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Water, water, water (Ed. obsession)



A hot-air balloon soars over Arches National Park near the Tower of Babel, outside of Moab, Utah.
Photograph by Jon G. Fuller, VWPics/Redux

Meet the peach that traveled the Trail of Tears and the elders working to save it The "Indian peach" survived genocide. Can it withstand climate change?

It's November and it's unseasonably warm as John John Brown, a Muscogee elder, works to replant peach saplings. "I haven't had much luck growing them from seed," he says. The reason, he thinks, is because peaches need lower temperatures.

Around him, tiny peach trees the size of pencils stand above the browning grass underneath their parent tree. Brown harvested around 200 peaches this year from his small orchard — enough for his family and neighbors — but he had competition: A fox has been poking around. "The animals know when the peaches are ripe quicker than I do," Brown laughs. "They start coming in and stealing my peaches."

Brown's peaches aren't your everyday peaches, they're heirlooms: direct descendants of peach seeds brought across the continent on the Trail of Tears. Brown calls them "Indian peaches" while other Muscogees call them "Trail of Tears peaches." There has been little research on this particular variety, and it's unknown just how many genes they share with commercial peaches. While grocery store peaches are soft and fleshy, Indian peaches don't get much bigger than a lemon and are extremely firm but sweet.

The Indian peach is threatened by climate change. Where hurricanes, flooding, and higher temperatures have massive impacts on crops, including peaches, around the nation, heirloom varieties, like the Indian peach, are also threatened. This fruit, that crossed a planet, carried by traders and travelers, and eventually by a few Muscogees along The Trail before they found a new home outside Sapulpa, Oklahoma, is a connection to another time and place.

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"One of the greatest gifts Creator gave me is these peaches and the ability to share these trees with our community and everyone," Brown said.



These "Indian peaches" are direct descendants of peach seeds brought across the continent on the Trail of Tears. Courtesy of John John Brown

There are only 50 Indian peach trees on the Muscogee reservation that Brown knows of — some grow in some peoples' backyards, and some at a local daycare — and between climate-driven changes to growing cycles and high temperatures, they face a difficult future. Luckily, they have people like Brown working to protect them.

Peach cultivation is thought to have begun around 8,000 years ago in the Yangtze Valley in China. One of the first mentions of peaches in literature appears in the fictional novel [Journey to the West](#), written in 1592, that describes peaches as a fruit that could grant longevity and "make a man's age equal to that of Heaven and Earth, the sun and the moon."

From China, peaches made their way to Europe, then to the Americas in the 1600s on Spanish ships — the beginning of a kind of crop exchange between the continents: potatoes and tomatoes from South and Central America went to Europe while peaches made their way to the Georgia coast, and quickly, [into Indigenous diets](#).

“Indigenous people were already caring for and managing forests and other kinds of tree foods,” said Jacob Holland-Lulewicz at Pennsylvania State University, who studies archaeology and ethnohistory. “That would have allowed them to adopt peaches super quickly and know really well how to create healthy peaches.”

Within a few decades, and with the help of a vast network of trade routes, peaches made their way across the continent, as far as the Southwest, where tribes like the Navajo [sun-dried and stewed them](#).

Around 1780, thousands of peach trees tended by the Seneca and Cayuga tribes along the Finger Lakes in western New York State were [destroyed by President George Washington](#), in an attempt to ethnically cleanse Indigenous peoples from the region. Washington [wrote in a letter](#) to one of his generals that the goal was “to lay waste all the settlements.” He added, “It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more.”

In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed into law the Indian Removal Act that led to the Trail of Tears — a death march that forced around 60,000 Indigenous people to leave their homes and move west, across the Mississippi River, to Oklahoma.

Vernon Courtwright grew up eating Indian peaches. Now 75 years old, the Muscogee elder and veteran says his family brought Indian peach seeds and planted them when they were done walking The Trail. “That was the beginning of our life and the peaches’ life in Oklahoma,” he said. When he was a child, his grandmother, Emma Bruner, was the one who taught him about how to grow and tend to the fruit. “We grew up eating these peaches.”

