

**Statement of Vicki Varela
Director of Utah Office of Tourism**

**House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Legislative hearing of H.R. 4558
December 14, 2017**

Good morning, Chairman McClintock, ranking member Hanbusa, and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Vicki Varela. I am the director of tourism, film and global branding for the state of Utah. I am here to testify in support of H.R. 4558, establishing Escalante Canyons National Park and Preserve in south central Utah. If you have been to Utah, you know that Mother Nature played favorites, providing us with The Greatest Snow on Earth® and extraordinary red rock landscapes. This proposed national park features winding slot canyons, otherworldly sandstone domes and plateaus, and pinyon-juniper woodland against shimmering palettes of red. H.R. 4558 gives this area National Park recognition that is long overdue. The bill protects these beautiful places in perpetuity for some of the best exploration and recreation on earth. The amenities offered in national parks — trails, signage, transportation access, parking and staff — will enable us to properly welcome visitors from all over the world. This designation will generate prosperity in an economically distressed region of our state.

Tourism is big business in Utah, generating \$8.4 billion in spending last year, creating more than 144,000 jobs and \$1,226 of tax relief per Utah household. The Mighty 5® promotion of our five national parks and the campaigns that followed are the most successful tourism marketing campaigns in Utah history, generating \$6.72 billion of economic benefits. We want to provide Garfield County and the surrounding region a larger share of this tourism prosperity, and also provide a welcome mat to other economic development. An attractive place to visit is also a more attractive place to work or relocate a business. National park designation is the way to accomplish these community goals.

Escalante Canyons National Park and Preserve would be located at the midpoint of one of the most glorious roads on earth — the All-American Road: Scenic Byway 12. Two of Utah's five national parks bookend this scenic byway — Bryce Canyon to the southwest and Capitol Reef to the northeast. This 122 mile ribbon of road — with a new national park in the middle — will be an unparalleled triangle of adventure and discovery in the heart of south central Utah.

Utah's economy ranks among the best in the nation, but we have a silent recession in many rural communities. Young people are fleeing the towns where they grew up. They can't find work or community to sustain them. Governor Gary Herbert has called on Utahns to work together to create 25,000 jobs in rural Utah by 2020. Escalante Canyons National Park and Preserve is a missing puzzle piece to create many jobs.

You may wonder why we aren't already promoting this area. While we do feature a limited set of destinations and recommendations on our website, the lack of funding for BLM staff, signage and visitor amenities as simple as restrooms have made it impractical to promote. To put it simply, it is not safe for many visitors. National park status and all the amenities that come with it is an important tool for making this landscape more accessible. Establishing this new national park will also distribute

demand from national parks that experience seasonal constraints and overcrowding. It will spread out the love.

It is important to note that our national parks are severely underfunded. Utah's Zion National Park had a 60 percent increase in visitation since 2010 paired with a 3.7 percent funding cut. While national park status will dramatically improve investment in the area, it is essential that national park funding also be restored. I know this is important to Congressman Stewart and the rest of you. I look forward to seeing long term investment restored to protect national parks for generations to come.

In summary, investing in our landscapes for visitation is a path to jobs and vibrant communities. Tropic, Cannonville, Henrieville, Escalante, Boulder, Grover and Torrey all deserve a bigger share of Utah's economic prosperity. They deserve to have their children stay in the community where they were raised. The Escalante Canyons National Park and Preserve is the breakthrough to make this happen.

