

From Co-Management to Land Back: (Re)Imaging Mesa Verde National Park

Abstract

Mesa Verde National Park, the first U.S. national park established to protect archaeological heritage, is situated on the unceded homelands of 27 Indigenous Tribes. Since its founding, its management has prioritized Western scientific research, preservation, and tourism at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty and cultural values. This project critically examines how Mesa Verde's settler colonial frameworks have historically excluded Indigenous voices and perpetuated cultural erasure. We explore the complex intersection of archaeological preservation, ecological conservation, tourism, and Tribal sovereignty, highlighting how current management strategies conflict with Indigenous beliefs around excavation and stewardship of sacred sites. While recent co-management efforts and inclusive programming exhibit progress, they are limited and symbolic. We argue for a transformation in park governance through the expansion of co-management into Indigenous-led stewardship, the establishment of a self-determined Indigenous governance council, and the advancement of the Land Back movement. These changes would prioritize Tribal consent in archaeological research, return artifacts and ancestral remains, and center Indigenous knowledge to conservation practices. Grounded in the Just Transition Principles, this project envisions a future where stewardship of Mesa Verde reflects justice, sovereignty, and healing—redefining what public land management can and should look like.

1. Introduction

Mesa Verde National Park, established by Congress and signed into law by President Theodore Roosevelt on June 29, 1906, was the first national park dedicated to preserving archaeological sites. Located in southwestern Colorado near the Four Corners, it protects the well-preserved cliff dwellings of the Ancestral Pueblo people, who inhabited the area from AD 550 to 1300 (“Foundation Document - Mesa Verde”). Mesa Verde National Park exists on land stolen from the following 27 associated Tribal Nations (26 of which are recognized by the National Park Service): Opi Tribe, Kewa Pueblo, Ohkay Owingeh, Pueblo of Cochiti, Pueblo of Isleta, Nambé Oweenge Pueblo, Pueblo of Pojoaque, Pueblo of San Ildefonso, Pueblo of Santa Ana, Pueblo of Taos, Pueblo of Zia, Ute Indian Tribe, Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo, Jicarilla Apache Nation, Navajo Nation, Pueblo of Acoma, Pueblo of Jemez, Pueblo of Laguna, Pueblo of Picuris, Pueblo of San Felipe, Pueblo of Sandia, Pueblo of Santa Clara, Pueblo of Tesuque, Southern Ute Indian Tribe, Ute Mountain Tribe, Zuni Tribe (“The 26 Associated Tribes of Mesa Verde”). The park’s current management and narratives reflect colonial values and the suppression of Indigenous voices. By implementing co-management strategies, advancing Land Back initiatives, and reframing narratives in media, we can redefine stewardship and move toward a more just and equitable future for Mesa Verde and all public lands.

2. Personal Relationality Statements

It is important that we acknowledge our relationship to this research and (re)imagining project given that who we are and how we approach this work shapes our understanding and learning.

Olivia: I am a white, non-Indigenous, settler scholar studying Philosophy with an emphasis in Disability Studies and Global Health. I study these disciplines at the University of Oregon, which is located on Kalapuya ilihl land. I am originally from Madison, Wisconsin, which is located on the traditional homelands of the Ho Chunk. I have ground myself in acknowledging, listening, and respecting Indigenous thought, knowledge, and ethics. I want to position myself with relational accountability to Indigenous peoples as a community, and especially to the Indigenous homelands that I work, live, research, and recreate on. I learned the importance of these statements at the beginning of Indigenous work through my engagement with the works of Margaret Kovach, a Nehiyaw and Saulteaux Indigenous scholar and author (Kovach, 2009).

Cole: I am a white, non-Indigenous, settler scholar, studying environmental studies and Native American/Indigenous studies at the University of Oregon. I grew up in Western Colorado, the traditional homelands of the Ute people. Learning about Mesa Verde National Park was integrated into my elementary school curriculum and I have visited the region several times for field trips and personal outings.

Sadie: I am a white, non-Indigenous settler in my fourth year of studying English and environmental studies at the University of Oregon, on Kalapuya land. I have spent the majority of my life in Portland, Oregon, which sits on the traditional homeland of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, the Clackamas, Cowlitz, Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla Tribes. I have very little experience with federal lands and national parks beyond Crater Lake, but my perception of these spaces has still been shaped by settler rhetoric.

