



Report **Veterans and California Public Lands**

Vet Voice Foundation
February 2024

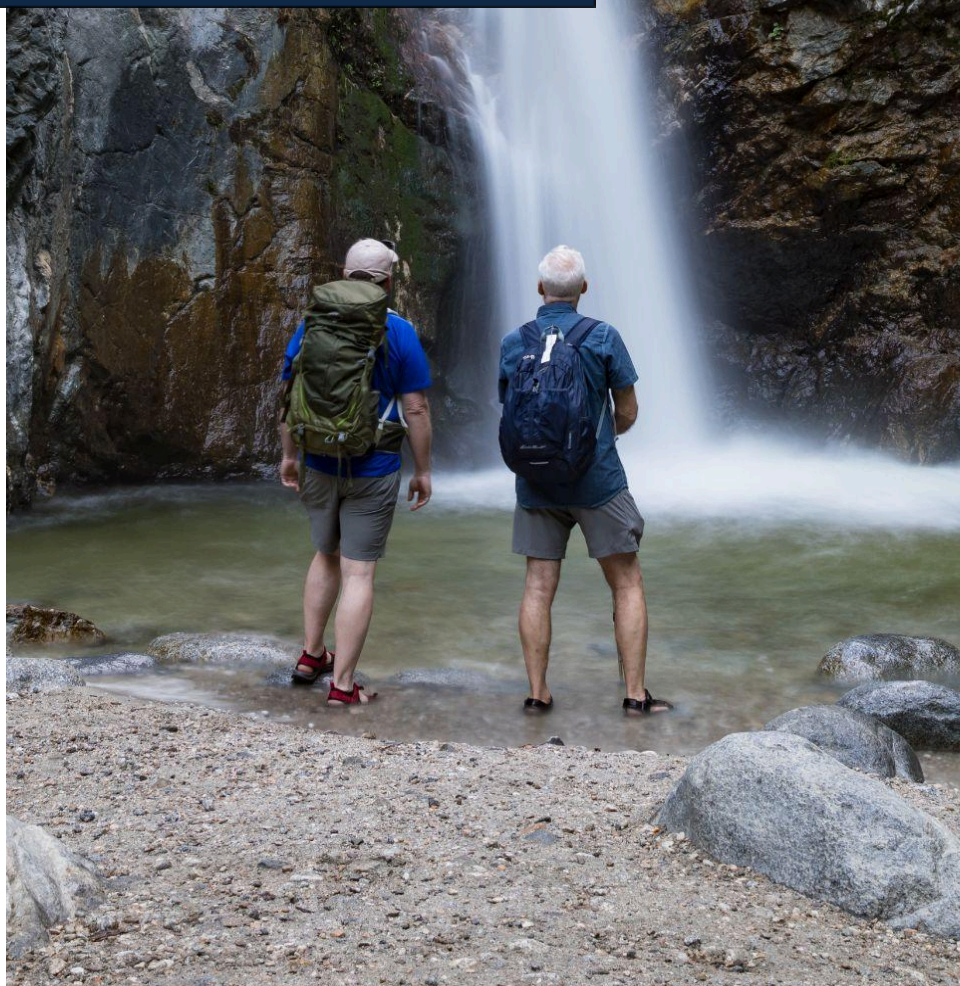


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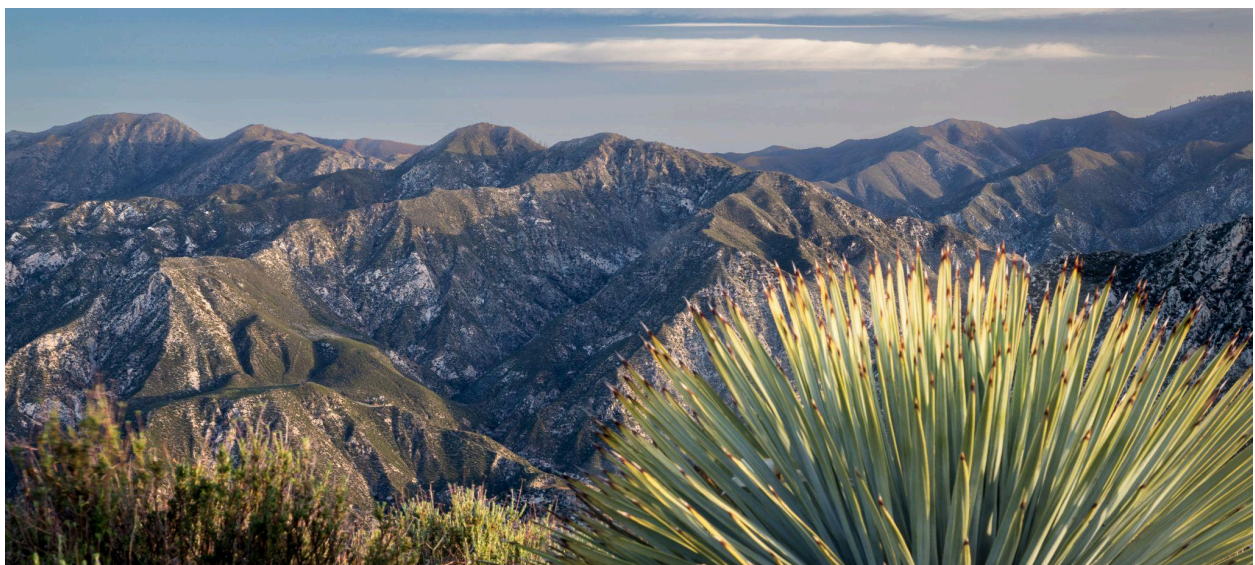
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INTRODUCTION

Veterans and Public Lands

Among all the communities that benefit from public spaces, the military and veteran community maintain a unique relationship with public lands. From the shores of Acadia to the deserts of Joshua Tree, our nation's public lands have long provided the necessary refuge and respite from the demands of military service. These are places of reflection, reunion, and healing for veterans. We view protecting and expanding our nation's public lands as an extension of our service to this country and the duty of anyone who thinks themselves a patriot.

Moreover, many federally protected lands were historic homes to military training camps. With more than 30 military installations, California is home to 1.8 million former military service members, 162,000 active duty military personnel, and 56,000 reservists and National Guard members – more than any other state in the nation.

Furthermore, while our public lands are special to all veterans; these lands are sacred to others. In fact, Tribal communities have the highest per-capita representation of any in the U.S. Armed Forces. Therefore, any issue that's important to Native communities is categorically important to veterans and military families.

Along with nine national parks, California proudly hosts seventeen national monuments including the San Gabriel Mountains, Berryessa Snow Mountain, and Fort Ord – which preserves military history for veterans and civilians alike. Nestled in urban, suburban, and rural areas, these public spaces, along with others in California, host millions of visitors each year, providing access to the great outdoors to families and communities alike. These include the veteran and military communities.

The Biden Administration has been a champion for our nation's public lands from their first days in office. It's vital we use the momentum from their efforts, along with the hard work being carried out by community groups, who share a common goal of safeguarding our nation's lands and waters, to expand the existing San Gabriel Mountains and Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monuments and designate Chuckwalla and Medicine Lake Highlands National Monuments, and protect land adjacent to Joshua Tree National Park.

“California has some of the most beautiful natural landscapes in the world—and it is our duty to preserve these pristine outdoor spaces and rare natural habitats to combat the climate crisis and benefit future generations.”

– U.S. Senator Alex Padilla (CA), (Official Senate press release, 4/13/22)

