PastForward Online 2021 Conference Proceedings: Lead the Change
The Time to Act is Now: Protecting Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis

DEB HAALAND, SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

G uw’aadzi haupa. Hello everyone, I’m Deb Haaland, Secretary of the Department of the Interior and proud member of the Pueblo of Laguna. I’m grateful to deliver remarks at the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s PastForward plenary session.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge that I’m joining you from the traditional and ancestral homelands of the Anacostan and Piscataway people here in Washington, D.C. Many may think that land acknowledgements are a new custom, but the practice actually dates back centuries in many Native nations and communities. Land acknowledgments recognize Indigenous people who are the original stewards of the lands where we live and work. As the globe faces the existential threat that climate change poses, the recognition of the Indigenous stewards of our land, air, and water helps us to center those voices and honors the millennia of traditional knowledge that can and should guide us as we tackle our toughest challenges.

Your motto, “Save the past. Enrich the future.” aligns strongly with our mission at the Department of the Interior and with President Biden’s goals for the United States in this pivotal moment. It’s a moment in which we face the overlapping crises of a global pandemic, a climate crisis, economic uncertainty, and racial injustice.

I’ll start by giving a brief overview of how we at the U.S. Department of the Interior work to preserve cultural sites. Our department’s roles in culture and nature are deeply interconnected. In fact, part of our mission is to protect the nation’s natural resources and cultural heritage. Through efforts such as the World Heritage Program, the department works in partnership with other countries to preserve and share our nation’s and the world’s cultural and natural heritage. We’re proud to host workshops that bring World Heritage Site Managers together to share ideas and best practices, and plan for the future. Heritage is an essential resource for living cultures and human identity.
As the first Native American Cabinet Secretary for the United States, I come to the table with a deep respect and profound connection to cultural sites across our country. I applaud the National Trust for Historic Preservation for your long history of advocacy and incredible progress in recognizing the important historic sites that are part of our collective memory.

Identification, preservation, management, and sharing of our cultural heritage on public lands helps tell our stories. And telling those stories helps us to be better public servants and build a more inclusive future. It is my goal to make sure we’re telling the whole story of the United States by preserving cultural sites that reflect all perspectives, including communities that have been underrepresented in the past, and making sure that we build on, learn from, and react to what came before. We help give those communities a voice. We re-tell and elevate their stories, and in many cases, we help people to understand the hardships of those people and the origins of inequity. These special places can make people feel, laugh, and cry. These special places can make people care.

President Biden demonstrated his commitment to preserving sites that are culturally significant when he took profound action to permanently protect the Bears Ears, Grand Staircase-Escalante, and Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine national monuments.
As I stood on the White House lawn for the announcement, I felt the weight of that moment and remembered the many times I felt the presence of my ancestors in those canyons.

Historic places hold the memories, feelings, and lessons of the past.

In my culture and in many Indigenous cultures around the world, we are taught at a very young age that our actions impact not just ourselves, but our entire community and thus the generations that follow. That deep understanding grounds much of the work we do at the Department of the Interior, but none can be more pressing than the climate crisis. Right now, we’re in a pivotal moment in which communities across the globe face harsher storms, longer droughts, more intense fires, and extreme heat and cold caused by climate change. This is a moment that calls on us to recognize that climate change impacts every person on this planet, but not every person on this planet has the same access to life-saving resources or the ability to relocate when disaster strikes. Entire communities and cultures are at risk of being lost to the perils of climate change. The natural resources that have sustained Indigenous peoples for centuries in forests, grasslands, rivers, coral reefs, and other natural habitats are being destroyed by extreme weather events and climatic shifts. Cultural traditions are being irrevocably altered in the face of climate change. Communities that have been marginalized throughout history face some of the most devastating impacts.

The time to act is now. Earlier this month, the Biden-Harris administration released our climate action plans. The Department of the Interior’s plan centers on environmental justice, builds resilient communities, and invests in a clean energy future that can create millions of good-paying union jobs while protecting the natural and cultural resources on which we all rely. By taking bold action, we ensure that the special and sacred places that you all work so hard to raise awareness about and protect are preserved well into the future. It’s a win-win: Not only do we create a more sustainable future full of opportunity for generations to come, but we also preserve the histories and memories of the generations that came before us.
Together, our work will promote climate resilient lands, waters, and cultural resources; advance climate equity; transition to a resilient clean energy economy; support tribal and insular community resilience; empower the next generation of conservation and resilience workers; enhance climate literacy; and bolster climate resilience in the management of sites, facilities, and supply of products and services. We have a president who not only recognizes the inequities that exist but is showing through action that we are ready to lead the world toward a sustainable, equitable, and inclusive future.

One of the tools we use to preserve and maintain these important sites is through the Great American Outdoors Act. When I was a member of the House Natural Resources Committee, I worked with my colleagues to pass this bill. Now, as Secretary of the Interior, I can put this law into action. For example, the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund provides $8.2 million to stabilize the cliff that is part of the foundation of the San Fernando Bastion. The National Park Service also recently completed a $6 million multi-year construction project that

Historic Fort Yellowstone is the recipient of $22.3 million from the Great American Outdoors Act Legacy Restoration Fund. The army fort was established in 1891 to assist in effectively managing the park prior to the establishment of the National Park Service.
repaired about half a mile of historic masonry walls including an original city gate on the west side of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

When I visited Yellowstone National Park earlier this year, I saw the largest Legacy Restoration Fund project focused on historic preservation. We’re investing $22.3 million to address the deterioration of historic Fort Yellowstone. These investments are also funding the National Park Service’s Historic Preservation Training Center and Historic Architecture Conservation and Engineering Center so that we can develop Preservation Maintenance Action Teams. These teams will develop, coordinate, and deploy experienced personnel to address high-priority deferred maintenance projects at small and medium parks, while introducing youth in underrepresented communities and veterans to the skills, knowledge, and opportunities in historic preservation.

This is one of the many tools in our toolbox that we’re using to serve as a partner to you, and to be good stewards of our lands by preserving the past. We can learn from it and build an equitable and sustainable future we can all be proud of. Thank you for all you do. Please know that as we take bold action to address the climate crisis, we also think about how we work with partners like you to tell America’s story for generations to come. Thank you all. FJ

DEB HAALAND is Secretary of the Department of Interior.