
Campo Kumeyaay Nation: Meet the People

Monique LaChappa, Tribal Chairwoman, Campo Kumeyaay Nation: (Kumeyaay language) That means, “Hello, may your heart always burn with fire.”

Narrator: The Campo Kumeyaay Nation is located on a small reservation in southern California near the Mexican border. They are one band of a tribe that once occupied a large area of what is now southern California and northern Mexico. The people of the Campo Kumeyaay Nation have lived for thousands of years in a region where water is a precious resource. Water is important to their survival, and to their history and culture. Today, the Campo people are facing challenges to their supply of fresh water.

Stan Rodriguez, Kumeyaay Language Instructor, Santa Ysabel Band of the Iipay Nation: We say the Creators came from a place of water, a place of salt water. When they created this universe, all that there was—was around—was water. And as they continued to make the land and build the land up, they knew that water was part of everything. Our word for Creator is Maay Xa, which means the Water Above, and it’s a very sacred thing.

Michael Connolly, Environmental Consultant and Former Tribal Councilman, Campo Kumeyaay Nation: The Kumeyaay people in San Diego County are currently separated into 12 different bands. This wasn’t the way we lived historically. We had clans. They were called sh’mulqs. Most of the clans did a migration every year up through the drainages, and they would go back down to the lower elevations during the wintertime to escape the severe weather that we’d have up in the mountains. Well, each clan had a leader. He was called the Kwai-pai. And the Kwai-pai was the one who made the decisions on behalf of the clan. But the Kwai-pai was not a dictator. He ruled through consent.

Narrator: The Spanish arrived in Kumeyaay territory in 1769, the Mexicans in 1822, and the Americans in 1846. Each group brought changes to where and how the Kumeyaay people lived, and to the environment.

Michael Connolly: So people didn’t really live year-round up here at the higher elevations until the coastal lands were taken after the arrival of the Spanish. Starting around the 1870s, the cattlemen moved up into this area. They brought with them the windmill technology. They were able to sink wells and have mechanical means for bringing that water to the surface. And so that expanded a lot of the cattle grazing that previously had been restricted down into the lower areas.

Fidel Hyde, Senior Technician, Campo Environmental Protection Agency, Campo Kumeyaay Nation: And when we found out what the cattle were doing to our water with high nitrates, stream-bank erosion, it made a big difference to me and to the tribal members.

Michael Connolly: Originally there was a treaty that was negotiated in 1852 with the United States, but this treaty was undermined by the legislative lobby from the state of California. And so our treaty was not ratified. So we had hundreds of Indian people living all over the rural areas, in little clusters where they had no rights of citizenship. They had no rights to go out and claim land, on the very land that they and their ancestors had been living on for thousands of years. They were people without a country, essentially. Many Indians became the cowboys on the ranches and worked for them. They also worked in agriculture. They had to leave behind the elderly, and the women, and the children. And in many cases, women became the spokesmen for the tribal communities.

Narrator: The establishment of the Campo and other Kumeyaay reservations in the late 1800s brought further hardships to the Indian people.

Michael Connolly: There was very little that could be done on the reservation without the consent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. There was a prohibition against traditional religious practices. There were prohibitions on certain types of dress, how you cut your hair, where you went to school. Up until 1940, Indian children were not allowed to go to the public schools.

Narrator: Despite the many changes the Campo and other Kumeyaay people have endured, they have their own tribal government today.

Michael Connolly: And in 1975, the tribe adopted its first constitution, which created the position of chairman and six other elected officials that would be the executive branch of the tribe.

Narrator: They are also working hard to preserve their Kumeyaay language and culture.

Stan Rodriguez: They forcibly took the children away and forced them to speak English and not speak their own language. Part of our own healing is to go back and learn the language. This is what we are as a people. This is the language that we believe was given to us by the Creator.