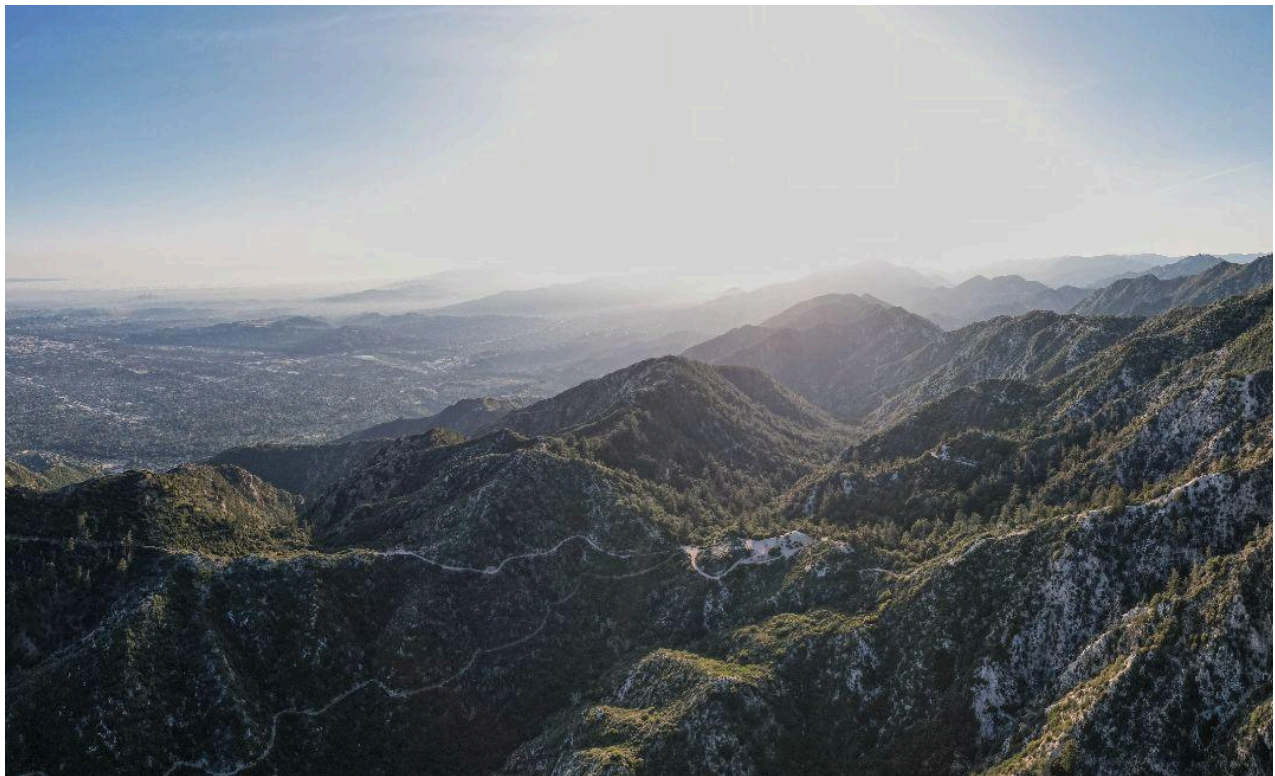


CALIFORNIA CAMPAIGN MAP



A History of National Monuments

National monuments in the United States have a storied history, dating back to the turn of the 20th century when President Teddy Roosevelt, a famed conservationist, outdoorsman, and military veteran signed the Antiquities Act of 1906. Spurred by the rapid expansion west, this act was the first to provide the legal framework for the federal government to preserve and protect cultural and natural resources as national monuments. The Antiquities Act also reflected the priorities of a growing nation – sending a message that certain areas were too important to be left unprotected. Perhaps most importantly, it delegated authority to the executive branch, allowing the President to designate national monuments without congressional approval. Elected leaders rightly recognized the urgency required in permanently protecting public lands could not always be met within the bureaucratic confines of Congress. Since its passing, 18 presidents, from both parties, have used this authority to establish more than 120 national monuments.



Environmental Justice

Designating national monuments helps preserve the cultural history of often marginalized communities across our nation and also produces immediate benefits for the current generation. Permanently protecting public lands helps increase equitable access to nature for communities across racial lines and the socioeconomic spectrum, helping to close the “Nature Gap,” a term used to describe the disproportionate lack of access to green spaces for communities of color and low-income communities. According to a recent report from the Hispanic Access Foundation, Latinos and other people of color in California are two times more likely to live in nature-deprived areas than white people, denying these communities the essential benefits of the outdoors. California is one of the most diverse states in the nation, with no one ethnic group making up the majority of the population. In fact, according to the 2020 census, 39% of Californians are Latino, 35% are white, 15% are Asian American or Pacific Islander, 5% are Black, 4% are multiracial, and fewer than 1% are Native American or Alaska Natives. While we celebrate the diversity of our state, we are increasingly concerned with the growing wealth gap. California ranks 4th among all states in income inequality, with “20% of all net worth is concentrated in the 30 wealthiest zip codes, home to just 2% of Californians.” Expanding existing and designating new national monuments is a critical step in addressing the impacts of such gaps, particularly by providing public spaces to all Californians, regardless of race or socioeconomic status.



