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Political Issues Prompt Shakeup of Outdoor Retailer Trade Shows

The loss of trade shows in Salt Lake City are Denver's gain

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by Matt Alderton | July 14, 2017

Meetings and conventions are supposed to be about business. More and more, however, they're also about politics. The latest illustration of this is written all over Utah's Bears Ears National Monument. Although it's located 300 miles south of Salt Lake City's Salt Palace Convention Center, it's the epicenter of the meetings industry's latest political kerfuffle.

Protection vs. Profit

Bears Ears is Mother Nature at her best. Encompassing 1.35 million acres in southeast Utah, it's home to stunning stone arches, soaring buttes, breathtaking red rock canyons, and blankets of juniper, to say nothing of the ancient cliff dwellings, hogans, and rock art left there by centuries of Native Americans whose ancestors continue to hold traditional tribal ceremonies there in honor of their forebears.

Its natural beauty and historical significance is why President Barack Obama made Bears Ears a federally protected land in December 2016, bringing the total land he protected during his two terms in office to over 550 million acres -- more than double the amount staunch conservationist Theodore Roosevelt protected during his presidency.

"Following years of public input and various proposals to protect both of these areas, including legislation and a proposal from tribal governments in and around Utah, these monuments will protect places that a wide range of stakeholders all agree are worthy of protection," Obama said of Bears Ears and Gold Butte National Monument in Nevada, to which he also granted federal protection.

While many stakeholders did, in fact, agree with Obama, at least one group of stakeholders did not: Republican lawmakers.

On Feb. 3, Utah Gov. Gary Herbert signed a resolution calling on President Donald Trump to rescind Bears Ears' national monument status. And on April 26, Trump himself signed an executive order instructing U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke to review all national monument designations made over the last 21 years. Released in June, Zinke's recommendation was to reduce the size of Bears Ears National Monument, which Trump has called a "massive federal land grab."

"The federal government [does not have] unlimited power to lock up millions of acres of land and water, and it's time we ended this abusive practice," said Trump, who has yet to act on Zinke's recommendation.

Trump and Herbert want to give states the power to decide the fate of public lands. Doing so, they argue, will free up millions of acres with which to stimulate states' economies. Their critics, however, worry that the "economic development" Republican lawmakers envision is environmentally harmful oil and gas drilling.

"Bears Ears National Monument is more than just mere federal land to us, as it may be to many other stakeholders -- it is a living landscape; it has a pulse," said Shaun Chapoose, chairman of the Ute Indian Tribe Business Committee. "It is offensive for politicians to call the Bears Ears National Monument 'an abuse.' To the contrary, it is a fulfillment of our duty to preserve our cultures and our ancestral lands."

An Industry Reacts

Native Americans aren't the only ones who are angry about Bears Ears. America's outdoor industry also is upset. So much so that Outdoor Retailer, the nation's largest U.S. trade show for the outdoor community, has decided to move its longstanding events from Salt Lake City to Denver.

The events -- the Outdoor Retailer + Snow Show, the Outdoor Retailer Summer Market, and the Outdoor Retailer Winter Market -- have been held in Salt Lake City for each of the last 22 years and generate approximately $45 million in annual direct spending for the State of Utah.

"Our original decision to review venue options was a business decision. We had been exploring a change of dates to better suit the evolving buy/sell product cycle, optimize our hotel blocks, and work with the city to provide adequate space for our growing show. We were at a fork in the road -- extend our current contracts in Salt Lake City, or look for other options that would best support our need," Outdoor Retailer Vice President and Group Show Director Marisa Nicholson told *Successful Meetings*. "We notified Salt Lake officials that we would embark on an RFP process and consider multiple venues. At the time, we expected Salt Lake to remain a leading candidate to continue to host Outdoor Retailer."

Then, Bears Ears happened.

"Shortly after we made this decision ... our industry learned that certain state political leaders were officially asking the current Administration to formally review designations around public lands. At that point, we made the decision to accelerate our search for a replacement home for Outdoor Retailer and notified Salt Lake we would not be including the city in our RFP process for the future," Nicholson said.

While Outdoor Retailer leaves a huge deficit in Salt Lake's convention calendar, Salt Lake County Mayor Ben McAdams said the destination will rebound -- and will continue to leverage its outdoor assets as it courts replacement business.

"I'm sad to see Outdoor Retailer leave our area, but I have no doubt that our future as a convention and meetings destination is bright," McAdams said in a statement. "Salt Lake values the outdoor industry and the public lands that provide its recreation foundation. Our environmental record will serve us well as we promote the area to both new and repeat visitors and clients. We will continue to emphasize the value of a vibrant convention and visitor presence to our economy."

Meanwhile, Salt Lake's loss is Denver's gain.

"We couldn't be more excited that Denver was selected as the new home for the Outdoor Retailer show -- the leading national gathering for outdoor gear and brands," Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper said on Facebook last week. "The outdoor recreation community serves as an economic driver for our state and our nation, providing 229,000 jobs in Colorado alone. Like many outdoor activities, this accomplishment is the result of a true team effort and we want to thank everyone who helped make this happen."

Denver's contract with Outdoor Retailer will begin with the combined Snowsports Industry America (SIA) and Outdoor Retailer winter show in January 2018, followed by two additional shows in 2018. Each show is expected to attract more than 20,000 attendees representing roughly $35 million per show in economic impact.

Politics: The New Normal

The win won't just benefit Denver's economy, however. It also will benefit its reputation.

"As an outdoor city with such immediate proximity to the Rocky Mountains, Denver is thrilled to be the new home for Outdoor Retailer. The city and the state are committed to focusing on the vitally important outdoor industry -- not only because it creates nearly 313,000 jobs and billions of dollars in economic impact, but also because it positions us as thought leaders and champions of our natural resources," said Rachel Benedick, vice president of sales and services at Denver's convention and visitors bureau, Visit Denver.

"Colorado has shown that there is a fundamental support of public lands and, politically and culturally, the state is in opposition to any reduction of boundaries of national monuments or other public lands," added Darrell Denny, executive vice president of Emerald Expositions, the owner of Outdoor Retailer.

According to Denny, politics and meetings have always been bedfellows. Outdoor Retailer is proof, however, that the bed is getting cozier.

"I think every venue situation is different and any particular market's sensitivities will vary. That said, social media enables audiences to be aware of issues and speeds up and helps coalesce willingness to act. North Carolina's legislation around bathroom access is another example," Denny concluded. "I do think that politics has always been a consideration, but I think it may well be a larger consideration going forward."

Echoed Visit Denver President and CEO Richard Scharf, "In today's world, politics and related issues are becoming a big part of the decision making process. That is why more and more DMOs are monitoring issues at the state level and lobbying their legislators with pro travel, tourism, and convention messages. Outdoor Retailer's vision and mission are so much larger than only the brands and products they represent, and, as with any business or industry, their actions and decisions are intended to holistically represent their brand. We do anticipate that more organizations and industries will examine where they hold their meetings and where they have a presence much more closely, paying particular attention to how the politics of those destinations resonate with their mission and their consumers."

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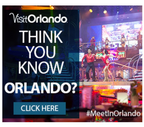

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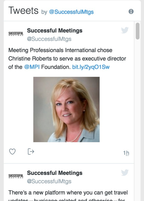

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