Courtwright says in the 1970s, he began to see Indian peaches disappear. With each passing year, there was less on the landscape. “I just knew that our orchard had to be taken care of,” he said. When his grandparents passed, he took on the work of caring for the trees, and eventually, met John John Brown, who helped cultivate seeds and saplings to give out to other Muscogees.

“It’s our legacy,” said Courtwright. “It’s my family’s legacy to the tribe.”

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For the Indian peach, peach chill and extreme weather aren’t as big a threat as they are in the South. However, Oklahoma is expected to become around [two and a half degrees hotter](#) in the next 20 years. Even though the peach is a resilient plant, peach chill will become an issue. Natural disasters like floods become more of a threat to the lives and livelihoods of tribal members — tribal lands in Oklahoma are the [most prone to flooding in the state](#).

But to protect Indian peaches, and a little part of tribal history, John John Brown has been giving out saplings for the better part of a decade to anyone interested in growing them.

## **[The American chestnut tree is coming back. Who is it for?](#)**

[Maya L. Kapoor](#)

Brown regularly travels to Georgia and Alabama to visit the proposed [Ocmulgee Mounds National Park and Preserve](#) — located on Muscogee homelands. On his drives, he often passes peach orchards filled with the variety most Americans are used to. “You don’t think they would be able to produce peaches,” he says as he eyes the tightly-pruned rows. “They cut ’em back real small.”

He goes down to the homelands to remind settlers in the area that the Muscogee survived despite the United States attempts at genocide and demos making canoes and bows the traditional way out of local wood during the annual Ocmulgee Indigenous Celebration. To Brown the peaches are a symbol of resilience.

“When our ancestors brought these peaches up from the South you think about how devastating it was, to lose loved ones, and not know if the seeds will sprout,” he said. “I do this to honor them, and their strength.”

## **Indigenous Affairs**

### **[Mass protests against New Zealand’s effort to weaken Māori rights — and hurt the planet](#)**

- **[Can Lula still save the Amazon?](#)**

[Joaquim Salles](#)

### **[A Q&A with Indigenous leader Nemonte Nenquimo, who fought oil drilling in the Amazon — and won](#)**

[Anita Hofschneider](#)

### **[A ‘first step’ toward landback: Tribes call for three new monuments in California](#)**

[Taylar Dawn Stagner](#)

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Welcome to The Sierra Fund’s first issue of our new eNews

designed to serve our network of Tribal Communities, allies, and supporters. As you may have heard by now, The Sierra Fund has recently transformed into an Indigenous-led organization – with a renewed mission to elevate Indigenous place-based wisdom, leadership, and guardianship to achieve reparative justice and resilient Sierra Nevada cultural ecologies and communities for future generations. To learn more about this transformation, [visit our blog here](#).

As part of this new mission we will be sharing here regional Native news, cultural events, resources, Tribal jobs, grants for tribal-led projects, and our own updates.

We invite you to share with us your own Tribal-focused news, events, jobs, or grant-leads to contribute to this newsletter – you can do so by contacting Development and Communications Director Laura Carroll at laura.carroll@sierrafund.org.

Celebrating Indigenous Guardianship: Highlights from the Sierra Nevada Tribal Summit

We are still buzzing about The Second Sierra Nevada Tribal Summit on Indigenous Guardianship, held from October 7 to 9, 2024 at the Red Hawk Casino. The event brought together 179 participants, including 115 Indigenous attendees from 26 Sierra tribes. The summit featured a robust program that included nine informative sessions, a field trip, and a film screening. Attendees engaged in rich discussions led by 48 speakers, including esteemed elders, Tribal practitioners and youth crews, and agency leaders. Feedback from participants shared that the Summit fostered a strong sense of community, hope, and commitment to advance Indigenous guardianship.

[Click here to read the full summit recap!](#)

Webinar and Radio Interview Recordings about The Sierra Fund's Recent Transformation Now Available

Catch up on the details of The Sierra Fund's transformation through our recorded webinar and a community radio interview featuring CEO Brian Wallace and others. These discussions highlight our renewed mission centered on uplifting Indigenous wisdom and leadership, and focusing on reparative justice and resilient cultural ecologies.