Economic Benefits

Protecting public lands can be a boon to local economies and helps preserve beloved places from misuse and incompatible development. One study found areas around 14 national monuments designated in the 90s and early 2000s experienced, on average, a 10 percent increase in the number of businesses established and an 8.5 percent increase in the number of jobs.

National monuments and other public lands provide an economic foundation for the outdoor recreation industry, which accounts for \$54.7 Billion in revenue, or 1.6% of the state's total GDP. These spaces support more than 517,000 jobs for Californians and produce \$28.7 billion in wages.



Environmental Impacts

The ecological impacts of preserving public lands cannot be overstated. The intentional designation of critical spaces as national monuments is often driven by the urgent need to protect the biodiversity of these habitats. The United Nations argues that such biodiversity is “our strongest natural defense against climate change.” Biodiverse spaces serve as carbon absorbers, pulling in dangerous greenhouse gasses and helping to curb the rapid acceleration of climate change.

This is the foundational understanding for the Biden Administration’s America the Beautiful initiative to conserve 30% of the nation’s public lands and waterways by 2030, a plan paralleled by California’s own 30x30 commitment.

As California continues to fight the devastating impacts of climate change, conservation efforts have never been more important. In addition to the critical benefits provided by biodiversity, one study concluded that wildfires may be better directly prevented and contained by expanding public lands protection, enabling the federal government to better manage these critical spaces.




San Gabriel Mountains National Monument

Expansion



Designated by President Obama in 2014, the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument covers 342,177 acres of the Angeles National Forest and 4,002 acres of neighboring San Bernardino National Forest. The area is within 90 minutes of 18 million people in the Los Angeles Basin - the backyard for many urban and culturally diverse communities within the county. In 2021, the forest welcomed 4.6 million visitors (more than the Grand Canyon or Yosemite National Park).

We are calling on President Biden to expand this critical monument by adding 109,000 acres of public lands. The proposed expansion area is the gateway to the Angeles National Forest and is adjacent to the western side of the existing monument. In addition to advocating for the expansion of the monument, we are also highlighting the urgent need for increased resources for the national monument and the Angeles National Forest. Local agencies deserve the resources to care for and manage sustainable visitation. Our goal is to continue to work with the national forest, partners, active volunteer groups, and our champions in Congress to advocate for these resources.



Expanding the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument will honor the original stewards of these lands, the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians and Gabrieleño (also known as Kizh, Gabrielino, Tongva) Peoples. The expansion can help increase equitable access to nature for millions of people living near the monument. Permanently protecting these public lands will also help improve public health, conserve a critical drinking water source, protect key wildlife habitats, and address the climate and biodiversity crisis.

The push for expansion is championed by Senator Alex Padilla (D-CA) and Representative Judy Chu (CA-28). Ninety-three elected officials, the Fernandeño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, and the Gabrieleno Band of Mission Indians support the proposed expansion. Over 34,000 community members have signed a petition urging President Biden to use the Antiquities Act to expand the monument. Los Angeles County and the Cities of Alhambra, Baldwin Park, Duarte, Glendale, Monterey Park, Santa Clarita, and South Pasadena have also passed resolutions endorsing this effort.

“Veterans have long championed the safeguarding of our public lands and waters. I’m proud to be part of that tradition. Since getting out of the Navy, I’ve seen firsthand the benefit of time in the outdoors for myself and my fellow veterans. Knowing how many veterans live in Southern California and how precious what wild spaces we have are, I’m particularly proud to be working to expand San Gabriel Mountains National Monument — ensuring it’s protected for future generations. I urge President Biden to use his powers to make this happen.”

