



Colorado Council of Professional Archaeologists (CCPA) Official Statement Regarding Bent/Ute Prayer Trees as Culturally Modified Trees (CMTs)

The Colorado Council of Professional Archaeologists (CCPA) has concluded that so-called “bent trees” or “prayer trees”¹ in Colorado are not culturally modified. American Indians harvested natural materials from bark-peeled trees and those trees are rightly regarded as “culturally modified trees” (CMTs). Euroamerican settlers similarly modified trees for a variety of purposes. However, no evidence exists that native peoples in Colorado bent or otherwise altered the growth habits of trees. The CCPA further believes that the identification of “bent trees” as CMTs diverts valuable resources that could otherwise be used to document and protect legitimate cultural resources and results in the dissemination of false and misleading information to the lay public.

We base this conclusion on the following:

- In June 2019, the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Tribes released a formal, officially signed statement disavowing bent trees entitled “Official Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Statement: Addressing the False Cultural Connection of Bent Trees to Traditional Practices of the Ute Nation.” This statement makes clear that, according to tribal elders, tribal historians, spiritual leaders, and traditional practitioners from the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribes, purposely bending trees is not a known Ute practice within their oral tradition and is not practiced today.
- No evidence exists in the archaeological, historical, or ethnographical record that trees were bent as part of cultural practices by native peoples in Colorado.
- A wide variety of natural processes explain the occurrence of bent trunks, twisted limbs, or other variations from typical growth habits. Such processes include competition for sunlight, snow loading, soil/slope creep, disease, and damage caused by animals, insects, wind, lightning, and tree fall.
- Dendrochronological analysis (tree-ring dating), a widely and commonly used dating method, shows that many or most of the trees claimed to have been bent historically by Utes or other native peoples are not old enough to have been bent during the historical time period in Colorado.

In summary, no evidence exists in the archaeological, historical, or ethnographical record; no data exist from recognized representatives of Native American tribes; and no dendrochronological data exist to support the argument that “bent trees” are cultural resources. Moreover, biological explanations are more than adequate to explain unusual changes in typical tree-growth habits.

The CCPA supports the documentation, study, and preservation of legitimate CMTs, including bark-peeled trees and other trees with scientifically and culturally recognized modifications, such as axe-cuts/blazes, witness/survey markers, mining claim-marker cuts/blazes, trees with fence line peels/axe-cuts, axe-cut delimiting and wood removal, and arborglyphs (aspen trees with historical inscriptions). These authentic CMTs are all considered significant cultural resources important to our understanding of Colorado history and archaeology.

¹ Bent trees have been referred to as “Ute Prayer Trees,” “Culturally Bent Trees,” “Spirit Trees,” “Burial Trees,” “Grandfather Trees,” “Trail Marker Trees,” “Vortex Trees,” and other designations and have been interpreted by adherents as trees whose trunks or branches have been intentionally bent by Native Americans, particularly Utes, for purposes of wayfinding or spiritual and religious practices.