Thank you again for the opportunity to offer input, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

H.R. 4558

**VICKI VARELA
SUPPORTING MATERIALS**

**PREPARED FOR:
House Committee on Natural
Resources, Subcommittee on
Federal Lands**

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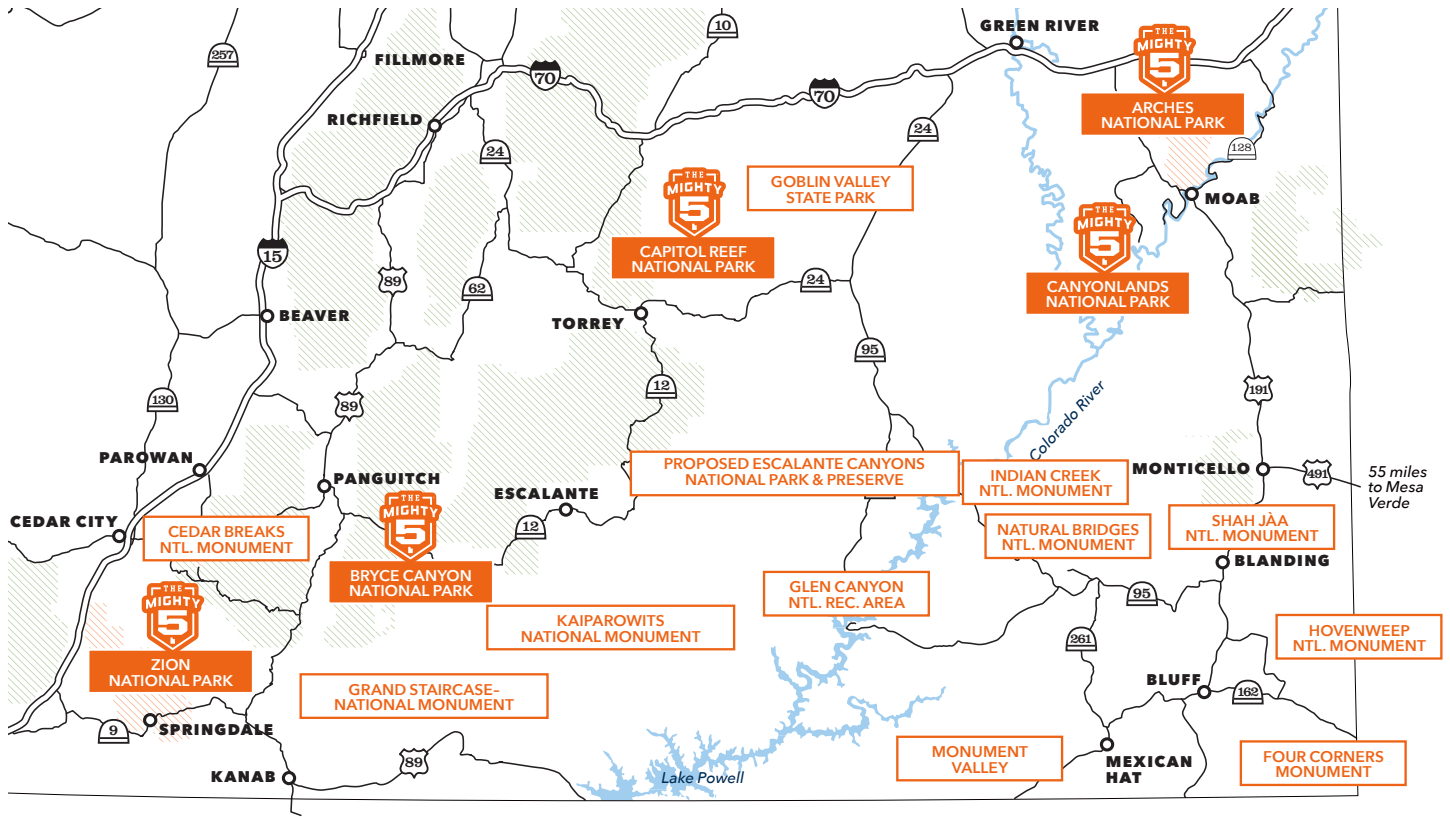