– *Jim Roberts, U.S. Navy veteran*

Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument Expansion



In 2015, President Obama designated Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument north of the Bay Area in California. This landscape is home to multiple natural, historical, and cultural resources and offers a range of recreation opportunities for visitors, including hiking, camping, backpacking, hunting, fishing, mountain biking, horseback riding, and off-highway vehicle (OHV) use on designated routes.

Stretching from Napa County in the south to Mendocino County in the north, the monument is located about an hour away from Travis Air Force Base, providing opportunities for the thousands of people who live and work on the base to relax and recreate outdoors.

The Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, Senators Alex Padilla and the late Dianne Feinstein, Representatives John Garamendi and Mike Thompson, and local community leaders have called on President Biden to use the Antiquities Act to expand Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument and permanently protect the entirety of Molok Luyuk (Condor Ridge). They are urging President Biden to expand this national monument in order to safeguard an area that is culturally significant to Native American tribes,

increase equitable access to the outdoors for the region's residents, and help preserve wildlife corridors and the area's distinct biodiversity.

The proposed addition includes 13,753 acres of public lands and is located on the eastern edge of the existing monument in Lake and Colusa Counties. The rolling hills and rocky outcroppings of Molok Luyuk overlook meadows of colorful wildflowers, forests of pine, cypress, and oak, and 360-degree views. These lands serve as a critical corridor between the existing monument and other protected areas for species such as tule elk, mountain lions, and black bears. They are also home to dozens of rare plant species.

The land is of tremendous present-day cultural and religious importance to the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, and includes sites central to their origin stories. A key goal of this effort is to establish co-stewardship with federally recognized Tribes and return to an Indigenous name for these lands.

"My 'Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument Expansion Act' also ensures that federally recognized tribes are consulted throughout the process to ensure Native American voices play an active role in protecting public lands."

– U.S. Representative John Garamendi (CA), (*Lake County News*, 3/4/22)

"With our long history in this area, we have a unique perspective on how this land should be managed, and we are willing to apply our historical practices with modern technologies to ensure that Molok Luyuk is preserved and healthy, a place for all to enjoy."

– Yocha Dehe Tribal Chairman Anthony Roberts, (*Lake County News*, 3/4/22)

"Back in 2016, I worked to designate the Berryessa Snow Mountain region as a National Monument...Earlier this year, I was proud to join Rep. Garamendi to expand this designation and protect more of our pristine public lands. The Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument is crucial for protecting the biodiversity of the land and boosting our economy through recreational opportunities."

– U.S. Senator Alex Padilla (CA), (Official Senate press release, 4/13/22)

“Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument is a special place to me — and I know it’s sacred to others. Not only do I want to see the monument protected, I support its expansion. Everyone has a different experience in the military, and everyone transitions back to civilian life in their own way. But there’s no denying that for many veterans — including me — time on our public lands is a vital component to our overall well-being. I’ve long enjoyed working alongside my fellow veterans to protect our nation’s public lands. It’s even more special to do so in my own backyard. President Biden should use his authority under the Antiquities Act to expand Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument to include Molok Luyuk.”

– Ryan Henson, U.S. Navy veteran

“When I came home from combat in Vietnam, I pledged to continue to serve my country and fellow veterans. Sharing the adventure, fun, and healing of outdoor recreation on public lands, including sustainable motorized recreation, became my passion. I support President Biden using the Antiquities Act to expand Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument so that more Americans can enjoy the freedoms I and many others fought for.”

– Del Albright, U.S. Army veteran



Chuckwalla National Monument



Stretching across 660,000 acres and bordering the south of Joshua Tree National Park, the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument would help increase equitable access to public lands for local communities while protecting habitats for native wildlife. These lands are the traditional homeland of the Iviatim, Nüwü, Pipa Aha Macav, Kwatsáan, and Maara'yam peoples (Cahuilla, Chemehuevi, Mojave, Quechan, and Serrano nations).

