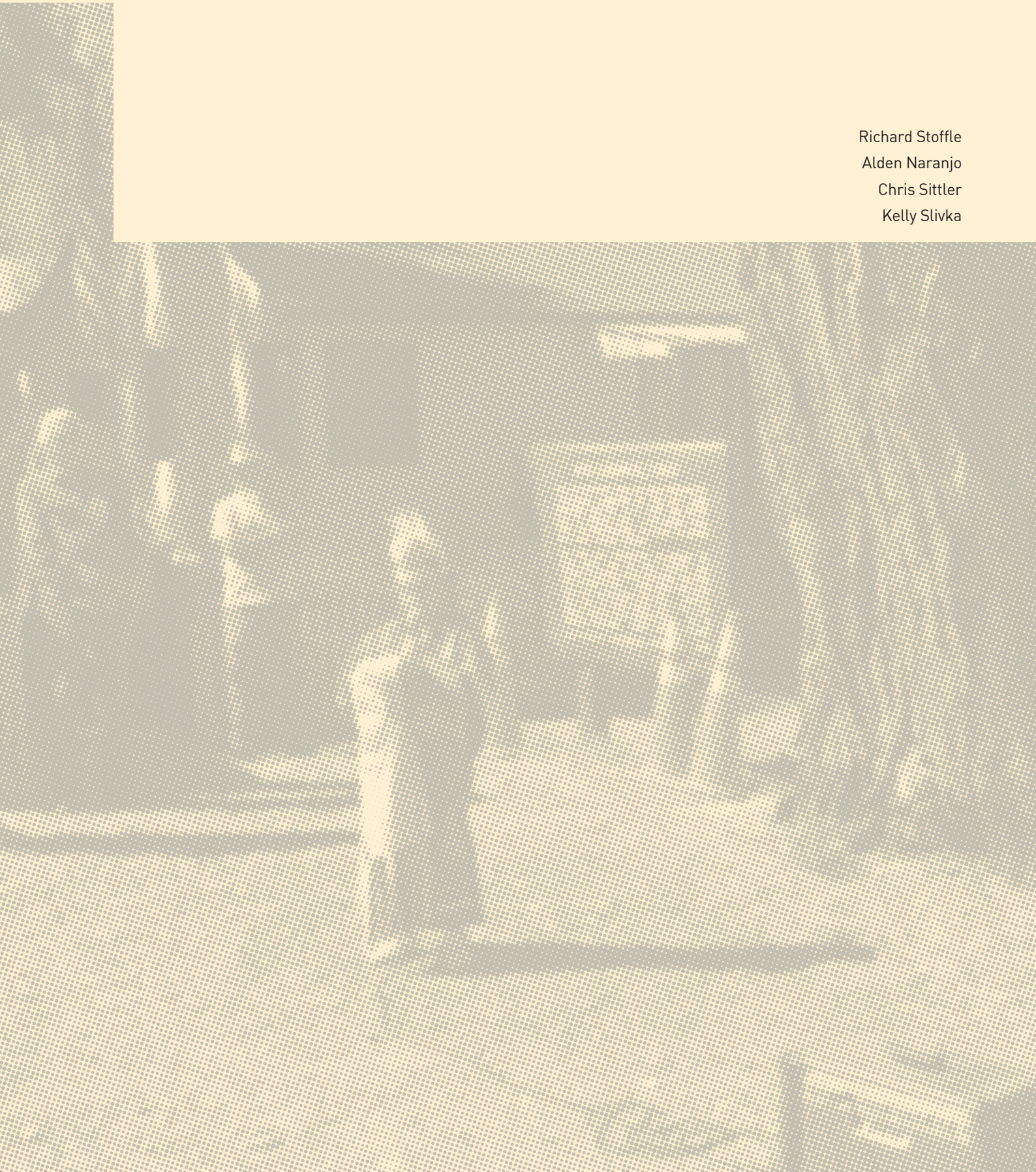
‘Grandfather Tree’: Ute Horror at the Killing of a Heritage Tree

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates that epistemological barriers can stand in the way of communication about, and understanding of, natural heritage resources. This common problem becomes explicit by using the 2017 killing of a living Ute 'Grandfather Tree' in Delta, Colorado. The 260-year-old tree, which was recognised as culturally central to the three Ute Indian Tribes and the people of the State of Colorado, was cut down while still alive by the Delta County Historical Society. Communication about this action was short, one-sided, and clouded by the contrasting beliefs of the two parties: i.e., to Euro-Americans the tree was just wood without rights, while to the Ute people the tree was a living grandfather with full rights to exist.

Keywords

Ute Indian Culture, 'Living Grandfather Tree', settler colonialism, Colorado Native Americans, Delta County Historical Society, environmental heritage communication, epistemological divide, Delta, Colorado, Ute Indian tribes.