[Access the recordings here.](#)

Homeland Return: Escrow Closed for Nisenan Village Site of Yulića

In the fall of 2023, the California Heritage: Indigenous Research Project, a nonprofit serving the Nevada City Rancheria Nisenan Tribe, was presented with an opportunity to purchase 232 acres of land near Nevada City, California (AKA the Woolman property). This land was once part of the thriving Nisenan community and town called Yulića. After a tremendously successful grassroots campaign, CHIRP fundraised over \$2.5 million dollars and escrow finally closed in September 2024. The purchase and repatriation of Yulića provides a tremendous potential for stability and healing for the Tribe, the environment, and the fabric of the Sierra Nevada foothills community.

[Learn more on CHIRPS website here.](#)

Glossary of Terms

First released at the 2024 Sierra Nevada Tribal Summit, the Glossary of Terms by A. Brian Wallace, provides a guide to terms related to Indigenous rights, governance, and conservation, emphasizing the importance of cultural practices, biodiversity, and self-determination for Indigenous Peoples.

[Link here to the full document.](#)

The Nature Conservancy of Canada Indigenous Guardians Toolkit

This toolkit supports Indigenous communities across Canada to learn, share and connect about Indigenous Guardian programs. Be inspired by other communities, find practical information, and share your experiences.

[Link here to full document](#)

Jobs

CA Department of Public Health Tribal Relations Coordinator, Contra Costa or Sacramento Counties

The Tribal Relations Coordinator will serve broadly as a subject matter expert on Tribal & American Indian/Alaskan Native Communities (AI/AN) population health, leading activities that include relationship building, project guidance, direction and oversight, training, coordination, technical assistance to support CDPH's outreach to Tribes and AI/AN communities. The Tribal Relations Coordinator will act as a bridge between CDPH's OHE and the Department's Tribal health partners, providing technical consultation to support the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of projects and activities designed to continue to improve public health response and recovery among California Tribes and Tribal communities.

[Click here to access full job announcement.](#)

CHIPS Forestry Field Operations Crew Members, West Point, CA

CHIPS' Field Operations Crews are seasonal workers that work in forest settings to cut, pile, and chip or remove trees and brush that would fuel wild fires. CHIPS Forestry trains and equips wildfire prevention crews who perform fuels reduction projects throughout the Sierra. Currently, all but a couple of CHIPS Forestry employees are indigenous. Starting wage is \$17-\$19 per hour.

[Click here to access the full job announcement.](#)

The struggle continues today

The Native peoples of Turtle Island have fought for the right to self-determination through hundreds of years of colonization.

From the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 to the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 to the Occupation of Wounded Knee of 1890 to the election of the first Native women to Congress in 2018 to recent struggles to protect salmon, we will never stop the long walk towards sovereignty and the fulfillment of our treaties. We have persevered during many attempts to eradicate and silence us, and we will continue to fulfill our ancestors' hopes and dreams.

1680: The Pueblo Revolt

A collective rebellion against Spanish colonialism which kept Spanish settlers out of the area (now known as New Mexico) for over a decade, allowing the Pueblos to continue stewarding their land and practicing their traditional culture

1876: Battle of the Greasy Grass (Battle of the Little Bighorn)

While wrongly popularized as 'Custer's Last Stand,' the Battle of the Greasy Grass, also known as the Battle of Little Bighorn, took place in June 1876. Colonel George Custer had moved to the Plains to extract gold and control Tribes. Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull led an assembled group of Lakota, Northern Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors who fought back against Custer, who was outnumbered and defeated.

1958: Lumbee drive off KKK in The Battle of Hayes Pond

A Ku Klux Klan meeting was set to take place near Maxton, North Carolina, but several hundred Lumbee men a Hayes Pond during the KKK meeting. They circled around and while an altercation took place, the only damaged KKK member who had arranged the event was arrested and the Lumbee men were praised around the country attempt to hold a KKK meeting in that county since.