Sky: I am a white, non-Indigenous, settler student in my fourth year studying environmental studies at the University of Oregon. The University of Oregon is located on the traditional

homelands of the Kalapuya people, and I have spent a majority of my life in Huntington Beach, California which is located on the ancestral lands of the Gabrielino-Tongva and Kizh Nation peoples. I have had the privilege of growing up recreating outdoors and visiting numerous national parks and wilderness areas, which fundamentally shapes my relationship to public lands.

3. Transparent History

Leading up to the foundation of the park in 1906, the Federal government began to recognize the sheer density of culturally significant archeological sites in the southwest region of the United States. In the decades predating the park, the region experienced the growth of a semi-established market of artifacts created by looters, as well as research projects created by international scientists like Nordenskiöld's publishings on Mesa Verde. These key factors raised alarm to the U.S. government that southwestern cultural sites were valuable for many reasons. The federal government also lacked the oversight to prevent looters and foreign researchers from accessing what was at the time deemed public lands. The Swedish scientist Nordenskiöld completed the first preliminary excavation, mapping, and photography of the Mesa Verde in the late 1890s. Nordenskiöld was also capable of sending artifacts back to Sweden, this act culminated in a legal battle that Nordenskiöld won on the basis that there was no law prohibiting the removal of archeological property from public lands. In response, the federal government passed the Antiquities Act in June of 1906. The act provided the executive ability to establish national monuments to protect and preserve cultural sites and historic landmarks as well as outlaw the excavation or destruction of archeological sites. Importantly, this legislation gave the federal government the ability to oversee cultural sites and place management priorities within the field of archeology. Federal management exemplified federal control over research, narrative,

and access to the region. Under the authority of the Antiquities Act, President Theodore Roosevelt established Mesa Verde National Park three weeks later. The national park was the first to be established purely for the preservation of the site for archeological purposes. At the time, the park was established within the Ute Mountain Ute reservation. To secure the park within federal ownership, the government entered an agreement with the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe to agree to a land exchange in 1911 that included a five-mile zone including all of the ruins of the park. Contesting land claims of the park are unique because the structures and cliff dwellings were not actively occupied at the time of federal control. While many Tribes claim ancestry to this space, desires for access and communal use of the lands vary amongst each community. From the inception of the national park 27 associated Tribes have claimed ancestry to the space and have advocated that the structures, artifacts, and human remains resist excavation and disturbance.

Following the formation of the Park, several disciplines of American scientists began research projects in the region. As extensions of larger institutions like the Bureau of American Ethnology Smithsonian Institution, early projects in Mesa Verde aimed to draw preliminary conclusions about the site's inhabitants. It is widely accepted that the inhabitants of Mesa Verde occupied the region from 550 A.D. to 1300 A.D. ("People"). Following this 700-year occupation, a massive migration from the region occurred. Hypothesizing the migration from Mesa Verde, as well as the lifeways of the region's occupants, have been the focal point of scientific research. Scientists evoked the eurocentric philosophy to define a single true migration path of Mesa Verde's original occupants, leveraging pottery, architecture, and language to conclude how the site connects to contemporary Indigenous Peoples (Fewkes). These studies were completed through the excavation of sacred sites as well as burials of human remains.

Research in the region has developed hypotheses attempting to detail all aspects of life for Mesa Verde's original inhabitants including diet, spirituality, conflict, and migration. Many associated Tribes lack substantial backing from the scientific community yet continue to claim ancestry to the region. Tribes with inferior approval from Western science lack representation in the park and claims to current co-management strategies. In 1916 the Organic Act established the entity of the National Park Service which enabled the park to stabilize the ancient architecture and implement infrastructure for the benefit of tourism and public visitation. Visitation enabled the park to promote, sell, and educate the public on the accepted scientific historical narrative.

4. Narrative Analysis

When we began this project, we chose to focus specifically on Mesa Verde due to the high number of stakeholders involved with the land. As previously mentioned, archaeologists take a special interest in this park due to its unique cliff dwellings and sacred sites of the Ancestral Pueblo people. Today, the 27 associated Tribes that claim land, history, and recognition in the area have a large role here based on their past, present, and future. Other stakeholders include tourists, who are generally members of the public in "public lands," endangered species and those with an interest in conservation, and park officials. Each of these groups has a different narrative, but they do not all hold equal weight in discussions about the park's future. It is vital to prioritize Indigenous voices in these conversations.

