



Arborglyphs and Aspen Management

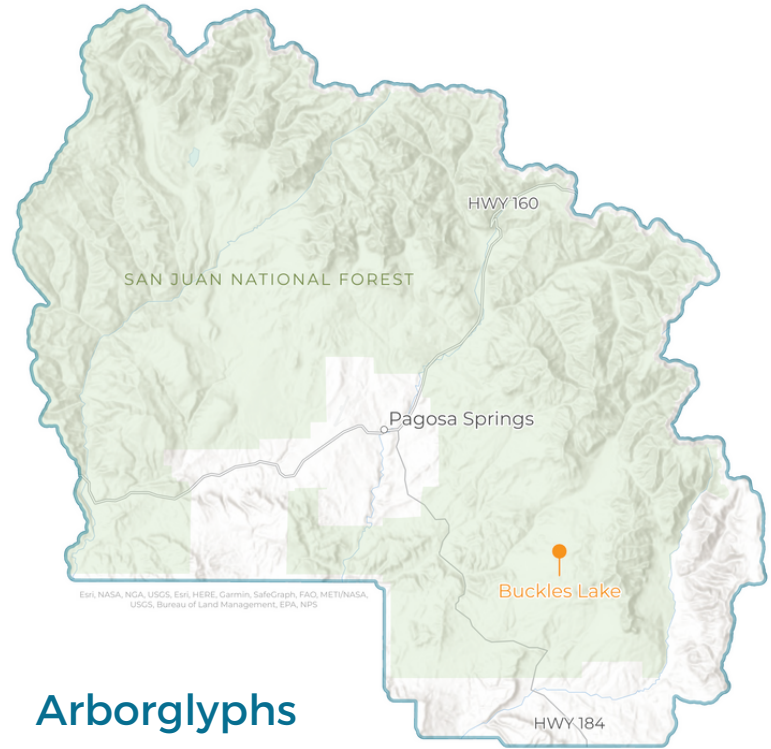
Buckles Lake, September 2023

Context

The Buckles Lake area, southeast of Pagosa Springs, features large Aspen trees (the kind that really catch your eye), stunning views (prime for leaf-peeping), many miles of trails, and several layers of human history. There were two prongs to this field tour: learning about and viewing arborglyphs from local expert, Peggy Bergon, and learning about some of the challenges and opportunities with managing aging aspen forests.

What is an arborglyph?

An arborglyph is a carving in a living tree, in this case, on aspen trees. We're not talking about "John from Waco" that you noticed had recently been carved on an aspen tree along a popular hiking trail. These are historical, cultural markings left on trees by people that lived long before we did.



Arborglyphs

The arborglyphs at Buckles Lake were carved by Spanish sheep herders in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As Spanish settlers moved north through New Mexico and Colorado, they brought flocks of sheep to graze along the way. They preferred sheep over cattle because they were easier to move, they stayed

together, and their meat, milk and wool were valuable goods. The sheep herders were often young boys, and typically worked in groups of two, grazing their flock of about 1,500 animals for months at a time. Sheep sleep during the day, leaving the young sheep herders with lots of time on their hands, so they turned to the trees, the white bark of aspen like a canvas.

The sheep herders often carved their names and the date into the trees. Although they were typically not very educated, the school that these boys did attend valued penmanship. The sheep herders often wrote in a beautiful Spencerian script (right), which is still visible on the aspen trees at Buckles Lake. Some carvings depict women, geometric features or events and individuals would often leave their mark on several trees, allowing us to track their movement through the area.



If the trees don't live forever, how do we preserve the piece of history that is stored within these arborglyphs? Peggy Bergon's answer is to photograph them! Peggy is a local expert on arborglyphs, having studied and photographed them for over 40 years.



A sheep herder's name carved in Spencerian script. Photos by Alex Handloff.

A figure laying down in the woods, perhaps on a sunny fall day in the aspens.

Layers of human history

The Spanish sheep herders certainly weren't the first people to call this home. This is part of the Jicarilla Apache's (and other tribes') traditional homelands, and they were likely in conflict with the sheep herders. There are multiple layers of values, history and interests, with different views of how to move forward and what to hold on to.

Aspen management

Everybody loves aspen trees, especially this time of year. They are a staple of Colorado's tourism industry, and let's be honest, standing in an aspen grove when the leaves are yellow and the sun is shining feels like the world is giving you a big hug. But aspen don't live for long, especially compared to the tree species they are surrounded by. Aspen are the first trees to start growing after an event like a wildfire or a beetle outbreak that kills all of the other trees. Their roots spread out and send up shoots that turn into new trees, so when you're looking at a patch of aspen trees, they are likely all the same individual organism. However, as soon as the other tree species like fir and pine start growing, the aspen get pushed out and the forest moves on to a new stage of life, which is what is happening at Buckles Lake right now. If us humans weren't around to care about everything, the forest would transition to a mixed-conifer type, the aspen trees would die and eventually a fire would burn through the area and aspen would come back again, which is a normal process, ecologically speaking. But us humans are here, and we value these aspen trees and sometimes we need sunny hugs from the forest, so we want to keep them around.

The San Juan National Forest does more aspen management than most other places in the country. Typically, management in these forests is designed to mimic disturbance like wildfire or insect outbreak. This is called a coppice cut, which is like a clear cut of aspen trees. This can look harsh at first, but aspen tend to do a fantastic job regenerating, and we often see a new forest of baby trees within just a few years. The SJNF already has clearance to do work in this area, but they haven't made a final decision on how to proceed. They value input from the Headwaters Partnership, especially surrounding the management of trees with arborglyphs.



Headwaters Partners heading toward an arborglyph that looks like a volleyball. Or maybe a celtic knot. Alex Handloff.

Interested in participating in the next SJHFHP tour or meeting? Email Alex Handloff, the Coordinator, to get involved or learn more: alex@mountainstudies.org