1961: Fish-ins

In the 1960s and 1970s, Native fishermen in the Pacific Northwest were inspired by the Civil Rights sit-ins, utilizing similar tactics with fishing in order to bring attention to treaty rights outlined in the 1854 Treaty of Medicine Creek. This led to a victory in 1974 when a court decision affirmed that, according to the treaty, Native fisherpeople must have an equal voice in the management of the fishery and have a right to take up to 50% of all potential fishing harvests.

1973: Occupation of Wounded Knee

Beginning in February 1973 and lasting 71 days, 2,000 Native activists joined AIM (American Indian Movement) 1890 Wounded Knee massacre in opposition to collusion with paramilitary federal police. Native participants fa Leonard Peltier, who is now the longest-serving political prisoner in the United States.

1996: Diné traditional activists win suit against multinational energy company and owner of Peabody Coal Company

In response to previous mines that had destroyed the health, land, and groundwater of the Diné people, 500 people successfully petitioned the federal government to deny a permanent operating permit for this multinational energy company. Their victory prevented further degradation of Native land.

2016: Protests at Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline

Thousands of people from around the United States joined the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe to block construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Their efforts succeeded under the Obama administration until Trump took office in 2017, and the fight continues in the courts.

2017: Indigenous Women Rise: Women's March on Washington

On January 21, Indigenous women joined the largest single-day protest in U.S. history, led by LaDonna Harris (Comanche) who was appointed as an honorary co-chair for the Women's March. While many women wore pink, Indigenous women wore turquoise scarves or shawls in a visual show of force.

2021: Biden restores protections for Bears Ears

After his predecessor Donald Trump reduced the size of the Bears Ears National Monument by 85%, President Biden restored protections for Bears Ears, re-establishing Tribal Nations as collaborative managers of this sacred landscape. Responding to the movement led by Tribal Nations, President Biden also **rescinded the Keystone XL pipeline's permit** and designated monuments like the **Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni National Monument**.

2020: Deb Haaland becomes Secretary of the Interior

U.S. Representative Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) was nominated by President-elect Joe Biden to become the first Native member of a presidential cabinet. Haaland was later confirmed as the Secretary of the Interior, where she oversaw a record number of Tribal-federal co-stewardship agreements and an investigation into horrors perpetrated on Native children and families through boarding schools, which led to a history-making apology from President Biden.

Through time immemorial, Indigenous people have stood up for our rights, our lands, and our cultures. That struggle continues today, whether it is protecting against modern-day land grabs by the federal government or defending sacred places from corporate polluters.

Hawwih (thank you in Cado), Judith LeBlanc (Caddo), Executive Director'

Native Americans for Sovereignty and Preservation – Tribal Community Empowerment

<https://nativesovereignty.com/>

More scholarships

The Earth Prize Competition \$100,000 **Deadline:** November 30, 2024

[See If You Qualify](#)



Dell Scholars Program \$20,000 **Deadline:** December 1, 2024 [See If You Qualify](#)

Burger King Scholars \$60,000 **Deadline:** December 15, 2024 [See If You Qualify](#)

Cards Against Humanity Scholarship \$20,000 **Deadline:** December 16, 2024

[See If You Qualify](#)

Vought picked for repeat performance at Trump’s budget office

Russ Vought, the hard-driving budget director from President-elect Donald Trump’s first administration, will be nominated for a second stint in the job. [Read more...](#)

Trump selects Rep. Chavez-DeRemer for Labor

President-elect Donald Trump said he will nominate Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer, R-Ore., to be Labor secretary. [Read more...](#)

Trump picks former aide Scott Turner to be HUD secretary

President-elect Donald Trump said Friday he would nominate Scott Turner, a White House aide during his first term, to become secretary of Housing and Urban Development. [Read more...](#)

Listen: What do more water cuts in 2025 mean for Las Vegas and Nevada?

