|  |
| --- |
| The Honorable Sally Jewell  Secretary of the Interior  1849 C Street NW  Washington, DC 20240 |

 [DATE]

Dear Secretary Jewell:

In February of this year, President Obama designated three new National Monuments in the California desert: 1.) Mojave Trails, 2.) Sand To Snow, and 3.) Castle Mountains. California Senator Dianne Feinstein was the leading proponent advocating these designations, which originated from a bill she sponsored, the California Desert Conservation and Recreation Act (S. 414).

I support the conservation objectives enshrined in the national monument designations, which will ensure the protection of California’s wildlands, its natural landscapes, and fragile ecosystems. I am concerned, however, that the President’s proclamations omitted explicit language to accommodate rockhounding within the newly created monuments. Senator Feinstein has endorsed such an accommodation similar to the one she specifically included in her bill (see Sec. 101).

Some areas within the monuments have been longtime favorite collecting areas for amateur rockhounds and fossil collectors ­– some dating back 100 years or more. The Mojave Trails National Monument (MTNM) is the most impactful to the rockhound community. Some of the most important areas include Afton Canyon; Cady Mountains; Chambless; Kelbaker Road area adjacent to the Trilobite Wilderness/Marble Mountain area, Bristol Mountains (Strawberry Onyx Mine); Cadiz (Siam Siding); Broadwell Lake area (west of Kelso Dunes Wilderness); Lavic Siding and Jasper Hill; Hector Hills and Pisgah Volcano lava flow; and Amboy Crater.

I am pleased for Senator Feinstein’s support of the rockhound community and also that of California BLM Director Jerome Perez. He clarified BLM’s rock collecting policies within the monument while a management plan is being drafted. A notice was published on the BLM website on May 13, 2016:

“The Presidential proclamation that designated the Monument provides latitude for existing uses and activities and does not limit or prohibit rock hunting. Rockhounders are welcome to continue collecting limited amounts of rocks, minerals, and gemstones in the Monument in accordance with the Bureau of Land Management’s rock collecting guidelines.”

While this is a most welcome clarification, it is an interim policy which affords no guarantee that amateur rockhounding will be accommodated as a permissible recreational activity in the monuments in the future. At the recent Desert District Advisory Council (DAC) meeting held in Barstow, California, on May 21, 2016, several speakers, including DAC members, are on record expressing precisely this concern. Specific language needs to be incorporated into the final Management Plan to ensure that amateur rockhounding will be permissible in all three new National Monuments in California. In general, I would like to see this policy applied to other monuments.

Historically, the BLM, U.S. Forest Service, and National Park Service, have not limited or forbidden rockhounding on public lands. In other words, the custom and culture of rockhounding has been recognized and validated as a matter of policy and practice over many decades.

Recreational Rockhounding is defined as the Non-Commercial collecting of Rocks, Minerals and Fossils, according to established laws, rules and regulations, for personal and educational use, see: Part 8365 of Title 43 CFR [Code of Federal Regulations], which provides for the collecting of “reasonable quantities” of rocks, minerals, semiprecious gemstones, and invertebrate and plant fossils of non-scientific importance, for personal use.

I believe Recreational Rockhounding practiced responsibly is consistent with the conservation values protected by the National Monument designations, which includes historical, cultural, and educational values. Rockhounds are well-known for being responsible stewards who want to preserve public lands in perpetuity and for future generations to enjoy. ­ Our mineral clubs and our families teach these values to our children. We pack in and pack out, careful not to leave trash or scar the landscape, which we value for its natural beauty and habitat.

It should be emphasized also that the National Monument designation is consistent with the Code of Ethics of the American Federation of Mineralogical Societies (AFMS) and its 108 member societies of the California Federation of Mineralogical Societies, Inc. (CFMS). On CFMS affiliate-sponsored field trips, participants sign a waiver adhering to the AFMS Code of Ethics, which stipulates that rock collecting activity should cause no willful damage to collecting material and “...take home only what ...[we] can reasonably use,” “practice conservation and ...utilize fully and well the materials...collected and ...recycle...surplus for the pleasure and benefit of others,” and “appreciate and protect our heritage of natural resources.”

Access to public lands is essential to collect, preserve, and exhibit rocks, minerals, and fossils. It provides opportunities to enrich the public’s appreciation of nature. It is a living outdoor classroom where students, naturalists, and amateur enthusiasts/recreational users can learn about California’s unique natural resources, geology, and minerals.

This letter respectfully requests that you provide accommodation in the Management Plans of the three new California National Monuments to allow recreational rockhounding activity. To be effective, it is important not to close vehicular access and staging areas near collecting areas. Many amateur rockhounds who participate in field trips are senior citizens, and long treks by foot or by pack animal carrying water and rocks is impractical. It can make some sites effectively inaccessible. Numerous secondary trails and travelways are found throughout the MTNM, many of them dating to the 1930s. We would like the Management Plan to stipulate vehicular access via not only main roads, but also along existing secondary travelways.

Thank you for considering the needs and rights of the public, specifically, the amateur rockhound community, in the Management Plan for National Monuments in Southern California.

Sincerely,

[Your name here]

[Your address here]

[Your club affiliations, if you wish]

cc: The Honorable Dianne Feinstein

Senator

880 Front Street

Suite 3296

San Diego, CA 92101

Michael Ahrens

Acting Field Manager

Bureau of Land Management

Needles Field Office

1303 S. Hwy 95

Needles, CA 92363

Stephen Razo

BLM California Desert District External Affairs

22835 Calle San Juan de Los Lagos

Moreno Valley, CA 92553

Katrina Symons

Field Manager

Bureau of Land Management

Barstow Field Office

2601 Barstow Road

Barstow, CA 92311