

## Background Information on the Campo Kumeyaay Nation

For use with the website, *American Indian Solutions to Environmental Challenges*

[www.americanindian.si.edu/environment](http://www.americanindian.si.edu/environment)

The Campo Kumeyaay (KOO-me-eye) Nation is one of 12 Kumeyaay bands located on 13 small reservations in southern California. The Campo reservation is located about 60 miles east of San Diego, near the border between the United States and Mexico. Original Kumeyaay territory extended about 60 miles north and 120 miles south of this border, and more than 100 miles east from the Pacific coast to the Salton Sea.

Kumeyaay identity and culture have been shaped by the land on which the Kumeyaay people thrived for thousands of years prior to European arrival. Their relationship to this place is deeply ingrained and celebrated in many contemporary cultural expressions, such as their language and songs, which describe tribal journeys and careful stewardship of the earth. In the semi-arid region where the Kumeyaay live, water is a precious resource, and the Kumeyaay relationship to it is of great importance.

Kumeyaay territory included coastal beaches and lagoons, mountains, and arid desert. There were gently rolling grasslands dotted with oak forests, areas of chaparral (or shrublands), pine and oak woodlands, and coniferous forests. In the spring, wildflowers and shrubs bloomed on the hillsides. There was abundant wildlife in the area, including deer, mountain lions, grizzly bears, bobcats, golden eagles, and many other species.

The Kumeyaay people lived in clan groups called *shmulqs*, (shmulks) moving with the seasons up and down the various drainages that reach the Pacific Coast from the east. Some groups lived more permanently along the coast itself or at the Salton Sea. As they moved, the Kumeyaay lived on the abundant plant and animal resources that the earth provided. Kumeyaay men hunted game, such as rabbits, birds, and deer, and the people used plant resources for food, medicine, and in ceremonies. Plants were used to make many everyday objects, including traditional houses, mats, acorn granaries, baskets, bows and arrows, mortars, clothing, bags, brushes, combs, soaps, and shampoo.

The Kumeyaay didn't only harvest from the earth—they used complex techniques to manage their land and water resources. Under the direction of spiritual leaders known as *Kuseyaay* (KWA-see-eye), they were able to keep groundwater close to valley surfaces, and springs and surface streams at levels that could be used for agriculture and personal needs. The Kuseyaay also advised about the burning of selected areas to increase habitat for game species, improve access for hunting and the gathering of acorns, and encourage the growth of plants needed for making everyday items. Kumeyaay specialists

knew which plants could be used for medicines and foods; they experimented and tested plants, trying seeds, cuttings, and transplants in different locations. They also practiced animal husbandry, raising animals they needed for food and clothing.

Beginning with Spanish arrival in the 18th century, Kumeyaay people and the land they lived on were subjected to dramatic changes. The introduction of European agriculture and new domestic animals—cattle in particular—affected the delicate ecosystem that supported the water supply. Land development and cattle ranching accelerated after the Americans arrived in the region in the mid 1800s, extending further inland to where Indian reservations were established. After more than 100 years of continual grazing on the Campo reservation, the wetlands had become denuded. Creek beds were severely eroded, and the underground water table had dropped significantly. Water, which had until that time been plentiful, was disappearing.

To deal with this environmental damage, the Kumeyaay community turned in the 1990s to its traditional knowledge of water management, and began utilizing a technique known as rock-drop structures. Employing modern technology and science in combination with their ancient knowledge of how to preserve water in this setting, they placed several rock-drop structures on tribal waterways. The results were dramatic, bringing significant improvement to tribal wetlands and an increased supply of fresh water. This project expresses and documents the importance of indigenous knowledge, and its application in the modern world.

Pronunciations of additional Kumeyaay language terms in the videos:

*Maay Xa* (my-HAH)—literally, the water above. Kumeyaay term that means the Creator.

*Kwai-pai* (KWY-pie)—the title for a Kumeyaay clan leader.

*Shawii* (sha-WEE)—a Kumeyaay food staple made from ground acorns.

*'ewaa* (ee-WAH)—word for a traditional type of Kumeyaay house.

*Tu cuk* (ta-COOK)— refers to a group of songs known as Bird Songs. *Tu cuk* is a species of bird that tells stories in the songs of the Kumeyaay's ancient migrations.