



Pre reservation map of Western Apache landscape. (Base map courtesy of Basso 1970.)

## Introduction

The Western Apache, whose ancestral lands closely border the Upper Gila region, still have many profound and direct cultural ties to the landscape. Though an exact time period for when Apachean people enter the Upper Gila remains unclear, printed, oral creation accounts link the Apache as a whole to multiple locales all through present day Arizona, New Mexico, and Northern Mexico.

## Methods

Analysis of multiple historical accounts, ethnographic works, personal field notes, and unrestricted translations of the Apache language create a clearer picture of the region and the Apache people's connection to it.



## Translated History

The eastern most group of the Western Apache, the White Mountain Apache, (*Dził ligai siaan Ndee*), printed creation story places them in a region where “black metal was placed in the east” as part of the process that would shape their world. By the time this oral account was dictated in the early 20th century, western influence is evident by the use of “metal” in the story. This incorrect translation of an oral history ignores the geographical dimensions of the once vast ancestral landscape of the White Mountain Apache but simultaneously protects sacred elements of the story.



Alchesay, Chief of White Mountain Apaches [Photo Credit: Andrew Miller]

## Béésh

A White Mountain Apache creation story variant references *black metal* within the creation narrative, but this is actually a misinterpreted obsidian reference. The actual word in the White Mountain Apache language for obsidian is **Béésh** (beh-eshh) and in a modern context translates to mean metal objects, often knives. This important clarification not only corrects a small portion of the White Mountain Apache creation story, but also expands the ancestral landscape while accurately placing a vital obsidian source east near the Upper Gila area.



Mule Creek NM, Obsidian nodule & debitage [Photo credit: Shiloh Craig]



The Upper Gila Region in southwestern New Mexico [Photo Credit: Henry Wallace]

## Nadasái

- Pre-reservation geographical names across much of the southwest still have their indigenous names intact; the Gila Wilderness is no exception.
- The White Mountain Apache word for this mountain range is *Nadasái*. Definitions are known, however continued ceremonial references to this place do not allow for the release of such information.
- Modern boundaries have severed ancestral ties to the area but the knowledge of the lessons the land teaches continues to be taught.

## Conclusion

Indigenous languages have long been brushed aside in favor of written records, when the reality is language alone carries a highly detailed record of place and space. When correct language definitions are applied to specific, unrestricted, portions of Western Apache history a vivid geographical map of pre-reservation life can be reconstructed. This reconstruction directly corresponds with modern geological and archaeological features found directly in the Upper Gila area.

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