From its recognition as a National Park, one of the primary narratives around Mesa Verde was that of its archaeological importance. An anonymous article that appeared in a 1916 edition of *The Scientific Monthly* reveals that tourist and researcher attitudes toward the park primarily reflected an interest in its Ancestral Pueblo "ruins" without acknowledgment of the Indigenous

people still living in the area at the time (“Ruins of the Mesa Verde National Park”). Sandwiched into a section of the journal on “the progress of science,” this short description of the park takes a clinical, scientific tone and does not reflect on the people who lived in these “prehistoric monuments” (309). Even today, over a century later, Indigenous Tribes are still left out of the conversations that dissect their land and treat their people as relics of the past. By failing to recognize the Tribes with history in Mesa Verde, this early piece paves the way for the continuing narrative that the Indigenous people are gone and settlers are free to research and recreate on the land as they please with no ill effects.

The reality, of course, was not nearly as simple as the 1910s settler perspective made it out to be. As Richard West Sellars explains in “A Very Large Array,” after the first boundaries for Mesa Verde National Park were proposed, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe realized that many of the cliff dwellings were on their lands rather than within the park (299). In response to this discovery, new legislation provided for the Department of the Interior to control and maintain all of the “ruins” within five miles of the boundary. This seized power from the Ute Tribe, who argued that they “had preserved the sites simply by leaving them alone” (Sellars 299). This was a clear instance of the settler colonialism narrative becoming undeservedly dominant in the decision of control and stewardship of “public” lands.

The park features a museum which, until very recently, showcased an exhibit of dioramas built by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration (“Museum Dioramas”). This exhibit opened in 1939 and was a primary attraction for visitors for over eighty years. The dioramas depict the Ancestral Pueblo people living in the cliff dwellings and are currently in the process of being permanently retired due to racist and disrespectful depictions. The Native Interpretation Working Group, a committee of representatives from the 27

associated Tribes working in conjunction with NPS officials and University of Colorado Boulder students, has expressed that the dioramas make them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in the museum (“Museum Dioramas”). This attention to Indigenous narratives is a distinct turn from the park’s past.

Both despite and because of Mesa Verde National Park’s history of overriding Indigenous voices, recent efforts within the park have more highly prioritized local Tribal narratives within official messaging and materials. One new and ongoing initiative is the Indigenous Ranger Intern program within the park, which invites young people with a background in Pueblo culture to intern as rangers and tour guides, offering their own personal and cultural insights to visitors (Adomaitis). This shifts the narrative from the park as a place of prehistoric, ancient people to one of an active and thriving community. The park officials haven’t stopped there. The removal of the offensive dioramas is part of a comprehensive renovation of the museum, which focuses on collaborative exhibit design rather than exclusively promoting settler narratives. The NPS website states that the goals of this project include telling “a comprehensive story about [the park] from multiple perspectives,” and ensuring the museum “is truly welcoming to Native communities and embraces Indigenous knowledge” (“Museum Renovations”). The new exhibits are projected to be on display next year. More than other park messaging thus far, this initiative centers the Indigenous narrative in a manner that actually involves asking the local Tribes what they want. However, it is important to note that both the museum renovation and the internship program are collaborations between various stakeholders, not exclusively Indigenous projects. They still operate within the confines of the National Parks system and tourist visitation. They are a vast improvement on the historical narratives around the park, but they are not a stopping point.

Although the efforts above are a positive step, we also want to note that the official National Park Service website for Mesa Verde has recently undergone several troubling changes since the beginning of this year. When we started our research, the “people” tab of the website included a troublingly simplistic explanation of the history of the Ancestral Pueblo people, relegating the people of the region to a removed, antiquated position. However, toward the end of January, this section of the website disappeared altogether without any explanation for how to find the information that had once been there. Today, the page is back up, although in a seemingly diminished capacity. It describes how Europeans “explored” North America (rather than using a more accurate word like “colonized”) and states that the park “preserves a spectacular reminder of this ancient culture” (“People”). Given that the NPS website is likely the first place tourists will go for information on the park, this oversimplification of the history of the land and people has the potential to be very damaging. As the political narrative around the national parks continues to shift, the change in the historical narrative presented by the NPS will be important to follow.

5. Question of Conservation

Like most national parks, Mesa Verde is shaped by competing land-use interests, including cultural heritage preservation, endangered species protection, recreational access, and Indigenous sovereignty over sacred sites. When (re)imagining this park, balancing these priorities is essential. Although Mesa Verde was originally established to protect the cliff dwellings of the Ancestral Pueblo people, its land management history reflects settler colonial values that prioritize preservation and tourism over Indigenous perspectives.

