

# Official Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Statement: Addressing the False Cultural Connection of Bent Trees to Traditional Practices of the Ute Nation

June 2019



Dear Federal, State, and Local Governments, Public, and all other interested parties:

This statement is the official position of The Southern Ute Indian Tribe and the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe of the Ute Nation—regarding “Bent Trees” within the heartland of our aboriginal territory and ancestral hunting-grounds in the State of Colorado. While other Tribes may have conducted these types of practices, the practice of bending trees is not part of the customary cultural traditions of Ute people, past or present, who comprise the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribes.

Bent Trees have also been classified as “Spirit Trees”, “Ute Prayer Trees”, “Burial Trees”, “Trail Marker Trees”, “Ceremonial Trees”, and “Vortex Trees”, among other classifications. These trees have been falsely attributed to the Ute Nations’ general cultural practices. The aboriginal and ancestral territory of the Ute Nation includes the entire state of Colorado, the northern reaches of New Mexico, the northern reaches of Arizona, the entire state of Utah, the southern portion Wyoming that lies south of the Platt River, the western reaches of Kansas, and the western portion of the Oklahoma and Texas panhandle.

Some individuals, claiming to possess Ute cultural knowledge, have incorrectly asserted that Ute people purposefully bent trees for cultural purposes. According to tribal elders, tribal historians, spiritual leaders, and traditional practitioners from the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribes agree this is not a known Ute practice within our oral tradition; nor is it practiced today.

As a matter of record, we provided the following statements from several Ute Nation Tribal Elders, who are identified to speak on the behalf of Ute culture:

Mr. Alden Naranjo, Southern Ute Tribal Elder, oral and cultural historian, and President of Native American Church of the Southern Ute Indian Reservation:

Before I address matters about Ute History and culture, I was taught by my elders that it is important to start out by addressing which bands were in the location(s) that were going to be discussed. It is important to acknowledge which bands lived in what areas, due to slight cultural differences among bands, which resulted from intermarrying. Additionally, due to the social organization of the Ute peoples, family specific traditions also exist. Therefore, the cultural traditions of the Ute Nation cannot be generalized.

“Bent trees” identified in the aboriginal territory and traditional hunting-grounds of the Mouache and Capote bands (of today’s Southern Ute Indian Tribe) were not purposefully bent by Ute peoples. The aboriginal territory and traditional hunting-grounds of the Mouache and Capote bands of Ute, in today’s context, is best understood as encompassing today’s geographic areas of: The Front Range, Royal Gorge, and San Luis Valley. More specifically, the aboriginal territory and traditional hunting-grounds of the Mouache and Capote bands of Utes were essentially the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains, including: the areas as far north-eastern as Colorado-Wyoming-Oklahoma border, as far east as the Colorado-Oklahoma-Texas panhandle border, and south into northern New Mexico to Tukumcari. The Capote homelands extended south into the Jemez Mountains, where they wintered with the Jemez people. It was Jemez Pueblo who gave the Capote band their name.

As a practitioner of my spirituality and as a cultural representative designated by the Southern Ute Indian Tribal Council, my statement about the so-called “bent trees” is based on oral history passed down to me by tribal elders, past and present, who possess the oral history of our people’s history and who are traditional spiritual practitioners of our faith and lifeways, descendent from both the Mouache and Capote bands of Utes.

I have been active in my tribal community all my life and raised in our traditional ways. As such, tribal elders have never told me about our ancestors, from the Mouache and Capote bands of Ute, purposefully bending trees for wayfinding or cultural purposes. The ancestors of the Southern Ute, who have lived here since time immemorial, never needed to physically bend trees for navigation purposes.

The ancestors of the Southern Ute people were mountain people and knew their landscape well. Our ancestors used the mountains, the stars, rivers, creeks, and other land marks to navigate our aboriginal territory and traditional hunting-grounds. From generation-to-generation, our orienteering skills were passed down from elders to the youth.

Our Capote and Mouache ancestors never bent trees for cultural purposes. Several years back, we began to get notified about people identifying bent trees and associating them to the Ute peoples, as a part of our cultural practices. My elders never told me about our

people bending trees for spiritual or cultural purposes. Therefore, we as Southern Utes, the descendants of the Capote and Mouache, do not have the practice of bent trees in our faith or lifeways. From my understanding, the Mouache and Capote bands of Ute do not have bent trees for any particular purpose, such as “Spirit Trees”, “Ute Prayer Trees”, “Burial Trees”, “Ceremonial Trees”, or “Vortex Trees”.

The Southern Ute Indian Tribe has only one type of culturally modified tree and one tree that is associated with prayers. The only culturally modified tree, which is not physically bent, is a Peeled Tree. As Utes, the only tree that would be peeled would be ponderosa pine and occasionally aspen.

Our Mouache and Capote ancestors and tribal members today peel trees for various purposes. The traditional peeling of trees, however, is only done by specific people in our community and at a specific time of the year. Peeled Trees, known as culturally modified trees, are found throughout the Ute Nations aboriginal territory and traditional hunting-grounds.