“Even though it still gets over 100 degrees, and forecasters say it’ll stay there for another week or so, right now ... we’re all breathing a sigh of relief. Because the summer’s awful summer heat seems over. How bad was it? Even those few born here weren’t doing their usual boasting about how the heat was nothing. This summer was something altogether different. It was starting to break people, and it killed dozens. To make matters worse, the news came a few weeks ago that Las Vegas would once again have cut back on its use of the Colorado River, even though it already has the smallest share of water out of seven states that use the river. And it’s made us all wonder about our water supply. We can have all the megaresorts we want, but without a steady supply of water, Las Vegas doesn’t exist, or it exists on a much smaller scale. But is that even a

potential future? Will the seven states get their act together and come up with enough river cuts that we can stop worrying for a while?” [Listen at NPR](#).

Lake Powell: Water rule change could have saved 28.5 billion gallons

“As Lake Powell and other vital water sources in the Colorado River Basin face increasing stress, researchers are calling attention to a simple yet critical legal reform that could help secure the region’s water future. A recent study by a consortium of scientists, including experts from the University of Virginia, suggests that closing Colorado’s “free river conditions” loophole could play a key role in stabilizing water supplies and safeguarding reservoirs like Lake Powell. The loophole is a remnant of historic water-sharing agreements between the seven states, 25 Native American tribes and parts of Mexico that rely on the Colorado River—some 40 million people. It allows anyone in Colorado to divert unlimited water from the river when it carries enough to meet everyone’s needs, regardless of their water rights. “Closing this loophole in Colorado’s water rights system could save millions of cubic meters of water and be the state’s modest contribution to solving water stress in the Colorado River Basin,” lead author Peter Debaere said in a statement. ... ” [Read more from Newsweek](#).

SEE ALSO: [Researchers urge closing outdated water rule to aid Colorado River crisis](#), from Smart Water Magazine

New technology in the Upper Colorado River basin states will measure water lost to the sky“To help quantify how much water is lost as [evapotranspiration](#) — the biggest unknown in estimating water use — the Upper Colorado River Commission is installing EC towers across its basin. For now, the eddy-covariance towers measure the water lost from soil and plants to the sky and carbon dioxide, a major component of global warming. The towers take measurements 20 to 40 times every second, and each one costs a half- million dollars. One is up and running now at the Southwestern Colorado Research Center in Yellow Jacket. “Come next year, around this time, we will have 32 operating fully seamless, all of them communicating in the entire upper basin,” said Kaz Maitaria, Ph.D., a staff engineer at the Upper Colorado River Commission and a Fulbright Scholar. ... ” [Read more from The Journal](#).

For photos of CR/Lake Mead/Hoover (Boulder) Dam: <https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/joannaallhands/2024/08/26/lake-mead-colorado-river-2026-water-savings/74925833007/>

How Boeing, Coca-Cola and Google joined to save Arizona’s Verde River

“Decades of drought and taking more water from the Colorado River than it can afford to give have put both the river and the \$1.4 trillion economy it supports in jeopardy. Investing in water resilience is essential for companies operating in the region, but it requires a different approach than many are used to. A tested and successful model can be found on the Verde River, a Northern Arizona [tributary](#) of the Salt River in the Colorado River Basin. The Verde River provides water for local farms and delivers up to 40 percent of in-state [surface water](#) for major urban locations in the Phoenix metro area. But its long-term health is at risk from withdrawals, groundwater pumping, a warming climate and drought. Companies including Boeing, REI, Coca-Cola, Meta, Microsoft, Cox, PepsiCo, Google, Procter & Gamble, EdgeCore and Intel have partnered with groups such as The Nature Conservancy, Friends of the Verde River, National

Forest Foundation and the Salt River Project to support dozens of resilience projects over the past decade in the Verde River. ... ” [Read more from Trellis.](#)

