

A Hunting Dilemma

THE UTE BALANCE HUNTING WITH TRIBAL TRADITIONS

By Divya Abhat



As independent governments, federally recognized tribes have the right to manage wildlife on their reservation lands, which includes hunting and fishing in ways that suit tribal needs and cultural traditions. If a species is scarce or sacred, however, that right can stir conflict with state or federal agencies and even within the tribes themselves.



Credit: Ute Tribe Outfitting and Guide Department

Ute tribal guide Kobi Reed, left, shares in visitor Patrick Redding's success at an annual fall elk hunt. During this time the Ute tribe opens up a portion of its land to non-members for hunting wildlife species such as elk, buffalo, and bighorn sheep.

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The Ute people provide a case in point. Ute reservation lands comprise of millions of acres across the southwestern United States—with the Uintah-Ouray tribe living in northeastern Utah, the Southern Ute in Colorado, and the Ute Mountain tribe on the borders of Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico. Each spring the Ute hold an annual Bear Dance, a ceremony to celebrate the bear's awakening

and teach tribal members about strength, wisdom, and survival. About 10 years ago, however, too many bears were awakening, which created a management challenge for the Ute.

Black bear populations on the reservation were at an all-time high, and the animals had become dangerously habituated to humans. "We had situations where as many as seven or eight bears would come into campgrounds ... and tear up trailers," says Karen Cortis, big game enhancement manager with the Ute Tribe Fish and Wildlife Department (UTFWD), which manages 1.2 million acres of tribal land in the Uintah Basin. Cortis approached the Ute Tribal Council to recommend measures to control the reservation's burgeoning black bear population. She suggested hunting as one means of control—a recommendation that wasn't very well-received by the tribe, which hadn't ever hunted bears.

"There were a lot of concerns about what some of the older tribal members would think," Cortis says. Many Ute elders were opposed to hunting

bears, largely because of their traditional place of honor in the Bear Dance ritual. Two years and numerous public meetings later, the tribe agreed to hunt bears on the reservation. Today, "we have a very healthy bear population," says Cortis, whose department issues 30 bear permits a year.

Hunting Beyond Bears

The Ute also offer permits for furbearer hunting and fishing for species including rainbow trout and smallmouth bass. Tribal members do not have to pay for permits, which typically range in price from \$25 to \$50 for furbearer hunts and \$10 to \$30 for fishing. Big-game trophy hunts on Ute land also draw in hunters and income, and are administered by the UTFWD's [Outfitting and Guide Program](#), responsible for the assessment of game populations, costs, and projected revenues.

Each year the UTFWD offers six to eight trophy bull elk permits, two trophy buffalo permits, and one trophy bighorn sheep permit. Bids for the permits can be steep, ranging from \$345 for one elk cow permit to \$85,000 for a bighorn sheep.

Of course the Ute aren't alone in offering hunting permits as a means to manage wildlife and generate revenue. The Crow (Apsáalooke) tribes in Montana, for example, offer antelope hunts on their reservations for extended periods that are often longer than hunting seasons set by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. "The Crow Tribe has a variety of hunting and fishing opportunities for non-tribal members including elk, deer, pronghorn, and upland birds. The license requirements will vary depending on the species and location," says Alexis Bonogofsky, tribal lands senior coordinator of the National Wildlife Federation's Tribal Lands Conservation Program. The White Mountain Apache tribe in Arizona auctions off a special license for a trophy bull elk, which in the past, has gone for as much as \$75,000 for one individual.

Despite the high costs of permits, non-Indians aren't deterred from participating in such hunts, especially given the pristine habitat and quality wildlife on many tribal reservations. "As a non-member you get an excellent opportunity, and a lot of people are willing to pay," says Cortis. ■