Introduction

This is an analysis of a clash between the heritage beliefs and values of Native Americans and the goals of colonial settlers, both of whom claim cultural ties to the same delta of two major rivers in the State of Colorado, located in the western portion of the United States of America (USA) (Figure 1). The clash was over the premature killing of a 'Grandfather Tree' in the small town of Delta, Colorado. While the devastating event occurred in the summer of 2017, it is analysed as a continuation of more than 150 years of USA colonial settler encroachment on, and cul-



Figure 1
Delta, Colorado and its natural environment.
Source: Google Maps

tural diminishment of, the Ute peoples who are the aboriginal inhabitants of the entire Colorado region. Four variables are considered as contributing to the heritage clash. We consider that the Grandfather Tree was to the Ute people (1) located in a sacred area, (2) was a persistent historic marker in homelands from which the Utes had been forcibly removed, (3) a cultural symbol of an aboriginal way of life, and (4) a living person. Ultimately, the analysis is grounded in observations of behaviours, but inevitably the motivations behind the event must be explored by situating it with cases from other places.

Background

Effective environmental communication, which should lead to sustainable land use decisions, is often hampered when the participants act on different and oppositional epistemologies (Stoffle, Arnold, and Bulletts: 2016). Risk communication, which we believe is a variety of environmental heritage communication, is also commonly hampered by differences in epistemology (Stoffle and Minnis: 2008). Generally, debates about what is 'really there in the environment' and 'what is happening to it because of development projects or environmental changes' tend to be decided in favour of the dominant society, while the opinions of cultural minority groups are perceived as simply wrong-headed. USA dominant society largely dismisses the vernacular knowledge of Native Americans, who therefore are perceived as being in need of being educated to wiser environmental and heritage perspectives (Stoffle et al.: 2004). When environmental heritage debates draw upon widely different epistemologies, even the temporal and spatial scopes of data collecting and assessments, what Adams (1998) calls 'timescapes', tend to be disputed. Elsewhere, we have argued that sustainability assessments (Bond, Saunders and Howitt: 2013) require integrated social and environmental modelling using large 'timescapes' (Stoffle, et al.: 2008; Stoffle, Stoffle and Sjölander-Lindqvist: 2013).

The notion of an 'epistemological divide' is used here to explain why oppositional environmental heritage communication is simultaneously both essential in the ability of participants to understand and believe each other, and virtually unchangeable. In this paper we illustrate this issue using a recent decision to cut down a 260-year-old tree in Delta, Colorado. This event occurred without effective consultation with the Ute Indian peoples who maintain that the tree is a spiritual 'grandfather' to their people. The case both illustrates fundamental

problems that can derive from failures in communication about environmental heritage, and raises the question as to whether or not more talking between cultural groups brings understandings that are sufficient to re/solve such problems.

There are numerous Euro-American and Native American epistemological beliefs that are part of the 'epistemological divide' and thus serve to limit cross-cultural communication. Here we analyse how the notion that the 'Earth is alive' becomes a fundamental barrier to communication. In earlier research, Stoffle and Zedeño (2002, p. 174) suggested that the best way to understand how Native American people perceive the world is through the concept of 'a living universe'. This is an epistemological foundation of Ute culture or what Rappaport (1999, pp. 263-71 and 446) calls *an ultimate sacred postulate*. Simply put, the concept of a living universe is so basic in Ute culture that one cannot understand most other aspects of their culture and how they are interrelated without this concept. A living universe is alive in the same way that humans are alive and fully sentient. The universe has physically discrete components that we call 'elements', and an energy source that brings them alive that is called *Puha* in the Ute language, or something we can translate as 'Creation energy' or 'power'. These elements of the universe have most of the same characteristics as humans, including the ability to communicate, to help other elements, the power to accomplish their own goals or agency, and even the capacity to lie. The grandfather tree in Delta, Colorado is understood by the Ute people through this epistemological perspective.

Euro-Americans can love or hate, use or preserve trees, but on their side of the epistemological divide the tree can neither talk nor understand. On the Ute side of the divide a tree can love people or not, and use its agency for the benefit of humans or to harm them. Trees are grandfathers, or in some cases grandmothers, who are significant life-partners for generations of people and have human-like rights. So like them or not, in Euro-American epistemology trees are just wood and to Ute people trees are people.

The case

Here we describe the various components of this event in an effort to better understand and potentially avoid failed communication about environmental heritage in the future. On the 25th of August 2017 citizens of Delta, Colorado, as represented by the Delta County Historical Society, cut down a 260-year-old sacred living Grandfather Tree which was at the centre of a recognised Colorado Historical Site (Plates 1 and 2).





Plates 1 and 2
The Grandfather Tree just before being cut down. According to newspaper reporter Kelly Slivka … *it was still green at its crown and stood quietly in the still air with humming birds and doves moving through it's canopy.*
Photo: K. Slivka, August, 2017.