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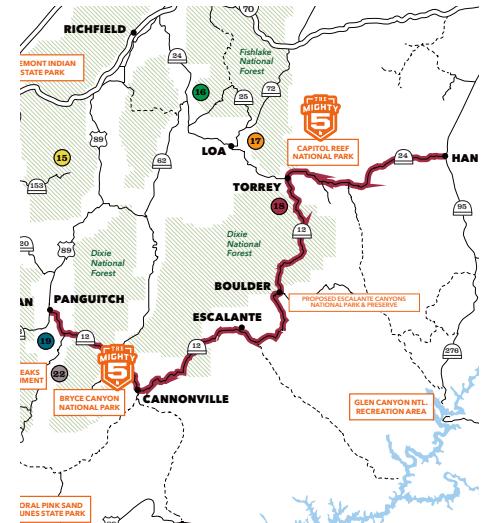
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GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT



Map of southern Utah, showing Utah's national parks, national monuments and Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park.



The iconic "hogback" formation on All-American Scenic Byway 12, connecting Capitol Reef National Park and the gateway town of Torrey to Panguitch, near Bryce Canyon National Park.

UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ESCALANTE CANYONS NATIONAL PARK AND PRESERVE

ALL-AMERICAN SCENIC BYWAY 12

All-American Scenic Byway 12, from Torrey to Panguitch traverses the aspen groves and timbered flanks of Boulder Mountain to the iconic hoodoos of Bryce Canyon National Park. The route is considered one of the most scenic drives in the United States due to its beauty, variety of terrain and unforgettable “hogback,” a sandstone ridge the width of the highway that drops away quickly on either side.

LOWER CALF CREEK FALLS

One of the iconic and most heavily visited destinations in the area is Lower Calf Creek Falls. The falls are accessed by a 6-mile, moderately strenuous round-trip hike to a stunning 126-foot waterfall at the end of a box canyon.

WILD AND OPEN SANDSTONE BACKCOUNTRY

For experienced outdoor recreationalists (hikers, canyoneers) there is a high concentration of slot canyons and sandstone domes — wilderness on a grand scale. The landscape is distinctive, unique and unforgettable. Most of these areas are currently only available to visitors with high-clearance 4WD vehicles, ample supplies strong backcountry skills and experience.

PALEONTOLOGY AND DINOSAUR DISCOVERY

To the south, the Kaiparowits Plateau has become a hotbed of paleontology. 90 million years ago, the area was the lost continent of Laramidia, an island of land separated by a shallow sea where dinosaurs, crocodiles, turtles and plant life evolved isolated from other species. Just as Australia has a proliferation of unique animals today, Laramidia contains species found nowhere else on earth. Though these fossils were featured in a recent article of National Geographic and can be seen in the Natural History Museum of Utah, there are few destinations within the monument for visitors to experience this rich dinosaur history, despite significant interest.

DARK SKIES AND ASTRO-TOURISM

This area is home to some of the country’s darkest night skies. To experience a moonless night and a sky filled with stars is truly an awe-inspiring moment. Nearby Capitol Reef National Park is an internationally certified gold-level Dark Sky Park. Utah has an abundance of certified Dark Sky Parks, making the state a top destination for visitors wanting to experience the true wonder of a starry night.

HUMAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

Human history in the Grand Staircase area extends back 13,000 years, with evidence of agriculture in the area dating back to 1,000 B.C. The northeastern part of the Grand Staircase area was inhabited by the Fremont peoples until 1,200 B.C. Later, the southern Paiute inhabited the area. Pottery, petroglyphs and granaries remain visible today.

In 1879, an expedition of approximately 250 Mormon pioneers left Escalante with instructions to settle the San Juan Mission (present day Bluff). The Hole in the Rock expedition of 1879 was an extraordinary feat of courage and fortitude to venture across rugged and unknown terrain to reach their destination. The Hole In The Rock Road, referenced in this legislation, follows the pioneers’ path to reach the San Juan Mission via a steep and narrow notch through Comb Ridge. What was originally planned as a six-week expedition required six months due to challenging terrain, navigation and weather.

