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In the Beginning

At 100, the Antiquities Act has proven its worth.

BY DWIGHT YOUNG

We'll need a really big cake. And since there will be 100 candles blazing on it, we'd better have a fire extinguisher close by.

This year marks the centennial of the Antiquities Act. If that doesn't strike you as an excellent reason for a bang-up birthday party, you don't realize how important this particular piece of legislation is.

In the first years of the 20th century, plenty of people—inside and outside the scientific community—were alarmed by the rapid destruction of America's archaeological heritage. Ancient ruins were being toppled by visitors, sites despoiled by looters, and priceless artifacts assembled and even displayed in museums with little concern for their original context. Much of the damage was being done on public land, and the government had little power to stop it.

The 1906 Antiquities Act changed all that. It established a procedure for authorizing legitimate archaeological investigations and set penalties for destroying or stealing artifacts. Perhaps most important, it gave the president the power to protect "historic landmarks, historic and prehistoric structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest" on federal land by designating them national monuments.

Very soon after signing the act, President Theodore Roosevelt started putting it to good use. Ironically, the first place he named a national monument was a geological feature, not an archaeological site: Devils Tower, the enormous volcanic monolith that rises like a Brobdingnagian tree stump in Wyoming. (In case you've forgotten, it's the mountain Richard Dreyfuss famously modeled in mashed potatoes in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.) Other designations followed: Within three years, Roosevelt created 18 monuments, including such natural features as Arizona's Petrified Forest and Grand Canyon—an impressively big "object of scientific interest" indeed—and historic sites like the Chaco Canyon ruins and Gila Cliff Dwellings in New Mexico.

Almost every White House occupant since 1906 has followed TR's lead. Use of the Antiquities Act has been resolutely bipartisan: Republican chief executives have created 60 national monuments; their Democratic counterparts have created 63. The roster of those presidentially proclaimed (many of which were later designated national parks) reads as a "greatest hits" list of our best-known and most-cherished scenic and historic places, from Death Valley and Carlsbad Caverns to the Statue of Liberty, Little Bighorn Battlefield, and President Lincoln's summer cottage here in Washington.

But the act did more than save some places from being paved over or simply allowed to crumble. For one thing, it greatly—and permanently—expanded the federal role in preservation. Although it applied only to land owned or controlled by the U.S. government, it laid the groundwork for later laws—including the 1935 Historic Sites Act and the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act—that fostered the recognition and protection of both public and private historic places. Also, by setting policies for archaeological investigation, the act encouraged us to see our heritage not as a commercial asset but as a public treasure, something to be treated with the utmost respect, deserving only the best practices, highest scholarship, and most up-to-date technology in its identification, preservation, and



Devils Tower, Wyoming (NPS)

interpretation.

A century after the Antiquities Act was signed, the good news is that historic resources on federally managed lands are generally better off than they were in 1906. The bad news is that many such resources are still very much in jeopardy, as evidenced by the fact that the National Landscape Conservation System—comprising 26 million acres of mountains, forests, prairies, and deserts in 12 western states—appeared on last year's list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places (see articles on pages 7 and 28). In 2006, just as in 1906, our historic and cultural treasures need the safeguards provided by this farsighted legislation.

The actual anniversary of the Antiquities Act is June 8, but it's okay if you celebrate a bit early. Sometime in May, for instance. It's Preservation Month.

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