The leadership of the historical society determined that the tree was a hazard to the public and needed to be removed. This action occurred without consultation with the three Ute Indian tribes who were known to perceive the tree *as a grandfather who understands our needs and our wants* according to Terry Knight, a spiritual leader for the Ute Mountain Tribe (Slivka: 2017). For cultural reasons described below, Ute people from three tribes viewed the killing of this tree as being a horrific action that was the extension of hundreds of years of their forced removal and genocide. The action was unimaginable because in Ute epistemology the tree was a living grandfather that for hundreds of years had listened to and recorded the words and songs of tribal councils who met below its branches. The future of the tree had until that moment, seemed to Ute people to be secure given that it was the symbol of an intercultural powwow and designated as the centre of a heritage site by the state of Colorado.

Sacred area.

The area was attractive to Indian people for thousands of years. Pitblado's (1998) analysis documents dozens of locations where Paleo-indian spear points, like Clovis and Folsom, were found in the mountains and foothills in western Colorado. Clovis points have been dated to 13,390 years before the present (Sanchez et al.: 2014), indicating the ancient occupation and use of the south west.

This area is topographically special because it is at the junction of the Gunnison and Uncompahgre Rivers, two of the major rivers in the region, and at the confluence of a series of large streams that flow off the surrounding high mountains. Together, these sources of water produced a delta that contained a lush, flat wetland that for more than 10,000 years of human use sustained a wide variety of fauna and flora, and people. The nearby uplands and mountains contributed to the ecological diversity of the area.

Indian people, including the Ute people, have long farmed this area because its water, flat delta, and climate are favourable to growing various crops (Stewart: 1966). Traditional Indian settlements here thus reflected the abundance of these natural resources in an area that is strategically located along traditional Native American trails. Under full Native American control, the area was a coming-together place for settlement, ceremony, political agreements, and trade. The area, now called Delta, Colorado, was traditionally a socially and culturally central area for Indian people.

Historic marker.

This delta area is where historic events of cultural importance to Euro-Americans and Ute people occurred. It marks the place where these happened and serves as a reminder of the past. Beginning in the mid-1700s, Spanish explorers passed through the area. The first of these explorers was Juan Antonio Maria de Rivera and his medium-size expedition, in 1765, who arrived travelling along Ute trails with a Paiute guide through southwestern Colorado and up to the area now called Moab, Utah (Jacobs: 1992). Importantly, he observed the Paiute and Ute lifestyles shifting away from a heavy dependence on farming, hunting, and gathering. Although Rivera observed them living in *rancheries* supported by irrigated farming, (a Spanish term for clusters of farms strung out along small rivers and creeks), Ute people were already using horses while the Paiute people did not. In many cases, the Utes and Paiutes were indistinguishable in 1765; however, since the 1680 revolt against the Spanish, the Ute people had become more mobile due to the horses they had taken from the Spaniards. The Ute people were beginning a new lifeway centred on the horse and distant trading along sacred trails.

In 1776 the massive Escalante and Dominguez expedition passed though southwestern Colorado, skirted the eastern side of the La Sal Mountains and then crossed the Colorado River at what is now Grand Junction. Both expeditions signalled the Spanish desire to link up the Northern New Spain (New Mexico) colony with their other colony, called Alta California, via overland trails.

Essentially, the Utes (and Paiutes) controlled the trails between their farms along major waterways, like the Gunnison and Uncompahgre Rivers, and nodes of exchange along the Rio Grande River as at Taos Pueblo and Santa Fe Pueblo, and along the Rio Chama at places like Abiquiu (Stoffle et al.: 2008). This armed defence of their trails and trading economy was finally broken due to disease which killed most of the Ute people.

The Spanish government continued to send small expeditions to learn about the trading trails and assess the strength of the Utes and Paiutes. Finally, the route to California was known by the Spanish. By 1829 large,

rapid, heavily-armed caravans containing woollen goods travelled from Abiquiu, New Mexico to San Gabriel Mission, California.

These caravans traded woollen goods woven in New Mexico for animals raised in Alta, California. These goods were exchanged every six months. The caravans involved hundreds of animals packing woven goods to California and the return caravans would be composed of large herds (thousands) of horses and mules. This caravan-based trade opened what the USA government has designated the Old Spanish Trail. Actually it was a series of traditional American Indian trails woven together and traversed twice a year by large commercial caravans which operated until 1849 under Mexican national control (Stoffle et al.: 2008).

During this time (1829 -1849) the Mexican government approved both caravans and intrusions by private Mexican citizens, both of whom increasingly disrupted Ute people and society. Ute culture had become almost totally dependent on trade with Hispanic and Indian towns in Northern New Spain, especially in the areas now called Colorado and New Mexico. When the Mexican trade caravans passed along the Old Spanish Trail they were totally self-sufficient and wanted nothing from the Native American communities along the way. On the way back to New Mexico they shot at approaching Indian people and captured young Indians for sale as slaves. Without seeing any benefit from the caravans, Ute leaders such as Walker became increasingly hostile, and began raiding the caravans for horses (Smith: 1974, p.122). Eventually Ute raiding would extend all the way along the Old Spanish Trail into Alta California.