Current conservation policies focus on preventing damage to historic cliff dwellings, protecting endangered species, and maintaining tourism access. However, tourism degrades both the landscape and sacred sites, raising the question of whether the park should remain a tourist destination. To accommodate visitors, extensive efforts have been made to reinforce overhanging cliffs near popular sites, which are naturally cracking due to gravity. Additionally, increased foot traffic through sacred locations such as Cliff Palace and Balcony House accelerates degradation, contradicting conservation goals. Maintaining infrastructure for the park's half-million annual visitors is costly, with an estimated \$57 million in necessary repairs, many of which remain backlogged ("Mesa Verde National Park"). Beyond cultural preservation, conservation efforts at Mesa Verde include prescribed burns to prevent Pinyon-Juniper encroachment and mitigate climate change-driven wildfires ("Preserving Mesa Verde National Park"). The park also combats invasive species like milk thistle and cheatgrass, which have spread following frequent wildfires. Mesa Verde is home to endangered species such as the Mexican Spotted Owl and Black Swallowtail Butterfly and is designated both a Network Conservation Area and an Important Bird Area ("Preserving Mesa Verde"). Balancing ecological protection with tourism underscores the broader issue of a problematic management framework.

Although these conservation initiatives are ecologically significant, they are grounded in settler colonial perspectives that exclude the park's 27 associated Tribes. Mesa Verde follows a fortress conservation model—one that enforces strict protections while denying Indigenous stewardship—reinforcing the historical dispossession of Native lands (Ybarra). As Priscilla Ybarra argues, "None of this so-called conservation would be possible without the original and ongoing dispossession and genocide of Indigenous peoples." For example, while the park employs prescribed burning for wildfire prevention, it simultaneously prohibits Tribal cultural

fire practices, reflecting ongoing oppression against Indigenous communities. Additionally, park management prioritizes excavating and cataloging sacred sites for research, despite modern Pueblo beliefs that these dwellings should be left undisturbed to return to the earth naturally (King). As Burghardt critiques, “United States settler culture prioritizes science, recreation, patriotism, and property, and these values tend to eclipse Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous histories, and the wishes of many contemporary American Indian stakeholders” (Burghardt) in federally managed heritage sites. Mesa Verde’s current management framework upholds colonial land-use values at the expense of Indigenous authority. To create a more just conservation model, Indigenous perspectives and stewardship must take precedence, replacing outdated systems that reinforce settler colonialism.

Although there is positive progress happening in the park, it is not enough. Mesa Verde is unique in that the park’s Foundation Document details a co-management framework that allows for federal collaboration with Indigenous groups, it does not give any specific accounts of actual implementation strategies or outcomes that have come from this collaboration (Mesa Verde Foundation Document). One such initiative has been Mesa Verde receiving an International Dark Sky Association dark-sky certification, which resulted from collaborations with local Indigenous communities and gives Tribes a platform to teach their star knowledge to park visitors (Vermillion). A Mobile Story Lab and an Indigenous-narrated audio tour of the park are also ways the Mesa Verde has taken steps to uplift Indigenous voices and change park narratives (Vermillion). Although it is a great first step that the park is beginning to recognize how the National Park Service needs to collaborate with the site’s associated Tribes, this effort needs to be expanded. There needs to be a move beyond just acknowledgment of Indigenous groups' ties to the site, and instead become genuine power-sharing with these groups. This would create a

more just and sustainable management framework and should involve Indigenous-led stewardship, limits on tourism, and conservation models that put Native sovereignty first.

6. Land Back

As previously established in this paper, the location of Mesa Verde National Park is located on the unceded homelands of 27 federally recognized Tribes. I want to emphasize that this does not extend to the non-federally recognized Tribes that also call the lands of Mesa Verde National Park home. This land was slowly but surely ripped from their grasp and given to the United States federal government for the preservation of the land and the extraction of the deep archaeological history that exists on the ancient lands of Mesa Verde. What sets Mesa Verde apart from other National Parks that have been created through the dispossession and erasure of Indigenous people is that this land is not utilized for the extraction of resources. When Western settlers came upon the sacred lands of Indigenous people in Mesa Verde, they found its beauty to be mesmerizing and its location unlike anything they had seen before (Watson 13). Therefore, the creation of this National Park was for archaeological findings, not for resource extraction.

It was not until the mid-1800s that the Indigenous people located on and near the lands of Mesa Verde were forcefully removed and pushed onto nearby reservations. When this history is recalled in mainstream media, it is always a story of Western glory and praise. Don Watson writes in his book “Indians of the Mesa Verde” that at that time the entire region was terrorized by the Ute Indians. Naturally a war-like group, they were goaded into a frenzy by the loss of their hunting grounds and they made life miserable for the whites. Adventurous miners and trappers were slain; farming settlements lived in constant fear of the merciless warriors. The situation became acute and soldiers finally were sent in to hold the Utes in check” (Watson 12).

