

The Great Sand Dunes

The tallest dunes in North America make a dramatic contrast with the alpine peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. The story of their formation is still being discovered.

People have had an enduring connection with the Great Sand Dunes for many generations. Humans have known about, visited or lived near them for a very long time. Evidence of humans in the area dates back about 11,000 years. What brought these early people here? What would bring you?

Stone age people who walked into the San Luis Valley were nomadic hunters whose connection centered around herds of mammoths and prehistoric bison that grazed nearby. Modern American Indian tribes were familiar with the area when the Spaniards first arrived about 400 years ago. The traditional Ute word for the Great Sand Dunes is *Sowapophe-uwehe*, which means "the land that moves back and forth." The Arizilla Apaches settled in northern New Mexico and called the Dunes *Sei-anyedi* which means "it goes up and down" Blanca Peak, just southeast of the Dunes, is one of the four sacred mountains of the Navajo. The Apaches and the Utes camped and hunted here. These tribes collected the inner layers of bark from the Ponderosa pine trees. This was used for food and medicine. There are over 100 Ponderosa pine trees, stripped of a lot of their bark, that are living artifacts around the Great Sand Dunes. This is the only grove of trees on the National Register of Historic places. The vanilla fragrance of the ponderosa is still evident after 500 years.

The first known writings about the Great Sand Dunes appear in Zebulon Pike's journals of 1807. Notes from January 28, 1807 read: *"After marching some miles, we discovered at the foot of the White Mountains which we were then descending, sandy hills. I ascended one of the largest hills of sand, and with my glass could discover a large river. The sand hills extended up and down the foot of the White Mountains about 15 miles, and appeared to be about 5 miles in width. Their appearance was exactly that of the sea in a storm, except as to color, not the least sign of vegetation existing thereon.* We know the White Mountains today as the Sangre de Cristos. The large river was the Rio Grande.

In the years that followed, the Rockies were explored, treaties were signed and broken with resident tribes and people with widely differing goals flooded into Colorado. Settlers arrived in the San Luis Valley by way of the trails from Santa Fe or La Veta Pass, several routes over the Sangre de Cristos were well known to American Indians and increasingly used by settlers. The Mosca Pass Toll Road was developed in the 1870s, and stages and the mail route used it regularly through 1911. That year it was badly damaged in a flash flood and is now a trail for hikers. Would you like travel that trail across the ever shifting, ever changing, mysterious, mystical Great Sand Dunes? Legend has it that the sands sing every time the west wind blows. Maybe you might hear the desert's song or even the faint, haunting sound of an ancient Indian flute still echoing among the dunes.