During the Spanish Colonial Period, up until the end of the Mexican revolution about 1822, the Ute people controlled both trails and trade throughout their territory. Our research suggests that the losses of Ute land, trails, and trade were ultimately due to the massive impact of disease between 1780 and the early 1800s (Fenn: 2001; Stoffle, Arnold, and Bulletts: 2015). The best known of these episodes was the smallpox pandemic of 1780 when up to 90% of the Indian people living along trails in trading communities died (Fenn: 2001; Stoffle, Arnold, and Van Vlack: 2015). By the early 1800s there were simply too few remaining Utes and Paiutes to resist Spanish intrusion as they had done for the previous 260 years.

During the Mexican National Period, the region around Delta, Colorado would see a slow but steady Euro-American encroachment, including a trading post established in 1820 by French-Canadian fur trapper, Antoine Robidoux, and Fort Uncompahgre, established in 1840. Both primarily functioned to serve fur traders (called Mountain Men) and protect them from the increasingly angry Ute people who were defending their traditional homelands. Trade was always a key function of the region because it was a hub for trails, some of which connected the San Juan River Basin in the south with the east-west part of the North Branch of the Old Spanish trail (http://fortuncompahgre.org/). It is important to note that the Ute people lost no aboriginal lands during roughly 282 years of the Spanish Colonial Period (1540 -1822), and only lost control of some traditional trails during the Mexican National Period (1822 -1848).

The shift from trading to raiding would set the tone for Ute intercultural relationships when USA citizens encroached on Ute lands after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1849. Through treaties with the USA and the Indian Claims Commission legal hearings (Sutton and Beals: 1986), the location and extent of lands exclusively occupied by the Ute people in 1849 were established. Aboriginal lands are, officially, where a Native American ethnic group lived when these lands came under the control of the USA government. These Ute lands included all of Colorado west of the front range of the Rocky Mountains, portions of northern New Mexico, parts of southern Wyoming, and much of Utah. (Figure 2)

This analysis must be situated in events occurring during the mid- to late-1800s, during which time the Ute people lost most of their aboriginal lands in the States of Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, and New Mexico to colonial settlers. It is estimated that they exclusively occupied more than 130,000 square miles of homelands (Callaway, Janetski, and Stewart: 1986). These lands and trails became USA territory at the end of the war with Mexico, which was marked by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, intrusion into Ute territory was not regulated by either the USA or Mexico.

Critical to this analysis is an understanding of how the Ute people were forcibly relocated from most of Colorado, including the Delta area. While beyond the scope of this paper, the full story is well researched and told by

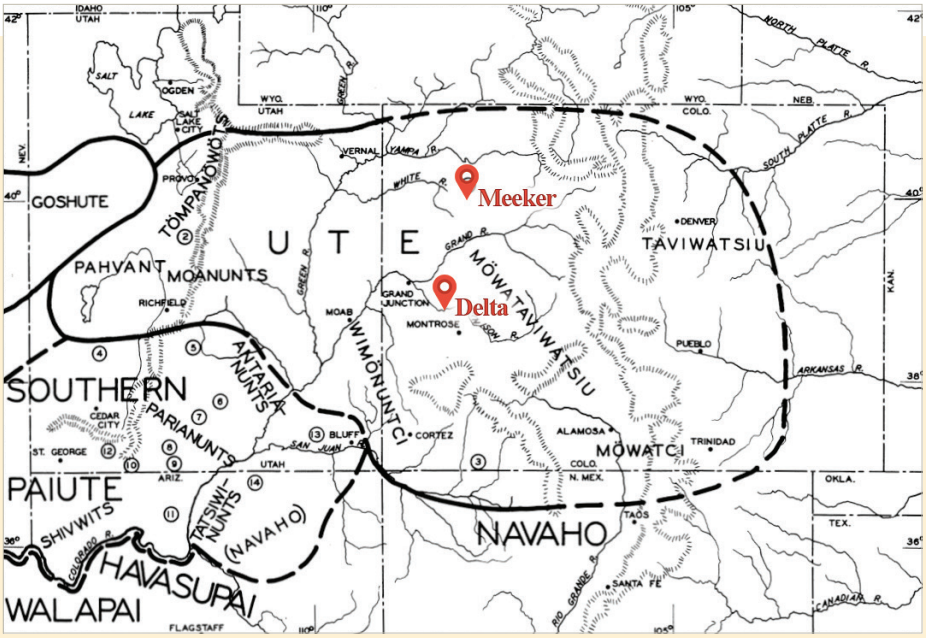


Figure 2
Indian Claims Commission map of Ute Aboriginal Lands in 1849.
Source: map drawn by Omer Stewart