Narrations like this are what perpetuate the dispossession and erasure of Indigenous people in the area.

Currently, Mesa Verde National Park is owned and “conserved” by the United States Federal Government. Our initiative with this (re)imagining of the national park is to focus primarily on Land Back. Land Back is the movement taking place across the United States (and even other countries where Indigenous people were displaced due to colonization) that is a reclamation of lost and stolen land (“Landback”). White settlement, colonization, and the perpetuation of the aspects of these movements actively displace and work to erase Indigenous people from their own land. Through Land Back, we argue that Mesa Verde National Park be returned to the Tribes who call the land sacred and from there, they get to decide how this land is managed from here on out. Land Back is about returning lost land to their rightful owners, something that should have happened a long time ago. But, how do we plan on doing this?

7. Futurity

While a co-management framework exists contemporarily at Mesa Verde National Park, we suggest a large-scale expansion of this strategy. The prioritization to progress and showcase the field of archeology continues to be the main focal point of the park's management; as a result, it is important to analyze the overreach of Western science limiting the ethical stewardship of the area. The historical narrative produced by archeology has strict implications on the ability of associated Tribes to be included in management strategies. Tribal Nations that claim an ancestral connection to the area yet do not receive adequate recognition from the field of archeology lack power and involvement in management. As a result, Western science can limit the current standing of Tribal stakeholders within the park by hypothesizing ancient migration patterns.

Furthermore, the broader field of archeology has no professional standard to uphold a degree of codified ethics within fieldwork and excavations. Archeologists have never been required to ask for the informed and prior consent of any associated Tribal Nation before enacting any form of research. Ethics of research are left to the discretion of the researcher and require no Tribal involvement. As a result, the history of archeology at Mesa Verde has created extensive collections of culturally significant artifacts and human remains under the control of researchers and museums across the globe.

To further develop a co-management framework at Mesa Verde National Park, we suggest the creation of a “self-determined Pueblo Heritage Council” (Wolverton 28). This Council was originally suggested by Steve Wolverton, an Ethnobiologist in the Mesa Verde region promoting deeper involvement of Indigenous peoples within research and management of the park. Wolverton suggests the formation of a Council composed of all Tribal communities that claim a self-defined ancestral connection to the region. This Council could formally challenge the field of archeology and advocate for Tribal consent and inclusion within archeological research which could ultimately lead to the implementation of a codified ethic requiring scientists to receive consent that meets the Council's standards. As a result, the design of future research projects would be at the discretion of the Council rather than the researcher. Leveraging legislation like NAGPRA, the Council could also commit to restorative justice, returning remains and artifacts to Tribal management. Furthermore, the Council can establish a relationship through joint management with the National Park Service that exemplifies respect. Collaboration surrounding the narrative and information available to park visitors is imperative to developing an informed public. Strategies surrounding tourism should be placed within the oversight of the Council to ensure ethical visitations of the region. Clear representation and documentation of the

past injustices that have occurred throughout the colonial management of the park need to be evident within the information available at the park.

As for our long-term goals regarding the reimagining of Mesa Verde National Park, we hope to return the entirety of Mesa Verde National Park to the Tribes who owned it through Land Back principles, bringing with it recognized sovereignty for all associated Tribes. As Gilio-Whitaker writes, “restoring Indigenous stewardship to these “wild” places [is important] because it is Indigenous peoples who know what’s best for the land and what the land needs to thrive, and when the land thrives, people thrive” (Gilio-Whitaker). Indigenous Tribes will have complete stewardship over the park and decide what is public and what is not (if anything should be public in the first place). Lastly, after years of displacement of sacred Tribal artifacts, these will be returned to their rightful owners and from there, Indigenous Tribes have the power to decide what is done with them. Overall, our long-term goals for Mesa Verde National Park are centered around the complete restoration of Indigenous control over their own land. We believe that achieving these long-term goals can come from building on the Just Transition Principles outlined by the Indigenous Environmental Network. These principles emphasize shifting the focus from merely preventing harm to actively building new and better systems. Central to this approach is healing through an understanding of historical trauma, decolonizing knowledge, and transforming practices (“Just Transition”). Through this work, we aim to redefine stewardship and move toward a more just and equitable future for Mesa Verde and all public lands.

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