

# Get Wild: What happened to the Utes of Summit County?

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**Bill Betz**  
**Get Wild**

The Ute Indians lived in today's Summit County for thousands of years before being dispossessed and forced onto reservations in the 1880s. After the loss of their land, there followed decades more of cultural decimation. Finally, in the 1930s, the so-called "Indian New Deal" began to provide meaningful support for Indian culture, health care, agriculture and employment.

Much still remains to be done. For example, fewer than 2% of Native Americans living in Colorado speak their native language.

In order to assess better how much more needs to be done, scholars of Indigenous peoples have begun to create comprehensive databases, drawing from thousands of mostly disconnected sources, and creating accurate measures of land dispossession and forced migration.

A recent study reports that Indigenous peoples in the US lost a total of 98.9% of their original lands, that the average distance of forced tribal migration was 149 miles (the maximum was 1,724 miles) and that 42% of all tribes today have no land base at all. Environmentally, the number of days of extreme heat are 36% higher and precipitation is 22% lower on current lands than on ancestral lands. Economically, subsurface mineral (oil and gas) value per acre is 20% less on current lands than on former lands.

Armed with hard data like these, the 60,000 Native Americans living in Colorado now are better able to raise awareness of the issues, as they seek recognition on their way towards the ultimate goal of reconciliation.

One way forward is land acknowledgement, a mechanism used by a growing number of organizations to recognize that most of us live, work and recreate on lands taken from their former owners.

The Denver City Council, for example, says before each meeting, "The Denver City Council honors and acknowledges that the land on which we reside is the traditional territory of the Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Peoples. We also recognize the 48 contemporary tribal nations that are historically tied to the lands that make up the state of Colorado.

"We honor Elders past, present, and future, and those who have stewarded this land throughout generations. We also recognize that government, academic, and cultural institutions were founded upon and continue to enact exclusions and erasures of Indigenous Peoples.

"May this acknowledgement demonstrate a commitment to working to dismantle ongoing legacies of oppression and inequities and recognize the current and future contributions of Indigenous communities in Denver."

While important, such statements ring hollow to some people. Sure, words matter, but actions count for more. One wonders: Could Colorado lands be returned to the Utes? That seems like an utterly preposterous idea. Or is it? Recently, Carrie Besnette Hauser, President of Colorado Mountain College, described a project that CMC is undertaking in consultation with the Utes, which will examine the disposition of land that CMC owns in Montezuma County, near Ute reservations. Deeding that land back to the Utes is on the table.

What is key here to Ute leaders is not a land deed but rather having a place at the table. Working collaboratively is the best way to ensure fairness, collegiality and, ultimately, reconciliation. As tribal leader Ernest House Jr. has said, "If you aren't at the table, you're on the menu."

How might this work? One idea is shared management of public lands. For example, who better could help manage Bears Ears National Monument than the nearby residents whose ancestors resided there for thousands of years? And this example is easily extended to National Parks, Wildernesses and other public lands, all of which were part of their ancestral homeland.



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“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Bill Betz is the former chair and current board member 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 Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](http://EagleSummitWilderness.org).

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