Narrator: Kumeyaay territory receives an average annual rainfall of about 14 inches, but this amount can vary greatly. Droughts are common.

Michael Connolly, Environmental Consultant and Former Tribal Councilman, Campo Kumeyaay Nation: This is a chaparral environment. There’s scrub oaks, sumac. There’s the brush that you see burning a lot in the fires is called chemise. There’s yucca. There is buckwheat. There are hundreds of oak trees that go up through the valleys. And these provided one of our staples, which was the acorn. And that was ground up and converted into a food called shawii.

There are some trees that are estimated to be over 1700 years old, and they are really massive.

This is the old village site known in our language as Whitewater. This is one of the grinding holes that the women would grind the acorns in to make acorn flour.

And then when you get down into the very lowest parts of the valleys, you encounter the wetland areas. And the wetlands were a big source of medicinal plants and foods. And also the material that was usually used for the construction of a house called a ‘ewaa.

Narrator: Kumeyaay territory is home to abundant animal life.

Michael Connolly: All the wildlife that comes in, it’s really amazing. And I think people are learning to live more in harmony with the nature around them.

Narrator: The Kumeyaay people’s culture is deeply rooted in their traditional lands, from songs to stories to values and beliefs. One type of Kumeyaay song speaks about an ancient migration of the people.
Paul Cuero, Jr., Singer and Tribal Councilman, Campo Kumeyaay Nation: Okay, this song I’m about to sing is what we call *Tu cuk*, and *Tu cuk* is a species of bird that are telling the stories of travel.

This song’s talking about coming to the ocean and fishing. Our people believe they are like prayers because they come from the Creator himself.

And so it’s telling all these stories about how to be a person, how the rain’s going to come, and it’s going to give us water.

And that’s why when we look at our culture and our traditions, it talks about how to deal with our environment and how to deal with each other.

When we’d go pick acorns, they would say, “You have to leave enough for the squirrels and the other animals.”

Narrator: The Kumeyaay didn’t just harvest from the land, they managed the land and made it more healthy and productive. They also knew how to keep a supply of fresh water available.

Stan Rodriguez, Kumeyaay Language Instructor, Santa Ysabel Band of the Iipay Nation: So, you know, the water is always very important, and these people who were the specialists at this, they were the ones that could, we say, “(Kumeyaay language).” They took care of the people.

Michael Connolly: Well, within the communities, we had people who were specialists who were called *Kuseyaay*. And these Kuseyaay would offer their advice, and they would tell the *shmulk* when it was time to move to another area, or when it was time to burn an area, or when it was time to harvest different plants.

So burning was an integral part of the culture. And by burning through areas, it would help to clear out the underbrush. Some of the plants needed fire in order to germinate, and the transitional ecotones that you get from a patchwork of different burned and unburned areas help to create a much greater biodiversity.
Paul Cuero, Jr.: Because we live in an area that we don’t get much water, we had to come up with techniques of, ways of, storing water, because in ancient times, we didn’t have ways of digging with drills like we do today for water. So there was techniques that were taught to us by our, what we call Kuseyaay.

Stan Rodriguez: This is one of the things that people would take care of. They would make sure that the water was protected.

Narrator: The wetland areas of the Kumeyaay were centers of plant and animal life.

Michael Connolly: This right here is stinging nettle. It’s good to eat; when you boil it all the sting goes away. This is yerba mansa, this wide-leafed plant, and it’s a medicinal plant. That’s a baby willow. Willows are used in basketmaking.

This plant here, with a little tiny flower on the tip, is a bulrush or a tule, and these were used to build our traditional boats.