Professor Decker (2004) in a book entitled *The Utes Must Go*. Simply put, Euro-Americans continued to encroach, use, usurp, and desire lands legally recognised by the USA government as belonging to the Ute people. These intruders sought both legal and moral arguments for taking these Ute lands, but mostly they used raw force. With a constant flow of European immigrants pushing into USA east coast cities and subsequently migrating west, there was great pressure to provide spaces and resources for a new Colorado economy. The key argument for forcing treaties extinguishing Ute land title was that the lands should be used in the highest and best way - that is for farming and mining - as defined by Anglo-Christian dogma. By this time, the Utes had transformed their traditional irrigated-farming based economy, which was still active in 1765 (Jacob: 1992), into a transhumant lifestyle focused on hunting and gathering with seasonal movements, including trading trips to distant communities (Stoffle and Evans: 1976). Failing to recognise that the Ute people had been farmers before the horse, and that Spanish trade had already changed their economy, colonial settlers increasingly argued that the Utes did not farm (an assumption never questioned) and therefore should lose their land. It was argued that the Ute people had failed to evolve both socially and biologically towards 'Civilised Society'. Dismissed as 'savages', they represented a dual threat to civilised society, by wasting economic resources and standing in the way of cultural progress. The conclusion was that The Utes Must Go - as in the title of Decker's book.

The trigger for massive relocation would come when Meeker, a stressed-out Indian Agent for the northern Utes living on their reservation, panicked when an angry chief aggressively reached out and grabbed him. Meeker was subsequently fearful for his wellbeing and called for help from the US Army (Decker: 2004). When the US Cavalry illegally came on to the sovereign Ute reservation, the northern Utes attacked and defeated them at Mill Creek, Colorado. It is important to recognise that the Ute peoples were living at this time on remnants of traditional lands reserved for them by congressionally approved USA treaties (Callaway, Janetski, and Stewart: 1986, pp. 338-340). The uproar deriving from the Utes defeat of the US Cavalry unit spread nation-wide, and the calls for their extermination were stronger than those for their removal. At last, in 1881, the local Tabeguache and White River Utes were moved to Utah where they were forced to share an existing reservation with the Uintah band. The Uncompahgre Ute band (who called themselves the Taviwach) of the Delta area, who had remained totally at peace on their reservation under the leadership of Chief Ouray, were also relocated having being caught up in the state-wide fever to remove all the Utes and take their reservation lands.

The Euro-American motivation for removal was never in doubt, as we read in a recent local history that:

> *When the Utes were removed ... the Uncompahgre Valley was open to settlement. A great number of new settlers were anxiously waiting on the drawing of borders for the territory, for the arrival of the day when they would able to stake out their own piece of land.* (Davis and Huff: 2010, p.7)

Decker (2004, pp.185 - 189) observed that 'Manifest Destiny' had finally caught up with the Uncompahgre Utes. Other scholars, however, would call this the arrival of Settler Colonialism (Gahman: 2016; Hurwitz: 2014; Veracini: 2011). The Ute's mountains with minerals, plants and animals, and the valleys with fertile farm lands could no longer be theirs. Under the direct threat of military extinction, they carried their worldly goods on their backs or on horse travois, along with 18,000 ponies, sheep, and goats on a month-long death march of more than 350 miles to a place in Utah where they had never lived. It would eventually be called the Ouray Reservation after their famous leader who died just before relocation.

After 1881 the region of Delta became a central economic agricultural, mining, and residential place for the Euro-Americans. Delta, Colorado therefore experienced a shift in ethnic ownership, which marked an end of a lifeway for the Utes and a beginning of a lifeway for the new people of Delta.

A cultural symbol.

Often, after removal from all or a portion of traditional territory, the Indian people looked back and adopted a heritage symbol of their connection with the place, even though it was no longer controlled and occupied by them. Pipestone National Monument in Minnesota is visited and celebrated by now distant Sioux tribes (Toupal et al.: 2003). Although removed in space and time from the Mesa Verde World in Colorado, the people of Acoma Pueblo continued to conduct pilgrimages and pray to their place of origin (Stoffle et al.: 2018). Relocated tribes, such as the Iowa people, who are culturally associated with Effigy Mounds National Monument in Iowa, sought to nominate it to the National Registry of Historic Places as a Traditional Cultural Property because it remains culturally central to their lives and they would like to participate in its management (Van Vlack: 2015).

Denison (2017) provides an analysis of Ute efforts to reconnect with the places from which they were forcibly relocated, focusing on the Northern Utes and their connections with former lands near Meeker, Colorado. Ute people were relocated from most of Colorado, including Delta, after the so-called Meeker Massacre in 1879. Formal US and Colorado State history accounts of this event differ from Ute accounts, so there is a one-sided contested heritage issue.

