National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Great Sand Dunes
National Park and Preserve

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Great Sand Dunes Receives Cultural Preservation Award

On Thursday, May 12, 2011, Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve was honored by the Colorado Preservation Inc, the largest historic preservation organization in Colorado, for the role firefighters played in the protection of "Indian Grove", a group of 72 culturally modified ponderosa pine trees that were at risk during last year's Medano Fire. The grove is very significant to the history of the Utes and Apache peoples that have close affiliation to this area. Their ancestors extracted key medicinal and nutritional resources from these trees. Tree ring dating has shown that sections of bark were removed from select trees during the 1700, 1800 and the early 1900's. The Indian Grove group of trees is a key cultural resource in the park and is on the National Register of Historic places. This is one of the very few "living" sites on the register.

On June 6, 2010 a lightning strike within Great Sand Dunes National Park started the long running Medano Fire. This fire ultimately burned for nearly six months in the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness, a steep and remote portion of the National Preserve. Few park facilities were threatened during the fire. Overall the fire burned in a natural mosaic pattern and covered about 6,000 acres.

Previous consultation with tribes including the Utes, Apache and Pueblos provided the park resource staff with the direction to protect the trees if possible and not to put firefighters at risk; both outcomes were realized. Firefighters were instructed to rake duff and other woody material away from the Indian Grove grouping of trees and in a few instances hand held drip torches were used to prevent a spot fire in that grove. As a result, this historically and culturally significant group of 72 trees remains intact and will continue to be an important place for continued tribal visits. These trees are literally one of the only places left from their past that they can touch, see and smell.

The tribes and the park staff realizes that eventually this ancient grove of trees will succumb to time and age. That day was just postponed for a while.