

Bertha Gutierrez, *Living Monuments*

Las Vegas is in the heart of the Mojave Desert, surrounded by mountain ranges and valleys bursting with life. Mountains and valleys where Indigenous communities have lived, moved around, and thrived for thousands of generations. Mountains and valleys I now also recognize as home.

Growing up, the concept of land protection was foreign to me, but knowing to protect the land, the natural resources, the plants and animals, the water and trees, was part of who I was. I grew up in the middle of Central America, in a city of a million people, but surrounded by ancient trees and colorful birds, under a hot sun that set behind a volcano every evening. Spending time outside, rolling on the grass, hiding behind trees, getting dirt stuck under my fingernails, tripping on rocks, and getting cut by thorns and sharp rocks taught me how important it is to maintain a good relationship with nature and the land I am on. We get so much from nature. I've carried that knowledge and respect for the land as life has moved me around from the tropics, to the Ozarks region in Arkansas, to the Mojave Desert in southern Nevada.

Protecting the land we are on is to protect our lives, our future, and the future of those who will come after us. This truth has never felt more real than now, as we feel the effects of climate change on a daily basis and our communities globally deal with more wildfires, more hurricanes, more draught. Scientists tell us we must protect intact habitats and prevent habitat loss in order to mitigate climate change, by protecting at least 30 percent of land and oceans by the year 2030. While that may seem like a big goal, we can all take part of it. We can start small, by getting to know the lands around us and learn about and from them, and communicating that connection to elected officials so they know the lands hold value to us. You can send your message in a letter, a postcard, a tweet, or a petition signature.

Striving for a more respectful and balanced relationship with the land will help us ensure our survival. And looking around the desert that surrounds Las Vegas, we can see so many treasures worth preserving. One of the ways to protect land from development and further destruction is through different conservation designations by the President or Congress that dictate the way federal lands are managed, one of those being a National Monument designation. A place may receive national monument status for its cultural, historical, scientific, or scenic values. There are three national monuments in Nevada: Tule Springs Fossil Beds National Monument, Basin and Range National Monument, and Gold Butte National Monument. And a fourth monument has been proposed, Avi Kwa Ame (Spirit Mountain) National Monument. Avi Kwa Ame means Spirit Mountain in Mojave, and it encompasses the landscape that stretches from Newberry

mountains in the east to the New York, South McCullough, Castle, and Piute mountains in the west.

The lands in the proposed Avi Kwa Ame National Monument are home to a wide variety of plant and animal life. They are home to the biggest Joshua tree in the State of Nevada and countless archaeological sites that hold the history of these lands and the people that have inhabited the area for thousands of years. The landscape is sacred to ten Yuman-speaking tribes, as it is tied to their creation and well being, as well as being sacred to the Hopi and Chemehuevi Paiute tribes. And they all have been fighting off different projects attempting to develop the lands inside the proposed monument landscape for years. Standing anywhere inside the proposed Avi Kwa Ame National Monument lands one can easily appreciate their sacredness, their beauty, and their value in the stillness that bursts with life. We can support the efforts for protection now.

Up until I moved to the States, to me, monuments were man-made statues and structures dedicated to moments in history, to religious figures, and to mostly men who did one thing or another, the truth usually erased and replaced by stories I had to learn in school. So the thought of a monument being a place in its natural state, preserved for the cultural, historical, scenic, or scientific value went against everything I knew about the concept of a monument. It told me a different story, the story of elevating the glory of nature to be held in awe, learned from, and protected for future generations. Preserving the lands, their cultural value, the stories the lands hold, and the habitats that will allow countless species to continue living, means also preserving ourselves and our future.

In the moving we all do through life and through places, one thing that remains constant is our dependence on the land. We depend on it for provisions of food, water, clean air, and belonging. We must not forget we are tied to the well being of the lands that surround us, and we can all work to preserve the ancient mountains and valleys so alive, so gorgeous, and so vital to our own survival.

NOTES:

Go to <https://honorspiritmountain.org/> to learn more about the proposed national monument and to add your name in support of the designation.

Go to <https://www.campaignfornature.org/> to learn more about the need to protect 30 percent of the lands and oceans by 2030.

BIOGRAPHY

Originally from El Salvador, Bertha Gutierrez moved to Las Vegas from northwest Arkansas at the end of 2016. She is an artist and nature lover. Her interest in the outdoors and civic engagement led her to her current work at Conservation Lands Foundation. Bertha has a B.A. in Journalism and Art from the University of Arkansas. She has 16 nibblings and lives with her cat Dwayne. She enjoys hiking, star gazing, camping in the desert, drawing, and painting. She's part of the team bringing the *Wild & Free: A Battleborn Podcast* to the community in Nevada.