

The Fight to Save Chaco Canyon

Oil industry greed, Trump officials' anti-environmental extremism, and long-ignored Indigenous issues are coming together in one valiant uphill battle.

By NICK MARTIN The New Republic November 1, 2019

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On Wednesday, the House voted to pass the Chaco Cultural Heritage Area Protection Act, which would permanently ban any drilling or mining within a ten-mile radius of Chaco Canyon. The canyon is a historic and sacred site in New Mexico for the Pueblo nations and the Diné (Navajo Nation). It currently exists as a checkerboard of federally protected and unprotected lands.

Protecting Chaco—despite the show of support from the House—will be a fight. The bill still has to survive a Republican-held Senate and then somehow land the signature of President Donald Trump, whose approach thus far has been to strip protections from public lands and extract every last ounce of natural resources—unless the land is [near a place Trump needs votes](#) for the 2020 election. Chaco, located in a solidly blue state, is not.

The bill's main sponsor, Representative Ben Ray Luján, is committed to the uphill battle. “We do need a vote out of the Senate,” Luján told me by phone, the day before the House vote. “We need to sign into law to make sure that we are able to protect Chaco in perpetuity, for the Pueblo people and the Navajo people and the significance of what it means to us, not just in New Mexico or America, but the significant site that it is even globally.”

In championing Chaco in Congress, Luján was joined by Representatives Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo), Xochitl Torres Small, and Raul Grijalva, as well as New Mexico's Senators Tom Udall and Martin Heinrich. The Chaco battle is offering a political roadmap for how a grassroots movement led by Native American communities can successfully work with their local and federal political representatives toward protecting, and one day reclaiming, the land that was stolen from them. The path is not without its bumps.

Some hope for the Chaco bill has come from unusual places: Seventeen Republicans, including Chickasaw Nation citizen Tom Cole, joined Democrats in voting in favor of the bill. For the most part, though, the opposition has come from the people and organizations one could expect. Markwayne Mullin (Cherokee Nation) was the only Native member of the House to vote against the bill—not exactly [a shock](#) given his [record](#) and the fact that [the oil and gas industry rank as his top campaign donors](#).

Following public outcry over proposed drilling in Chaco, David Bernhardt, the secretary of the Department of the Interior, traveled there in the spring and subsequently [agreed to a one-year ban](#) on all drilling within ten-mile radius. But Bernhardt, [like many current federal agency leaders](#), has spent large chunks of his career working for the extraction industries. Having opposed H.R. 2181 prior to his visit, in the five months since the moratorium was put in place the Interior secretary has expressed no support for the bill.

There's a reason for this. The Interior has attempted to [lease](#) land for oil and gas companies within ten miles of Chaco [three separate times in the past two years](#). After facing the local uproar that was amplified by New Mexico's Democratic congressional delegation, the moratorium was instituted with the intention of pacifying the distraught parties. While it also provided a chance for Luján to push his bill through the House, the moratorium was never meant to actually protect Chaco in the long term, and the industrialists know it.

The New Mexico gas and oil industries have loudly expressed their opposition to the bill. Their support for the temporary moratorium has to be understood in light of the one-year buffer also potentially providing time for the Bureau of Land Management (run by [longtime anti-environmental extremist](#) William Perry Pendley) to push through an environmental and cultural study affirming that the land can in fact be parceled off to the highest bidder. "Our position is that we can protect cultural and archaeological resources while producing oil and gas," a spokesman for the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association [told the *Santa Fe New Mexican*](#) after Wednesday's vote.

Barring a surprising turn of events, H.R. 2181 will likely never land on Trump's desk, at least not before the next election. This means that Chaco will have to survive past next May without a drilling moratorium in place. Then, even if the Democrats were to retake the Senate and the White House in 2020, the bill would still need to be reintroduced, sent through committee, and then moved past stalwarts on both sides of the aisle who have pledged their loyalties to extractive industries.

As Indian Country witnessed for eight years during President Barack Obama's administration, protecting sacred lands isn't always simple, even with a Democrat in the Oval Office. "Under this administration, and to some extent under the Obama administration, the whole issue of natural gas, fracking—that extraction activity, it's continued to move at a very rapid pace," Grijalva said in a phone call two weeks ago. "And so Chaco Canyon became in danger with this activity. What the legislation did is create a buffer around it,

extending further into other areas that are not part of the national site at Chaco but still on public land and carrying significant cultural resources.”

Beyond the corporatists and their lapdogs in Congress, ignorance has emerged as an enemy in the fight for Chaco.

It’s not news that the American public is under-educated when it comes to basic Native history. That miseducation is not one bound by class: It extends even into the halls of the highest privilege. One of the most pressing matters for Luján, Haaland, Small, and Grijalva when trying to secure the necessary House votes was helping Congressional members who may not represent Native communities understand a very simple word: sacred.

“What people have a hard time understanding is putting the spiritual context into all of this,” Grijalva said. “We visited Chaco—and I had been there before—and spoke to tribal members, the Navajo and some of the Pueblos. The issue of the significance is much deeper for the tribes. It’s [a historic millennium touchstone](#). What it represents was the center of Native life before the contact [with Spanish and European colonizers]. And even after the other activity happened, it was a trade center, a commerce center, and so it seemed to Native people much larger than just some old site that needs to be preserved.”

On a conference call with the media on Thursday, Haaland said the movement to rally behind Chaco had a “unifying effect” on the Pueblos and Navajo Nation but that when it came to Congress, where some members wanted to limit the protections offered by the bill, she “had to remind my colleagues that there are some things more important than money.”

Spreading awareness and taking action on Native issues is one of countless reasons it’s crucial for progressive Native leaders like Haaland to occupy seats in Congress. Among them is the fact that [Haaland placed public lands atop her list of priorities](#) and announced [an open-door policy](#) for all of America’s tribal citizens. In March 2018, *High Country News* featured Diné activist Kendra Pinto, who spoke of how witnessing the global phenomenon of resistance in the Standing Rock case inspired Natives and Indigenous peoples like her to return to their homelands and start their own movements. This type of activism is where a politician’s open door becomes crucial; this is how grassroots fights turn into national movements. The fight to save Chaco did not start with Luján or Haaland or Grijalva—they simply picked up the baton handed to them by everyday Native citizens like Pinto, by Native-led groups [Tewa Women United](#) and [Pueblo Action Alliance](#) and [Diné C.A.R.E.](#), and by the [Diné and Pueblo governments](#).

While convincing the public to support land protections in America typically means designating the land a national park for public use, the true basis for these fights started by Indigenous people is the protection of Indigenous culture—the land, the artifacts, or the spiritually significant spaces. Luján said that when he was selling other members of Congress on the House bill, he would ask them to imagine what it would be like if their childhood church or their family burial ground was scheduled to be uprooted. It's not the perfect analogy, but in terms of generating enough empathy to convince non-Native politicians to vote against the extraction industry's wishes, at least in the House, it did the trick. That kind of historic victory, however temporary or initial it may be, is worth savoring.