

Get Wild: Indigenous roots protect nature's roots

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Humans can exist in wild spaces responsibly, admiring the Alpine tundra like this view in the Tenmile Range. Indigenous people did so for thousands of years.
Stasia Stockwell/Get Wild

The aspens love to show off this time of year, and who can blame them, with their display of vibrant shades of yellow and orange. Their leaves flicker in the sunlight. It not only looks like fall, but also smells, sounds, and feels like it. Nature is transitioning, slipping into the colder months. But this year, she's doing so slowly, letting us revel in all her beauty.

It's not just the aspens that pop. Look up above timberline and you'll see a contrast of the bright first snow against deep maroons and mustard yellows. The tiny tundra flora should get a turn in the golden hour limelight, too. These miniature plants are some of the most delicate in our ecosystem. Their beauty, especially this time of year, should remind us to tread lightly on the land we inhabit. After all, one gro hikers trampling along the tundra could cause damage that requires hundreds of years to restore. Ple do your part by keeping your impact to the trail. However, that's not to say that humans cannot exist these seemingly wild spaces responsibly.

For thousands of years, before settlers made their way to this land, Indigenous people dwelled on and cared for it, using the land and its resources sustainably. The Ute Indians — or Nuchu people — called these mountains and valleys home for nearly 10,000 years. They often dipped into the wide-open Alpine to hunt, forage and travel, and these spaces are still of great importance for the Ute tribes. If you spend enough time in a place, you have the privilege to know it — to have a deep understanding of the plants and animals, peaks and valleys that you share space with. Thousands of years and generations of people inhabiting a place comes with a deep knowledge of the land that cannot be acquired without something as simple and meaningful as time and attention.

Colorado is teeming with visitors to the mountains, and it's clear that at times we struggle with how to manage these spaces in a way that's best for the land and the people who use it and recreate on it. Many of us here in Summit County care about conservation. We want to see our beautiful home cared for and preserved, not only for future generations but also out of pure respect for the natural world. We have a plethora of tools at our disposal from the world of science that can assist in preservation. This, however, should only be part of our approach to conservation. Indigenous knowledge should be included in our understanding of the land, and should be employed alongside modern science in our efforts to care for it.

With Indigenous People's Day just behind us, we — as lovers of this land we call home — should look to Indigenous people in how we care for it. Not just theoretically, either. We should consider practical ways to involve them in our management of the land, ensuring they have a seat at the table. One example is inclusion of Indigenous people in decisions on how Colorado River water will be allocated.

Fall in the High Country brings both a beautiful spectacle and an opportunity to reflect. As we admire the golden aspen leaves and maroon-painted tundra, let it be a reminder that the land deserves our respect and care. We can all do our part. But if we are to learn anything from history — both natural and human — it's that we have much to learn from those who have called this place home long before we did.



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