Denison (2017) uses the concept of Ute Land Religion to convey the intense importance Ute people perceive about past places and their desire to reconnect. In a chapter entitled 'Remembering Removal: Enacting Religion and Memorialising the Land', she describes Ute efforts to gain access to the Meeker area forests for hunting, gathering, and ceremony. For tribal elders *access to the land to hunt and gather is imbedded in the cultural memory of the Ute and their spiritual relationship to the natural environment of the Meeker area* (Denison: 2017, p.238).

The Smoking River Powwow was jointly organised by the Ute Tribes, the Forest Service and the County Historical Society in an effort to (1) bring Ute ceremony back to the Meeker area in a way that serves to reconnect the Utes with the land, (2) is non-threating for the citizens of Meeker, and (3) tells a more balanced story of Ute land attachments and the events that caused the Meeker Massacre (Denison: 2017). The Smoking River Powwow is viewed by organisers and participants as a reconciliation effort designed to knit together the heritage of the Ute people and the citizens of Meeker. Burkhead (2008) observed that historic sites were visited as part of the Powwow, long-ago events, still painful for both sides, were remembered, and past fears and attitudes, reinforced by years of misunderstanding and resentment, were discussed openly. According to Ute spiritual leader Clifford Duncan, *the powwow was a homecoming. The remains of my people are here. It is always a good feeling to come back home. I want to say to my ancestors, I did not forget you* (Burkhead: 2008).

So too, the three contemporary Ute tribes celebrated thousands of years in the Delta area by annually gathering at the Grandfather Tree in an event called the Council Tree Powwow. The old Plains Cottonwood was estimated to be 260 years old, making it about 124 years old in 1881 when the US government forced the Uncompahgre band Ute people to move away from their homes in the Delta

area (Slivka: 2017). In the 136 years since, the Ute people have continued to visit their tree. The grandfather tree has increasingly come to symbolise their traditional lives and the social changes that happened after their relocation to Utah (Stewart: 1971 and 1987). Famous Ute Chief Ouray's wife, Chipeta, was known to still *visit with the tree* when she passed its way on trips from Utah's Uintah-Ouray Indian reservation in the early 1900s (Slivka: 2017).

The Ute Council Tree was formally designated as a Colorado Landmark by the Captain John Gunnison Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) in 2007. A sign was erected by the Delta County Historical Society at the base of the tree as a memorial to Chief Ouray and his wife, Chipeta, and their striving for peace. Symbolic of this striving for peace and the importance of the tree for this purpose, the sign says *Chief Ouray met with white settlers under this tree*. Ute tribal member, Kenny Frost, said during that dedication ceremony *this tree is sacred to us* (Slivka: 2017).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the tree was a central symbol of the Ute Council Tree Powwow and Cultural Festivals that took place for 16 consecutive years in Delta's Confluence Park. Like the Smoking River Powwow to the north, the Delta festivals were mutually designed to provide an intercultural learning experience containing a more accurate perspective on historical events, and potentially to mitigate the resulting intercultural tensions. Apparently this goal was not fully achieved.

Cutting down the Ute grandfather tree thus created a new contemporary public view of Delta's heritage. Now that the tree has been removed, the last public symbol of Ute ancestral presence, and by implication, 13,000 years of human occupation, has been removed. Thus the people of Delta now, essentially and publicaly, begin their history after 1881 with little or no mention of the Utes (Davis and Huff: 2010).

A living person.

Critical to this analysis is the notion that in Ute culture a tree has personal rights, which were endowed by the Creator at the beginning of time so it could live and be in this place of its own choosing until it decides to leave. In *The Personhood of Trees*, Harwood and Ruuska (2013) define the onto-epistemological categories regarding trees of the Ojibway peoples from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Barad (2007) suggests using this term inasmuch as it is composed of epistemology (theory of knowledge) and ontology (theory of being) and includes an assumption of ethics. That Ojibway analysis documents their epistemological premise that at Creation, people were placed on, and made responsible for, a living planet that contains natural elements, each having people-like characteristics and human-like rights.

Like the Ojibway people in Michigan, the Ute people understand the world as alive, and know that they have a Creation-based responsibility to behave appropriately towards all of its natural elements. In Ute epistemology, the elements of the earth, such as trees, are sentient, have human-like rights and feelings, and have the power to achieve their own goals, a power which we call 'agency'.

Epistemological differences that lead to alternative truths (veristic social constructions) are well understood by social scientists and philosophers (Goldman: 1999). Such differences have increasingly been studied to explain why people, as members of cultural groups or social categories, respond differently to land management assessments and policy alternatives (Bonaiuto, Bilotta and Stolfa: 2010). We recently addressed this issue in an article entitled 'Talking with Nature: Southern Paiute Epistemology and the Double Hermeneutic with a Living Planet' (Stoffle, Arnold, and Bulletts: 2016). Although this is a data-based analysis focused on Paiutes, it applies equally well to their Ute cousins. Key here is that both non-Indian western-trained land managers, and Ute people, respond to each other and to their common concerns for natural heritage resources from fundamentally different social constructions. Each has a different way of 'knowing' about natural resources and ecological processes. Western scientists have a body of knowledge developed over time through scientific methods. Ute people have a body of knowledge developed from thousands of years of experience of interacting with the natural resources. Essentially, both have come to understand something of the topic, but Ute people can talk with nature and it tells them about its situation and what it wants them to do to protect it. Talking with nature to understand what it wants is an unacceptable concept to a western scientist. And so we have the foundation for the misunderstanding about how to manage the Grandfather Tree.