This effort also proposes to protect approximately 17,000 acres of public lands that are adjacent to the east side of Joshua Tree National Park. The National Park Service (NPS) has studied this proposed expansion and has indicated that it would be feasible to incorporate the area into the park. These protections will help ensure habitat connectivity for desert bighorn sheep, burro deer, and other wildlife impacted by climate change. The park expansion could also help preserve places of cultural and historical importance.

This designation and expansion would honor veterans by preserving the entirety of the historic Desert Training Center, where General Patton trained military units for the “harshest of desert warfare” during WWII. Moreover, analysis shows that desert conservation is critical to support ongoing modern-day missions from five major military bases - Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake, Chocolate Mountain Aerial

Gunnery Range, Edwards Air Force Base, Fort Irwin National Training Center, and Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms.

Not only would a national monument support operational training, it also supports the social, mental, and physical health of military members and their families by providing access to public lands stationed aboard these California bases. Likewise, this designation would help close the “Nature Gap” by providing local access to the surrounding civilian communities, many of which lack access to nature close to home. This proposal is supported by the Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe, the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians, the Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians, the Chemehuevi Indian Tribe, the Colorado River Indian Tribes, over a dozen current and former local elected officials, the cities of Banning, Palm Springs, and Desert Hot Springs in Riverside County and Calipatria in Imperial County, over a dozen businesses, Chambers of Commerce, and over 1,000 residents of the eastern Coachella Valley and neighboring areas.

In terms of environmental benefits, this designation could help protect threatened and endangered wildlife like the desert tortoise and Munz’s Cholla cactus. The proposed monument is complementary to the goals of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) which identified areas suitable for renewable energy development as well as lands that should be protected for their biological, cultural, recreation, and other values. The boundaries of the proposed monument were specifically drawn to avoid areas identified in the DRECP as suitable for development. In fact, the DRECP identified many of the lands in the proposed monument as being important to conserve for their biological, cultural, and historic values. Permanently protecting these lands will help to fulfill the DRECP’s goal of balanced development and conservation.

“After eighteen years and multiple deployments, I left the Army. And I was struggling. A major part of my transition back to civilian life and healing has been time spent with nature. I support the designation of the Chuckwalla National Monument not only for these reasons, but also because such protections will help preserve sites important to our nation’s military history. I owe it to myself and my fellow veterans to continue to push for the preservation and expansion of these lands for both historical context and to serve as a respite for those seeking a reprieve from the trauma of war. I’m hopeful President Biden will use the Antiquities Act to make the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument a reality. “

– Craig A. Meling, U.S. Army veteran

Medicine Lake Highlands



The Pit River Tribe is calling on President Biden to protect ancestral homelands and spiritual sites in an area known as Sáttítla, within the Medicine Lake Highlands area of northern California. This 200,000-acre area is managed by the US Forest Service and is located within the Shasta-Trinity, Klamath, and Modoc National Forests of northeastern California, just 30 miles from Mount Shasta.

For thousands of years the forested lands and clear blue water have been sacred to numerous Tribes including the Pit River, Modoc, Shasta, Karuk, and Wintu. Sáttítla and the Medicine Lake Highlands are a spiritual center. Tribes continue to use the area for religious activities, ceremonies, and gatherings.

This sacred space is threatened by more than two dozen leases for large-scale geothermal energy development, which put cultural and historical sites and critical underground water sources at risk.

Serving as one of California's headwaters, the aquifers beneath these lands deliver clean, cold water to Fall River, the state's largest spring system. The freshwater

springs not only provide a buffer from increasing drought and climate change but are a major groundwater source to ensure enough drinking water for millions of people in major metropolitan areas downstream and agricultural needs.

Designating Medicine Lakes Highlands as a national monument will create an opportunity for federal agencies to work with Tribal nations to steward important cultural resources and lands.

“Medicine Lake Highlands and the whole of Northern California is a treasure. Since returning from Vietnam and getting out of the Army, I’ve found myself drawn to the outdoors. I know many of my fellow veterans have experienced the same. While this is a special place to me, it’s a sacred place to Tribal communities — communities that include high numbers of veterans. Moreover, protecting this area safeguards vital waters that help prevent drought and provide millions of Californians with clean drinking water. I’m hopeful President Biden will designate Medicine Lake Highlands as a national monument.”

