

Get Wild: Indigenous Peoples' Day

Karn Stiegelmeier



Chairman Manuel Heart, the current chairman of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, is pictured at a celebration of the Ute Pass in Summit County.

Bill Betz/Courtesy photo

Monday is Indigenous Peoples' Day, an opportunity to honor those who came before us on these lands in Summit County. The recent history of establishing Indigenous Peoples' Day is a bit confusing. Some states and local governments have changed the holiday name at different times. It was declared an official U.S. holiday in October 2021.

The Utes inhabited this area for over 10,000 years before European explorers and miners settled the then-Colorado Territory, which included the Territorial County of Summit extending beyond today's boundaries north to Wyoming and west to Utah. Summit County was established in 1861 after the mining boom of 1859, before Colorado became a state. William Byers founded the Rocky Mountain News in 1859 and wrote: "There were about 1,200 Utes camped at the mouth of the Swan River and Tenmile Creek. We have no fear of them whatever, as they are positively friendly."

The Ute Indians were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands in 1881, marched out by the U.S. Army to reservations in southwest Colorado and Utah.

The native Utes' lifestyle of sustainable practices has allowed us to enjoy these beautiful wild lands in Summit County today. In recent years, there has finally been more understanding and reparations for the many forms of damage caused by early settlers, U.S. government programs and broken treaties, but we still have more to do. Deb Haaland is our first Native American Secretary of Interior, and identifies herself as a 35th-generation New Mexican.

Locally, we have the opportunity to pay tribute to the Ute people by renaming the Gore Range in their honor. The name Gore was taken from early European explorers' hand-drawn maps. Lord Gore, a 19th century Irish aristocrat traveled to America in 1854 for a three-year hunting expedition, passing through Colorado, Wyoming, Montana and the Dakotas. With the help of many servants, Gore claimed to have killed 2,000 buffalo, 1,600 deer and elk, and 105 bears, primarily for sport. Most of the meat was left to spoil. Gore's needless devastation of these animal populations was criticized by U.S. government officials, travel guides and Native tribes for wasting precious resources that the Utes and other tribes needed to survive.

The U.S. Geological Survey criteria for naming places after people include that the person lived in the area and contributed significantly to the community. Lord Gore never set foot into our Summit and Eagle county mountains. He travelled just north of Kremmling and over what is named Gore Pass. The name would not be accepted today, but it was established before there was a U.S. Geological Survey.

Three Ute tribes were consulted about this potential change, and they proposed the name of Nuchu Range. Nuchu means "the people" or "Ute" in

the Ute language and is a way to reconnect these great mountains to the people who called them home for thousands of years, while also removing the name of a man who was little more than a wealthy animal abuser. The process is to first go through our Colorado Geographic Naming Board, which then provides recommendations to the US Board of Geographic Names.

Deb Haaland did direct name changes for places with names that are considered derogatory, particularly for Indigenous women, through a secretarial order. As result there were 650 names changed in the U.S. We now have a new name for a creek northern Summit County: Nuchu Creek!

Many people don't like the idea of change, but change can be refreshing, rehabilitating and a positive way to move beyond past wrongdoings. We can all celebrate Indigenous People's Day with a positive change.



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“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Karn Stiegelmeier is the Chair of Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and

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