that’s who they listen to; and really, they are blinded by the everyday voices that they listen to.” her partner said. “That’s the assimilation of living in townships, they kind of mirror what everybody is saying.”

Meredith added: “Utah Dine Bikeyah stays grassroots; they stay local to the people. It's unilateral. Whereas the coalition is able to maneuver upward and across. So, if people are saying ‘What about the coalition? How come they don’t talk to us?’ Well, we can always talk with them.” Her partner continued: “The coalition is good because it’s got representation from different tribes; the bad part that we’re talking about is probably our own fault, because the representation that we pick is sometimes not the correct representation that we want.”

Their perspective gave the Inter-Tribal Coalition more credibility; it likely isn’t perfect, in the same way that US elected government officials aren’t always the ideal candidates. But its existence is necessary — they are fighting for something that each of these tribe’s people want. The hundreds gathered that night was evidence.

BEYOND THE DOLLAR VALUE

In the beginning of this story, I wanted to learn more about that which cannot be answered by hard science; by one big equation. In many ways, science can explain the sacred environment that was created at the gathering: Music, for example, is wavelengths of phonons that everyone who listens is receiving — when we are all affected by this same energetic input, we share a physical experience that connects us. The air we were breathing, the sunrays poking through the tall pines, connected us all to this space and time. There is also research indicating how dance connects people: similarly, to move one’s body to a common beat creates similar neural patterns in people’s brains — it is a connector of people.

We can talk science all we want; but the theories will not bring us this sense of community that permeated the gathering — to achieve that, we must engage with one another.

Equations that suit economic decision-making will not account for the invaluable: our heritage and right to self-expression.

Through historical rejection of, and violence against, communities in San Juan county, we’ve created an environment of fear. Whether it be fear of outsiders, fear of the US government misappropriating the land, or concern that the inter-tribal coalitions interests do not align with tribal citizens — locals think that any change will affect them negatively, which can lead them to reject the monument or co-management.

However, steps like sharing management between the tribes and US, and further attempts to create authentic connection to these citizens, can begin to heal generational trauma.

Operating in this Tribal-US co-management, equations must be drawn up. But the solution to the fear is not further division; it is inclusion of locals in the management of their land, done through meaningful on-the-ground

connection.

As of this summer, the co-management plan appears to be a turn in the right direction towards native self-determination. However, more work needs to be done to connect with border towns, so that the transition into this new way of sharing land management is well-received.

When we cannot talk to each other, we do not connect with each other. When we do not connect with each other, how can we find solutions that meet both of our needs? Despite the old US relegation of

the west as a “wasteland,” Bears Ears is obviously rich in many things: wood for building and burning, land for grazing, spirituality that echoes through ruins of hundreds of canyons, and space for connection. Fear tells us that Bears Ears is 1.35 million acres that, if not possessed by us, will be used by others to lower our own positioning.

If we operate from only a capitalistic, euro-centric approach, perhaps that is the way it would go. But through a lens of hope, Bears Ears is a massive physical embodiment of history, ancestors, resources that give us life, and space that

we can connect with ourselves, nature, and others. To decide what should be “done” with the land, perhaps we may find a similar wavelength, rather than staying on our own separate ones. An equation of perfect division does not exist; which is why all who hold Bears Ears dear must be included in sharing this land. ▲



Natasha Thomas, '24
Photo by Hset Hset Naing, '24

Natasha Thomas is a CC 24' graduate in Biochemistry. Her project this summer was a qualitative exploration of public opinion regarding use of land, specifically that protected as Bears Ears National Monument. She interviewed individuals living in various communities in and around Bears Ears about the monument's initial establishment under Obama, de-establishment under Trump, and now reestablishment and co-managemen

with the Tribal Coalition. The project became a historical exploration into what causes fear in communities, and the importance of connection in healing generational trauma. The field work and story-building processes have been such a rewarding experience for her.

“ I’m grateful I got to work with the State of the Rockies team!” -- Natasha Thomas



Visitors at Data Viz Nite, April, 2024. Photo by Sabine Zentner '27.