– Roger Gardner, U.S. Army veteran




Kw'tsan



The Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe is leading an effort to establish the Kw'tsán National Monument, calling on President Biden to protect more than 390,000 acres of the Tribe's ancestral homelands located in Imperial County, California. The proposed boundary incorporates the Indian Pass Area, Pilot Knob, Singer Geoglyphs, Buzzards Peak, and Picacho Peak Wilderness areas.

These lands, currently managed by the Bureau of Land Management, contain incredible cultural, ecological, recreational, scenic, and historic values that the Tribe is asking be preserved for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Bordered to the east by the lower Colorado River – a critical bird migration flyzone – the proposed monument would protect biodiversity, wildlife habitat, and critical wildlife corridors, in addition to cultural and historic objects. Flora and fauna within the proposed boundaries include roadrunners, Woodhouse Toads, Desert Tortoises,



Kit Fox, Saguaro, Algodones Dunes Sunflower, Chocolate Mountains Coldenia, and the Yellow Palo Verde.

The proposed national monument is also part of a greater cultural landscape, connecting Avi Kwa Lal, Palo Verde Peak, the proposed Chuckwalla National Monument, and Spirit Mountain in Avi Kwa Ame National Monument.

The Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe remains committed to the preservation of the cultural values, belief systems, life ways, traditional practices, and the sovereign legal rights of Native American people, and are seeking to establish an inter-governmental stewardship agreement between the Tribe and federal agencies for the management of the proposed monument. This would mean that Quechan values, knowledge, expertise, and worldviews would be incorporated into the new monument's management plan.

“As original stewards of this land, we are asking President Biden to take action to protect this important and sacred landscape by designating it as the Kw'tsán National Monument. As others see the land as just land and dirt, we, the Quechan people, see the land in our DNA. We come from the air, the water, the land. It's who we are, and protecting these lands preserves our past while safeguarding our future.”

– Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe President Jordan Joaquin

“The Kw'tsán National Monument is directly adjacent to our reservation but encompasses the heart of our aboriginal homelands. The Quechan people have been in this area since time immemorial, and we intend to protect these lands until the end of time.”

– Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe Council Member Donald W. Medart, Jr.

Conclusion

Veterans and military families have long been central figures in efforts to create, expand, and safeguard our nation's greatest treasures – our public lands and waters. For example, fellow veteran President Teddy Roosevelt used the Antiquities Act to protect millions of acres during his presidency. World War II veteran Earl Shaffer became the first person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail following his service. And the veterans of today who mobilized and organized

in communities across the nation for years to ensure that the Land and Water Conservation Fund was permanently and fully funded, an effort that was finally achieved with the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act. Wherever one finds an effort to protect our wild spaces, one will find a veteran lending their voice to those efforts.

We find ourselves again at an “All-hands-on-deck” moment for public lands, conservation, and preservation, here in California and across the country. Veterans are calling on President Biden to act ambitiously and decisively to designate all of the national monuments listed in this report, and more – the time is now.



Vet Voice Foundation

Founded in 2009, Vet Voice Foundation is a Veteran-led 501(c)(3) non-profit organization with more than 1.5 million members. VV Foundation empowers Veterans and military families by providing education, training, and tools to shape policy and engage in civic processes, harnessing the energy and drive of those who have served our country to create new civic leaders nationwide.

Since VV Foundation's inception, Veterans and military family members have been critical voices advocating for policies that contribute to a safer and more equitable world - including ending the "forever wars" in the Middle East, strengthening democratic systems here at home, fighting disinformation from malicious actors, tackling the climate crisis, ensuring all Americans have the freedoms that we swore an oath to protect and defend - including the right to vote, organize at work, and to access health care - and protecting public lands.

Vet Voice Foundation is a non-profit, non-partisan organization, organized under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended, for charitable and educational purposes.

For more information, please visit www.vvfnd.org or contact us at info@vvfnd.org.



All photos by Bob Wick except Medicine Lake by Michael McCullough