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Monuments hold our past, deserve respect

When Canyon de Chelly in the northeastern corner of Arizona was threatened, President Herbert Hoover was able to save it by naming it a national monument under authority granted by the Antiquities Act of 1906, 80 years ago this month.

Now, ancient and sacred places like Canyon de Chelly, the Grand Canyon and the other natural, historic and cultural treasures that tell our story and connect us to our past may not be protected if efforts to limit the Antiquities Act succeed.

Canyon de Chelly was named a national monument in 1931 — a move that helped



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protect the past and future of the Navajo (or Dine) peoples. Today, the canyon is home to 12th-century Anasazi village ruins and more than 200 Dine families.

The permanent protection and unique arrangement the National Park

Service has with the Navajo tribe have ensured that the lands that support the Dine creation stories — places like Spider Rocks, the twin 800-foot rock towers where the deific Spider Woman lives — still inspire our children, just as they stirred our grandfathers.

Americans are united in our belief that protecting the beauty, health and history of our country for our children and grandchildren is of paramount importance. And for more than a century, with the support of the American people, presidents of both parties have used the authority of the Antiquities Act to rise above the politics of their day and better protect our national treasures for future generations.

At a time when Congress is so polarized and unlikely to agree or move with urgency, the president's authority to protect

areas under immediate threat should not be curtailed or compromised.

Fifteen presidents, from Theodore Roosevelt to George W. Bush, have used the Antiquities Act to create national monuments to protect natural, cultural, historic and prehistoric landmarks.

But now, some members of Congress and state legislatures are working to weaken the authority that established the Canyon de Chelly National Monument. They would deny Americans the inspirational, environmental, recreational, educational and economic benefits of places like this rare and unrivaled canyon.

Economic studies point out that protected lands such as national monuments spur tourism and recreational visits and are economic engines for surrounding communities and even the states where they are located.

Just last month, a North Carolina congresswoman introduced a bill that would inject state politics into the monument process — a politically motivated policy change that would give states the ability to veto new national monuments.

Had this been the policy in 1908, Arizona, because of its objections to naming the Grand Canyon a national monument, would have cost each of us and our grandchildren the chance to marvel at this national wonder. Today, Arizona proudly calls itself the "Grand Canyon State" and benefits from more than half a billion dollars in tourism every year. Proof that times and thinking change and that the ability to take the long view is essential.

Short-sighted efforts like the bills before Congress and state legislatures to kill monument-making cannot be allowed to become tomorrow's mistakes. We need to support the ability of our nation's leaders to save our national treasures for our children, instead of sacrificing them for short-term gains.

Christopher Clark Deschene is a member of the Navajo Nation and a former member of the Arizona House of Representatives.