

Summary: Desert Life

Adapting to the Desert

Much of southern and eastern California is desert. The Cahuilla, Paiute, Mohave, and Kumeyaay were desert people, who, like other California Indians, were hunter-gatherers. They adapted to the desert, moving from place to place to harvest ripe plants or find new sources of water.

The desert Indians gathered over 100 types of roots, seeds, berries, and nuts in the mountains and hills. In the lower desert they fished, and gathered cactus fruit and the pods of mesquite trees.

The Cahuilla people built towns near steady springs or streams. They dug deep wells and carried water from the wells in pottery jars to their crops. They grew melons, squash, beans, and corn. They built summer homes without walls. A roof held up by poles gave them shade. In winter they lived in houses made of brush, wood, and tree bark.

The Mohave people lived near the Colorado River. Each year the river flooded and left behind soft mud. The Mohave planted pumpkins, beans, and corn in this rich soil.

Government

Desert nations organized themselves and set up governments led by chiefs. Chiefs usually lead family groups, towns, or nations. The job of chief was passed down from father to son among the Cahuilla. In some nations, women could be chiefs. Chiefs were expected to be wise and honest leaders. They did not farm or hunt. The people paid chiefs with food, blankets, and other items. In turn, they were expected to share their wealth with those in need. Cahuilla chiefs decided when the clan would hunt and gather. They settled arguments about property. They met with other chiefs in war councils and decided if their people would fight.

Most California Indians organized themselves into clans, large groups of people who share an ancestor. The Cahuilla had about 12 clans. The Mohave, unlike other groups, saw themselves as one large nation. During wars, Mohave towns fought together and protected themselves.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

hunter-gatherer *noun*, a person who lives by hunting animals and gathering plants

agriculture *noun*, farming
government *noun*, a system of making and carrying out rules and laws

leadership *noun*, guidance



After You Read

REVIEW What did California Indians do to get food in the desert?

Highlight the sentences that describe how the desert peoples hunted and gathered food.

REVIEW What reasons did people have for working together in desert communities? Underline three sentences that explain how government helped the people.