Consultation gaps

The decision to remove the Grandfather Tree was exclusively controlled by people who claimed ownership of the place and the tree due to Fee Simple Title, a western property right that was conveyed to Euro-American settlers by the USA government when the Ute people were forcibly removed in 1881. It is an absolute form of ownership, so under Fee Simple Title, the people who own land and its resources maintain that they can do what they wish with their property.

Fee Simple Title can be clearly contrasted with the Ute ethics about land and resources, which stipulate that the land and natural resources own themselves. In this system of ownership, people have the right to use nature, but this carries with it the obligation to protect nature from abuse or misuse. Cultural groups, technically ethnic groups, are recognised as 'owning territory' and bands within these ethnic groups have their own traditional use areas. According to Ute land ethics, no one could have 'owned' the Grandfather Tree because, like a person, the tree has his own property rights, which were established by the Creator.

In this case, the land in question, which became a part of the State designation as a Colorado Landmark, including the sign and the tree, was owned by the local Delta County Historical Society. The society believed they were legally liable for any damage due to branches falling from the tree, and some did fall when it was windy. So when a major limb fell off in August of 2017, the society members, who do not include any Ute tribal members, decided the tree was a safety hazard. *We need to get public safety taken care of* said the society director (Slivka: 2017). So, according to the society chairman, they did try to reach out to the Utes before cutting down the tree. She agreed it was short notice, referencing the nine days between the decision to remove the tree and when removal occurred (Slivka: 2017). Mr Frost, a Southern Ute person who works for his Ute tribe on sacred sites and Indian treaties, said he heard of the removal plans two days beforehand on Facebook. He was only able to arrive in time to perform a blessing at the tree.

A Ute elder opened the removal ceremony with a prayer. Then Alden Naranjo, a historian for the Southern Ute tribe and a co-author of this paper, performed a blessing. Mr Naranjo faced the Council tree and spoke to it in the Southern Ute language, a bundle of sage burning in his hand. He then encircled the tree, using a feather to wave the smoke at the tree and at the audience in a cleansing practice called smudging. Then he and two other Ute people began singing to the tree. Others faced the tree to speak, addressing him as grandfather and thanking him for his presence in the history of their people. A couple of speakers shed tears (Slivka: 2017) (Plates 3 and 4). This was a horrific event for the Ute people who found it impossible to explain to the Council Tree what was about to occur and that, at this late date, it was impossible for the Ute people to protect the grandfather tree. Although not a mitigation of the event, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe sent tribal employees to Delta to retrieve a significant portion



Plate 3
Young Ute tribal member in traditional garb speaking to the audience about the importance of the tree to her heritage.
Photo: Kelly Slivka, August, 2017



Plate 4
Ute tribal member addressing the tree, and thanking the tree for being part of her community.
Photo: Kelly Slivka, August, 2017

of the grandfather. Subsequently that portion of the tree was painted to preserve it and then enshrined in front of the tribal headquarters (Plates 5, 6 and 7).

The decision to remove the tree was made by its Euro-American owners - that is in a western sense of property 'ownership' - but the removal was not informed by the cultural knowledge of the tree's relatives, the Ute people. This was a scene very much reflective of the 1881 forced removal of Ouray's Uncompahgre band of Ute people from this same location.

Situating the event

It is certainly possible to over-analyse an event such as the removal of a Ute Grandfather Tree, however, there is a rather extensive literature focused on the politics of place and property that seem to be reflected in this event. The literature is intertwined with a discussion of the epistemology of Settler Colonialism (Hurwitz: 2014), a concept that has found analytical utility around the planet in former colonial states. Settler Colonialism is a theoretical framework often used to analyse politically distinct practices that served the expansion of the western USA at the expense of aboriginal Native Americans (Inwood and Bonds: 2016). It was used to argue for both their extinction and the appropriation of their lands (Gahman: 2016)

The symbolic tree was taken down during a USA national debate over removing Confederate Civil War Statues, so removing the symbolic tree has entered a wider national debate over the value of symbols (loved or hated) as components of local, ethnic, and national heritage. Clearly, the Grandfather Tree had been used as the focus of heritage events. The tree powwow was even immortalised in hatpins! Where else have apparently similar events occurred? Four comparison cases are suggested here.

