

VIEJAS

A Sovereign Nation

Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians



Kumeyaay History

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The Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians, one of the remaining 12 bands of the Kumeyaay Indian Nation, resides on a 1,600-acre reservation in the Viejas Valley, east of the community of Alpine in San Diego County, California. The Viejas Band is recognized as a sovereign government by the United States, with which it maintains a government-to-government relationship.

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Kumeyaay Indian Nation

The Kumeyaay, referred to as Diegueño by the Spanish, were the original native inhabitants of San Diego County. The Kumeyaay, Yuman-speaking people of Hokan stock, have lived in this region for more than 10,000 years. Historically, the Kumeyaay were horticulturists and hunters and gatherers. They were the only Yuman group in the area and were the people who greeted the Spanish when they first sailed into San Diego Harbor with the Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo expedition of 1542.

The boundaries of the Kumeyaay lands changed with the arrival of the Europeans, but once extended from the Pacific Ocean, south to Ensenada in Baja Norte, Mexico, east to the sand dunes of the Colorado River in Imperial Valley and north to Warner Springs Valley. North to northeast, their territory was bounded by other Indian nations - the San Luiseno, Cupeño and Cahuilla.

Today, Kumeyaay tribal members are divided into 12 separate bands - Barona, Campo, Ewiiapaayp, Inaja-Cosmit, Jamul, LaPosta, Manzanita, Mesa Grande, San Pasqual, Santa Ysabel, Sycuan and Viejas. One of the largest owners of land in San Diego County, Kumeyaay governments have jurisdiction over approximately 70,000 acres concentrated in East County from El Cajon, Lakeside, Poway and Ramona, to the desert. Of the total acreage, more than 15,000 acres is unusable to the Kumeyaay because the El Capitan Reservoir was removed from Indian Government ownership. The reservoir feeds the San Diego River east of Lakeside and is located within the Capitan Grande Indian Reservation, which is jointly patented to the Viejas and Barona Bands.

Kumeyaay men were hunters of game, ranging from rabbit and quail to antelope and deer. Men crafted fishhooks, arrows, bows, axes, nets and other hunting implements. Kumeyaay women made fine baskets in coil fashion, pottery, most of the clothing and created shelter, which varied with the seasons and environments. The Kumeyaay practiced animal husbandry. They had a complex pattern of land ownership and division of labor that included a network of agricultural holdings in different geographic areas that were cultivated on a seasonal basis.

The Kumeyaay engaged in total environmental management of their land and water resources. As chronicled by anthropologist Florence Shippek, "Kumeyaay erosion control systems...included complex techniques of controlled burning. These systems were combined with several methods of water management to maintain ground waters close to valley surfaces, and to keep the many springs and surface streams at usable levels for the complex Kumeyaay plant husbandry-corn agriculture systems...An unidentified native grain, which the Spanish described as 'excellent pasture,' once covered the valleys and low slopes in the Kumeyaay area...Kumeyaay plant specialists experimented with all plants, testing them for subsistence, medicinal or technical purposes, using seeds, vegetative cuttings or transplants in every location."

Jessica Maxwell, in the May-June 1995 edition of "Audubon," adds to these observations: "When the Spanish first saw the meadows of the mountain valleys east of what we now call San Diego, they pronounced them 'excellent pasture.' They assumed them to be natural and, being European herdsmen, considered them prime grazing land... The early invaders were, in fact, gazing upon the ancient grain fields of the indigenous Kumeyaay Indians, some of the earliest - and best - environmental managers in North America."

Forced Off Ancestral Lands

Beginning with the Spanish invasion of 1769, continuing through the Mexican Period of 1826 to 1848, and on through the American Period, the Kumeyaay were forced off their ancestral lands. Nearly all of the Kumeyaay lands were taken into private ownership or made U.S. government holdings. Treaties negotiated with 18 California tribes in 1850 to set aside 8.5 million acres in specific tribal lands were never ratified by the United States Senate as a result of opposition by the state of California. Today, the acreage of tribal reservations in California is approximately 500,000 acres.

How Viejas Came To Be

Capitan Grande, about 35 miles east of San Diego, is the name of the canyon through which the San Diego River once ran. With abundant water, Kumeyaay Indians living there sustained themselves through farming.

In 1875, a presidential executive order withdrew lands from the federal domain, setting aside a number of small reservations, including the Capitan Grande Reservation from which the Viejas Band descended. Capitan Grande, patented in 1891, included portions of ancestral land of the Los Coñejos Band. In 1853, other Indians from Mission San Diego were given permission to locate on Capitan Grande by the federal Indian agent at the time. Over the years, other Indians were placed there, as well.

As the non-Indian population grew, demand for water increased. The city of San Diego built Lake Cuyamaca, laying its flume through the Capitan Grande Reservation and taking most of the San Diego River water originally used by the Kumeyaay. This left them only a small share from the city's flume, resulting in crop losses on Indian farms. The city later decided to dam the river and take all of the water by creating El Capitan Reservoir. Though the Kumeyaay protested, Congress - at the wishes of land speculators and unknown to the Indians - granted the city permission to purchase the heart of the Capitan Grande Reservation, where many Kumeyaay had built homes. From the proceeds of this forced "sale" of lands, some of the valley's inhabitants, the Coapan Band, or Capitan Grande, bought Barona Valley and are now known as the Barona Band of Mission Indians.

Another 28 families, including members of the Los Coñejos Band, purchased the Viejas Valley land (once a ranch owned by Baron Long) and incorporated the name Viejas. A few other families bought private individual property with their compensation. After the move, the Viejas and Barona Bands were denied their water rights and each valley became solely dependent on meager supplies of rainfall and groundwater until the issue was resolved by court action.

Today, membership in the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians is determined by direct descent from the families forced from Capitan Grande who pooled their shares of dam-site purchase money to buy Viejas Valley. The Viejas band continues to share a joint-trust patent with the Barona Band for the 15,000 remaining acres of the Capitan Grande Reservation.