

If Some Budget Hawks Today Had Had Their Way Yesterday, There'd Be No Grand Canyon National Park (Nor Many Others)

The current Republican assault on the Antiquities Act, the impact of which rivals the better-known National Parks Act, is ideology run amok.

By Jim DiPeso

Congressman Raul Labrador of Idaho is one of the Tea Party bulls battering at the crockery in the federal china shop. As part of his ideological crusade, Labrador offered a Valentine's Day greeting to every American who cares about history, culture, and scenic beauty.

On Page H787 of the February 14, 2011 edition of the Congressional Record, you can see his Amendment 203 to the stopgap 2011 spending proposal that roiled D.C. all of last week: "None of the funds made available by this Act may be used to designate monuments under the Act of June 8, 1906 (commonly known as the 'Antiquities Act of 1906'; U.S.C. 431, et. seq.)."

Squashing the Antiquities Act, an amazingly effective conservation law that presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to [George W. Bush](#) have used to protect great American treasures, has nothing to do with getting the federal government's fiscal house in order. The cost of studying, proposing, designating, and administering national monuments doesn't amount to a raindrop in a hurricane.

Related: [Top 10 Republican Accomplishments for the Environment](#)

No, Labrador's proposal is simply reactionary ideology run amok. There is no room in such a barren view of the world for the traditional conservative ethic of saving America's heritage—cultural and natural—to respect what our ancestors set aside for us and to inspire, educate, and enlighten future generations.

It's hard to put a pricetag on such values. Good. The intangible things that we do together as a people for our own and our descendants' benefit cannot fit into a cost-effectiveness straitjacket and shouldn't be forced to.

Since it's President's Day weekend, an honor roll of selected national monuments established by presidents invoking their Antiquities Act authority would be in order, if Congressman Labrador cares to pay attention to history. Might as well start with Labrador's home state and with, arguably, the most conservative president of the 20th century.

Craters of the Moon National Monument is a striking landscape of lava flows, cinder cones, and sagebrush benches in southern Idaho. It was established by Calvin Coolidge in 1924, who used the Antiquities Act to set aside a monument covering more than 22,000 acres. In 1928, he invoked the law again to double the monument's size. Today, the monument covers more than 715,000 acres.

Coolidge and his wife Grace were well known for their affection for animals. During Coolidge's presidency, the First Couple was presented a gift of two lion cubs that he named Tax Reduction and Budget Bureau. The cubs were sent to the Rock Creek zoo to live.

Coolidge invoked the Antiquities Act 13 times, preserving such treasures as Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, Chiricahua in Arizona, and, most spectacularly, Glacier Bay in Alaska, where he set aside nearly 1.4 million acres.



Grand Canyon National Park was established as an 808,000-acre national monument by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908 and re-designated a national park by Congress in 1919. In 1932, Herbert Hoover established a second Grand Canyon monument covering 273,145 acres. The park was further enlarged in 1975 when Congress incorporated Hoover's monument, the Marble Canyon National Monument, and parts of Lake Mead and Glen Canyon National Recreation Areas into the park.

Roosevelt's conservation achievements, including his use of the Antiquities Act to establish 18 national monuments, is well known. TR set the precedent that made the Antiquities Act a powerful conservation tool. Besides the incomparable Grand Canyon, TR's monuments include Devils Tower, Gila Cliff Dwellings, Muir Woods, and what are now Petrified Forest, Lassen Volcanic, and Olympic National Parks (below, right), and Chaco Culture and Tumacacori National Historical Parks.



Related: [The 10 Presidents Who Did the Most for the Environment](#)

Less well known is Hoover's robust use of the Antiquities Act. In addition to the second Grand Canyon monument, Hoover established what are now Arches, Death Valley, Saguaro, and Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Parks, in addition to the amazing Great Sand Dunes of Colorado and White Sands of New Mexico. In all, Hoover invoked the Antiquities Act nine times to further conservation.

Before Labrador continues his blinkered crusade to strip American presidents of a powerful tool for safeguarding intangible treasures from transient political fancies, he might ponder what Hoover had to say about what the outdoors can do for a people during troubled times:

"The spiritual uplift, the goodwill, cheerfulness, and optimism that accompanies every expedition to the outdoors is the peculiar spirit that our people need in times of suspicion and doubt."

Take the Great Engineer's advice, Congressman. Get out of D.C. and go camping. The still, stark beauty of Craters of the Moon awaits a chance to calm minds and let them reflect.

Update: On Friday, the House rejected another amendment that would have barred use of the Antiquities Act. That amendment was sponsored by Nevada Republican Dean Heller. Labrador's amendment did not come up for a vote before the underlying budget resolution passed Saturday morning.