Case one is about a new Tigua Pueblo sculpture. On October 9th 2017 a new outdoor Tigua Pueblo sculpture was vandalised with red paint, and with 'Columbus Day' written on a cross (Sanchez and Gonzales: 2017). Members of the Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo were hurt and wondered why a sculpture on tribal land that honours women was vandalised in such a way. Activists say Columbus Day glorifies someone who was a violent colonist and whose actions led to the destruction of Native American civilisations. Pueblo leader, Sierra (Sanchez and Gonzales: 2017), said the Tiguas do not harbour any ill will toward Columbus;



Plate 5
The 2007 sign designating the Grandfather Tree as a Colorado landmark. Source: Photo: Kelly Slivka, August, 2017



Plate 6
Remains of the Grandfather Tree killed by the Delta Historical Society. Photo: Kelly Slivka, August, 2017



Plate 7
Enshrined portion of Grandfather Tree in front of Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Headquarters.
Photo: Chris Johnson, 2018.

He was just a messenger from the King of Spain that wanted to explore. Our people have always been so friendly to anyone. We've opened our hearts. But clearly person(s) either do not understand the meaning of the Tigua Pueblo sculpture, or they resent Native American criticism of Columbus during his national day of celebration.

Case two is about the takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon which is viewed by Inwood and Bonds (2017) in light of this concept. They conclude that the takeover of the refuge can be understood as an extension of settler epistemology, as it has continued as a discourse about whiteness and property on the USA frontier. They contend that perceived white rights to property are used to sanitise the violent histories of the western frontier, which made such ownership possible. Such concepts have survived into contemporary times and they have contributed to a movement some have termed the Sagebrush Rebellion.

Case three is focused on the ancestors of colonial settlers who are living in the Karuk Native American ancestral territory, located along the Klamath and Salmon Rivers in Northern California, USA. According to Hurwitz (2014, p.67) these settlers know full well that the land they occupy was stolen, but they are unwilling to question their entitlement to it. Settler insecurity, as documented by Hurwitz, comes from a dread of acknowledgement that could bring about a loss of land, power, and privilege.

Case four is Hansen's (2013) study entitled *Encounter on the Great Plains: Scandinavian Settlers and the Dispossession of the Dakota Indians*, 1890-1930 which makes a special contribution to the Colonial Settler-Native American story because she and her family are directly from the settler community. Using oral accounts, she documents late 20th century ethical debates regarding what Scandinavians did to disenfranchise and dominate their Dakota neighbours. She concludes (Hansen: 2013, p. 236) that such debates have not prompted current government leaders or individual landholders to make apologies, propose reparations, or give back land. In the face of the outrage of dispossession, Scandinavians past and present have eluded their thorny past by misremembering it, or by living uncomfortably with their personal or ancestral culpability.

These are case studies of colonial settlers' contemporary response to their historic interactions with the Native American people(s) whose homelands were taken so that foreign intruders could make a new way of life. Such cases cannot be directly extrapolated to all other settler communities in the USA; however, these

case studies, along with dozens of others from around the world, document a common pattern. The topic has become a valid academic specialism, producing dozens of books, an academic journal called *Settler Colonial Studies* which contains the many research findings (http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rset20/curren), and even a Wikipedia site (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Settler_colonialism).

It is too facile, and somewhat problematic, to apply debates about public monuments and discussions of settler colonialism to the case of the Grandfather Tree removal. Still, we seem to be left with only two possibilities. One, that the people of Delta community in general could have spoken against the removal of the tree, but that they and the members of the historical society simply did not understand the cultural and heritage meanings of the tree to Ute people. For this to be true, these people would have had to be ignorant of Ute epistemology and history despite 136 years of intercultural interactions since Delta was established, and the more than 16 years of formal attempts to increase cross-cultural environmental heritage communication. Otherwise, we are left with a second theory - that the people of Delta were aware of the cultural centrality of the Grandfather Tree and he was intentional removed to finally eliminate the last sign of the cultural and historic presence of the Ute people.

The violent removal of the Utes from their ancestral lands in western Colorado does not contribute to contemporary local heritage discussions which now begin in 1881, after that removal. Two recent local histories either briefly mentioned the Ute people as simply gone (Davis and Huff: 2010), or brushed aside Ute removal as inevitable (Wetzel: 2003). Why did neither of these locally sponsored books, one called *The Uncompahgre Valley* (named after the Uncompahgre band of Utes) and the other called *A Spirit Returns*, engage with the historic events leading to the forced removal from their legally reserved lands and the implications of relocation for the Ute people?

Based on these observations and analysis, we are left with a number of questions. Where are the local community attempts at retribution for forcing Ute people to distant lands thus causing them to adjust their lifestyles and to face the well-documented impact deriving from social disorganisation? Where is there a Peace Garden, tended by Delta locals and Ute people alike? Why were there no Ute representatives in the Historical Society? And the central question - why did the Historical Society pre-emptively kill the living Grandfather Tree? It appears now that colonial settler society holds firm to a position, both physically and intellectually, that only supports the persistent narrative of the settler colonial heritage.

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