Why Utah is suing the U.S. for control of public land

“On Tuesday, Utah filed a lawsuit, asking the U.S. Supreme Court to determine whether the federal government can retain millions of acres indefinitely – or whether the feds must dispose of those lands. “It is obvious to all of us that the federal government has increasingly failed to keep our lands accessible and properly managed,” Republican Gov. Spencer J. Cox, said in a press conference. The state is calling the suit a “Stand for Our Land,” saying the feds are restricting access with recent decisions such as the Public Lands Rule and an updated travel management plan near Moab. Conservation groups quickly responded. “Governor Cox and the state legislature need to make a U-turn before they waste millions of taxpayer dollars enriching out-of-state lawyers on this pointless lawsuit,” said Aaron Weiss, deputy director of Center for Western Priorities, a nonpartisan, conservation advocacy group focusing on public-land protection. ... ” [Read more from the High Country News.](#)

Feds outline ‘necessary steps’ for Colorado River agreement by 2026 but no recommendation yet

“Federal water officials made public on Wednesday what they called “necessary steps” for seven states and multiple tribes that use Colorado River water and hydropower to meet an August 2026 deadline for deciding how to manage the waterway in the future. “Today we show our collective work,” Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton said as she outlined four proposals for action and one “no action” alternative that she and Biden’s government will leave for the incoming Trump Administration — with formal environmental assessments still to come and just 20 months to act. The announcement offered no recommendation or decision about how to divvy up water from the river, which provides electricity to millions of homes and businesses, irrigates vast stretches of desert farmland and reaches kitchen faucets in cities including Denver, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque, Las Vegas, Phoenix and Los Angeles. ... ” [Read more from the Associated Press.](#)

Colorado River management proposals receive mixed reactions, with hints of possible legal battle

“The U.S. Department of the Interior’s alternative proposals to guide the management of the Colorado River received mixed reactions from key negotiators and officials whose support is crucial in the river’s successful operation in the years to come. Several reiterated they don’t want litigation, which would tie up any plans in the court systems for years, but they also acknowledged — or at least hinted — that a legal battle is a plausible outcome. “We don’t want a legal fight,” said Tom Buschatzke, the Arizona Department of Water Resources director. “We want the process that we’re currently involved in to be concluded” by all seven states, the 30 tribes, the nongovernmental organizations, recreationists, and others, much like what happened in 2019 with the drought contingency plan, said Buschatzke, who is his state’s chief negotiator on matters related to the Colorado River. ... ” [Read more from Colorado Politics.](#)

Feds release highly anticipated options for managing overstressed Colorado River in coming years

“The federal government unveiled Wednesday the first glimpse of how the overstressed Colorado River could be managed for decades to come. Bureau of Reclamation officials shared five different management options: Some would keep more water in Lake Powell and impose large cuts on water use in Arizona, California and Nevada. Three options incorporate upstream reservoirs, like Blue Mesa in Colorado, and would require water cuts across the basin, including Colorado, in dry years — ideas that Colorado has staunchly opposed. The news is a big deal for the 40 million people who rely on the Colorado River across the West. The drafted options form the foundation for new water management rules, which will start in 2027 and operate for years to come during an unpredictable climate future. ...” [Read more from the Colorado Sun.](#)

White House urges Colorado River states to pick up the pace of negotiations

“Federal water officials released a set of possible plans for managing the shrinking Colorado River in the future. They urged state negotiators to agree on a single plan, since the states are [deeply divided](#) about how to share the pain of cutbacks during dry times. “We can either remain stuck at an impasse, or secure a future for future generations that promises the stability and sustainability of one of our greatest natural resources,” said Ali Zaidi, White House climate advisor. The current rules for sharing Colorado River water expire in 2026, and the seven states that use it are on the hook to come up with a replacement before then. They’re split into two camps, and [each submitted](#) a separate proposal to the federal government in March. State negotiators say they want a collaborative solution, but they don’t appear any closer to agreement than they did in March and have publicly dug in their heels about their [ideological differences](#). ...” [Read more from the KUNC.](#)

SEE ALSO:

- [The Biden administration is trying to throw a Hail Mary to save the Colorado River before Trump takes over](#), from CNN
- [Biden administration outlines options for addressing Colorado River water shortages](#), from the LA Times
- [‘Clear as mud’: Feds offer vague window into Colorado River negotiations](#), from the Las Vegas Review-Journal
- [Biden White House likely won’t finish long-term Colorado River plan, unveils five options](#), from the Desert Sun

