

# A park in Lava Bed's future?

Monument's diversity should merit upgrade, help local economy



Lee Juillerat

## Places to Explore

A visitor to the Lava Beds National Monument, just southwest of Tulelake, Calif., can explore a wide variety of lava tubes and caves, both guided and unguided. Portions of the monument are open year-round.

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The Klamath-Tulelake region has one national park. Why not two?

Why not encourage tourists to drive the 125 or so miles after a visit to Crater Lake National Park to Lava Beds National Monument with its unique blend of history and solid lava surface geography honeycombed by caves?

On the way, they can do some bird-watching at refuges and wetlands along the state-line area and maybe stop for a meal in Klamath Falls, Merrill or Tulelake. It might mean spending an extra day or two in the local area, and certainly the motels and restaurants can use any extra business they can get.

That encouragement could come, if the Lava Beds National Monument were upgraded to national park status. Just the attempt to do so should draw extra attention to it. The value of actually getting it done would put the Lava Beds on a unique list of scenic and geologic treasures.

Google the terms "national park," and "national monument." We got 20 times as many hits (1.42 billion) for national park as we did for national monument. There should be a message in that.

That doesn't mean that all of a sudden, we could expect 20 times as many people visiting the Lava Beds, crawling through its caves (watch your head!), and walking through the natural fortifications a band of Modoc Indians used in the winter of 1872-73 to stand off U.S. forces. But there should be an increase, and that would help the area economically.

The term 'national monument' is vague and can be anything from a 1-acre site of a fort built to protect New York City from the British in the War of 1812 or one that includes many thousands of acres of wildlands.

Don't take that as a putdown of the designation, because it also means there's something of value there. That's true of the Lava Beds along with all of the other national monuments, even the ones only an acre in size, such as Castle Clinton in New York, or Appomattox in Virginia, where the Civil War ground to an end.

But national parks are truly special, and to make the list takes unique qualities.

According to National Park Service documents online, a national monument “is intended to save at least one nationally significant resource. It is usually smaller than a national park and lacks its diversity of attractions.”

A national park, the documents say, “contains a variety of resources and encompasses large land or water areas to help provide protection of the resources. Hunting, mining and consumptive activities like logging and grazing are not authorized.” Those same restrictions are in effect on national monuments, so they wouldn’t change.

As for size, Lava Beds National Monument includes 47,000 acres. There are several national parks smaller than that, ranging down to Hot Spring National Park in Arkansas at 5,549 acres.

There shouldn’t be any need to expand federal land ownership to accommodate ‘Lava Beds National Park.’ The change would primarily be aimed at improving visibility of what the Lava Beds has to offer. In history, that includes not just the Modoc War, but ancient petroglyphs that may be as much as 6,000 years old.

Many years later, during prohibition, some of the caves were used to produce moonshine. Zane Grey used the Lava Beds as a site for his novel, “Forlorn River.” He visited the area and Crater Lake as well.

As for another aspect of the monument, the science — the monument’s rough-hewn, craggy surface was formed by layers of lava flows from the Medicine Lake shield volcano about 10-15 miles southwest of the park’s visitors’ center.

The constant flows into the area over a time span of 500,000 years created nearly 700 lava tube caves. Many are accessible to the public. According to the National Park Service, the park area covers about 10 percent of the Medicine Lake volcano’s surface area.

We see the change to a park status as a natural fit for the area. But it’s not something that can happen overnight.

Even if successful — and that’s a big “if” — this would be a years-long process requiring a group willing to contact members of Congress, work with the National Park Service and promote the idea, year after year.

If there’s a group out there willing to step forward and identify itself as willing to take on a big task and stick with it, please let us know.

Today’s editorial written by Pat Bushey.

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