The only tree that we would closely associate with prayers among the Mouache and Capote ancestors and descendants is the center pole for Sun Dance. The center pole for Sundance is made from a Cottonwood Tree. Therefore, these are the only trees that we treat as culturally significant and connected to our spiritual lifeways, neither of them are physically bent.

I want to stress that individual Ute families may have their own traditions associated with physically bending and or making prayers to trees. However, one cannot simply generalize all Ute people and identify those trees as “Ute Prayer Trees” or ascribe other names to them and say that they are associated to Ute traditional customs in general. If specific families carried or continue to carry out these practices, they may speak on behalf of their family’s practice, but not on behalf of all Ute people.

I want to re-state that the three sister tribes of the Ute Nation choose people to represent and speak on Tribal cultural matters, related to the bands that now comprise today’s federally recognized Ute Indian Tribes. If the public and others want to know about the Ute History and Culture, contact the specific tribal offices that possess the knowledge to speak on matters associated with our people, our history, and lifeways.

The Cultural Preservation Department for the Southern Ute Indian Tribe can be reached at (970) 563-2983.

Respectfully,



Mr. Alden Naranjo

5/13/19

Date

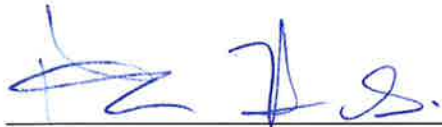
Southern Ute Tribal Elder,

Oral and Cultural Historian,

and President of Native American Church of

the Southern Ute Indian Reservation

Respectfully,



Mr. Hanley Frost, Sr.

4-8-19

Date

Education Coordinator-Culture Preservation Department,

Tribal Elder, and Sundance Chief

Mr. Terry Knight, Tribal Elder, oral and cultural historian, Bear Dance Chief and past Sundance Chief of the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe, states:

The Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe is one of the three sovereign governments that comprise the Ute Nation. As a spiritual leader and the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, I was chosen by the elders of our Tribal Community to take care of specific cultural and public responsibilities, such as educational outreach and preservation of the culture, history, and language of the Weeminuche Band. I have been taught many things by my elders, throughout my life, about our ancestors and I have never heard of the Ute people bending trees for any purpose. Like our sister tribes, however, specific people in our community did and continue to peel trees for various purposes.

Those identifying and spreading information about bent trees and associating them to Ute traditions are not designated tribal representatives for the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe. It is important to inform the public that the practice of bending trees was and is not a customary tradition of the Weeminuchu Band. After learning about bent trees

being associated with Ute people, I spoke to knowledgeable elders to get a consensus from the community. None of these community members were able to identify the practice of bending trees as a traditional cultural practice of the Weeminuche Band.

Our ancestors did not need to bend trees to remind them where they were on the landscape during seasonal migrations nor did we modify trees to mark burials. We maintain an intimate connection to our landscape since we have been here since time immemorial and our elders possessed great knowledge of the landscape due to our seasonal migrations. Further, traditionally, we never marked where our loved ones were buried.

Those who are perpetuating the idea of bent trees being associated with our ancestors can speak on the behalf of their own family traditions but are not delegated the responsibility of addressing cultural concerns on the behalf of the Ute Nation. It is inaccurate to associate these practices with Ute people in general and to identify them as Prayer Trees, Burial Trees, etc. If this was a pan-Ute cultural tradition, knowledgeable elders in our communities would possess information about this practice. Further, if this was a Ute tradition, only a spiritual person would possess this knowledge and would not likely share it with non-community members and or charge a fee for identifying these cultural resources.

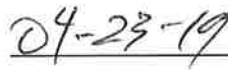
I want to take this moment to restate that we have three cultural preservation departments that have employees, within the three tribes of the Ute Nation, that are selected on the behalf of their community to answer or identify people in the community that can provide information to anthropologists, researchers, historians, or members of the public.

The Ute Mountain Tribal Historic Preservation Office can be reached at (970) 564-5731.

Respectfully,

  
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Mr. Jerry Knight,

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date

Ute Mountain Tribal Elder,  
Oral and Cultural Historian,  
Bear Dance Chief and  
past Sundance Chief

The two Ute Indian Tribal Governments want to clarify that the individuals cited above were sanctioned by their sovereign governments to officially speak on the behalf of the cultural matters. While those who espouse and further the misidentification of "Bent Trees" are not sanctioned to speak on cultural matters in official Tribal capacity associated with the two Ute Indian Tribes, they can speak on the behalf of their family traditions.

We would like to take this opportunity to inform agencies, institutions, and or citizens who are wanting to access information about Ute Lifeways and History, to enter consultation regarding proposed projects, schedule cultural events/performances, or engage in educational outreach to contact the *Southern Ute Indian Tribe Cultural Preservation Department*, 77 CR 517, P.O. Box 737 #88, Ignacio, Co and (970) 563-2984; and the *Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe*, P.O. Box 468, Towaoc, CO 81334 and (970) 564-5731.

Respectfully,

  
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Mrs. Christine Sage, 5-13-19  
Date

Chairman, Southern Ute Indian Tribe

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Mr. Harold Cuthair, 5/31/19  
Date

Chairman, Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe