

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project

Education Initiative

Restoring water to ensure the continuity of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh tradition of agriculture



Historic Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh Agriculture to 1860

Part 2

The Gila River Indian Community does not look like it once did. The land—flora and fauna—has been significantly impacted over the past 300 years. To understand what historic Akimel O’otham lands were like—and what they can become once again—requires a careful reading of the records left by those who came before. The Spanish were the first Europeans to come in contact with the Akimel O’otham, leaving a rich record of Akimel O’otham land use. What attracted Spain to the Pimeria Alta were the “dependable water sources” and “good land” for agriculture and ranching found along the Gila River.

Father Kino visited the Akimel O’otham several times, always observing the land. In 1697, Kino described “large cottonwood groves” along the Gila River near “Casa Grande.” Near the Mohawk Mountains, Kino observed fishermen “sustaining themselves with the abundant fish and with their maize, beans and calabashes.” Reaching the main villages, Kino was given “so much and so very good fish.” Juan Mateo Manje, part of Kino’s military escort, noted they camped near what later became Maricopa Wells, where they “slept in a pasture and broad fields, abundant in grass.”

Fifty years later, Father Jacobo Sedelmayr noted the Akimel O’otham lived in three rancherias. To the east was “Fuguissan.” Ten miles west was Tussonimo and, still farther, where “the river runs entirely underground in hot weather,” near “where it emerges [again] there is situated the great rancherias called Sudac-sson.” The villages were on either side of the river and “on the islands” between the river. The people enjoyed “broad acres for cultivation of crops.” Further west, Sedelmayr came “upon broad savannas of reed grass and clumps of willow and a beautiful spring with good land for pasture.” He gave it the name Santa Teresa; it later became known as Maricopa Wells. Where the Salt River joins the Gila, Sedelmayr noted: “Here the eye is regaled with creeks, marshes, fields of reed grass and an abundant growth of [willows] and cottonwood.”

The area surrounding the largest community was described as a “pleasant, abundantly tree-covered country fourteen miles long.” Father Ignaz Pfefferkorn observed land “irrigated by aqueducts, which are built from the river to the surrounding country with little difficulty because the land is so level.” Twelve miles downstream, at the confluence of the Salt and Gila rivers, the land was “very beautiful, is entirely level, and is exceptionally good for raising all kinds of grain and plants.” Both banks of the Gila near the Salt River were inhabited by the Pee Posh.

When Captain Juan Bautista de Anza visited the people on his return trip from California, in 1774, he found “plentiful pasturage close by the river” five miles west of Casa Grande Ruins. “The fields of wheat which they now possess are so large that, standing in the middle of them, one cannot see the ends, because of their length.” Their fields of maize “are of similar proportions.” In 1775, de Anza, traveling back to California with 240 people, 695 horses and 355 head of cattle, again noted “a good piece of pasturage” at Uturituc, west of present-day Sacaton. A few days earlier de Anza recorded: “We arrived at the Gila River at a site with abundant pasturage and water which by its inhabitants is called Comari,” southwest of present-day Blackwater.

Twenty-five years later, Fray Diego Bringas submitted a report to King Charles IV, describing Akimel O’otham Country. The banks of the Gila River were “covered with cottonwoods and willows,” Bringas wrote. “Mesquite, creosote bushes, and saguaros” were found in the “open country” near the river. The river itself “abounds in fish of various species.” The Akimel O’otham grew “beans, maize, wheat, watermelons, melons, squash, and cotton.” Every “species of grain would do well because of the mild climate,” Bringas explained. “The river can fertilize these beautiful tracts of land with its

waters. These can easily be conducted anywhere for farming.” The people diverted the river into canals that watered “small fields cultivated by each family.”

In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican War and Americans entered Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh Country. Lieutenant Colonel William Emory, traveling through in 1846, described “a long meadow, reaching for many miles south,” between the Buttes (east of Florence) and “Casa Grande.” Traveling by the “Pima villages,” Emory observed “cultivated grounds” with “a luxuriantly rich soil.” The river plain “appeared to extend in every direction” for fifteen or twenty miles. Emory was most “impressed with the beauty, order, and disposition of the arrangements for irrigating and draining the land.” Near the “dividing ground between the Pimos and Maricopas,” Emory found the “bed of the Gila, opposite the village” dry, “the whole water being drawn off” for irrigation. Canals were “larger than is necessary for this purpose,” Emory wrote, “and the water which is not used returns to the bed of the river with little apparent diminution in its volume.”

A soldier traveling with General Stephen Kearny, in 1846, recorded that the army camped near Maricopa Wells, “on a spot where the grass is excellent, wood sufficiently abundant, and water a short distance off.” Three grasslands robed the area between the Buttes and present-day Sacaton. Fields were irrigated “with care,” and were “separated by fences.” The late Akimel O’otham elder Joseph Giff remembered these fenced fields being surrounded by brush thickets with “small entrances through which the worker had to crawl on hands and knees.” A wide variety of food crops were grown and shared with all that passed through their country. In 1846, Colonel Philip St. George Cooke remarked on the “hospitality and generosity” of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh. “[T]hey feed and assist in every way travelers who are in need.”

Thousands of “49ers” on their way to the gold fields in California came through the “Pima villages.” Many of them maintained diaries and favorably spoke of the confederated tribes. Benjamin Harris arrived in the “Pima villages” in July of 1849, and was served “gourds of water, roasted pumpkin, and green corn.” After feeding Harris, the Akimel O’otham “hurried forward for relieving the others.” They also took in “Broken down or abandoned stock.” The next day Akimel O’otham “relief parties” welcomed more gold seekers. One 49er remembered Akimel O’otham foods were “sold in baskets or bags at such prices as you could bargain for.” Scores of travelers noted extensive stands of willow and cottonwood growing along the river as well as numerous “marsh lands.”

When John Bartlett surveyed the lands north of the Gila River as part of the US-Mexico Boundary Commission, in June of 1852, he stopped at Maricopa Wells where he described “a pleasant site” of “luxuriant grass.” Upstream, Bartlett noted the “dryness of the river” was caused “by the water having been turned off by the Indians to irrigate their fields, for which the whole stream seemed barely sufficient.” The bottomlands were “two to four miles in width, nearly the whole being occupied by their villages and cultivated fields.” The entire plain, Bartlett exclaimed, “is intersected by irrigating canals from the Gila, by which they are enabled to control the water, and raise the most luxuriant crops.” At the western end of the Pee Posh villages was “a rich tract of grass.”

After the 1854 Gadsden Purchase the United States surveyed the land south of the river. “The amount of land here capable of cultivation is quite extensive,” Dr. C. C. Parry wrote about the alluvial floodplain. It forms “a belt on each side of the river often several miles in width, and extending east and west for 20 miles or more.” Grazing land east of present-day Sacaton was covered year-around “with a magnificent growth of grama grass.” There were some that viewed the Akimel O’otham as “a wealthy class of Indians” with rich fields surpassing anything seen “since leaving the Atlantic states.”

Descriptions of the bounty and richness of the Gila Valley and the extent of Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh agriculture did not go unnoticed by visitors to the “Pimeria Alta.” Nearly all travelers and military expeditions were impressed by the extent of the land that was under continuous cultivation. This form of agriculture and land use continued until the late 1800s, when large scale non-Indian settlement changed the flow of the Gila River and severely impacted the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh way of life.

Lesson Plan for “Historic Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh Agriculture to 1860”

Terms to know and understand

- Flora
- Fauna
- Confluence
- Pimeria Alta
- Forty-niners

Critical Thinking:

Read the selection and discuss the following:

- What adjectives (describing words) do many of the travelers and military personnel use to describe Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh land and agricultural practices? Make a list. What does this tell you?
- When Juan Bautista de Anza traveled to California, in 1775, he had with him 240 men, women and children, and over 1000 animals. When he passed through Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh Country he noted there was “a good piece of pasturage.” Keeping in mind the number of people and animals with him, what might de Anza have meant by “a good piece of pasturage?”

Activities

- Tell students they will be reading about Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh land uses between the late 17th and mid 19th centuries. Inform students that the next three issues (including this one) will examine the historic O’otham and Pee Posh country. This will include how the land was used, how it has changed and what the impact of this change has been.
- Encourage students to discuss what they read with their elders. Perhaps they can interview elders to gain a better historic perspective. Most students today have not experienced the hardships of their elders and consequently they are unaware of the sacrifices made by those who came before. Consider having your class undertake a research project that relates to traditional or future uses of water. Research traditional village sites and learn about them. What species of fish once swam in the waters of the Gila River (and its tributaries)? How has the flora and fauna of the community been impacted? What flora and fauna no longer exist? What can your class do to reintroduce traditional flora and fauna?

About P-MIP

The Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project is authorized by the Gila River Indian Community to construct all irrigation systems for the Community. When fully completed, P-MIP will provide irrigation for 146,330 acres of farmland. P-MIP is dedicated to three long-range goals:

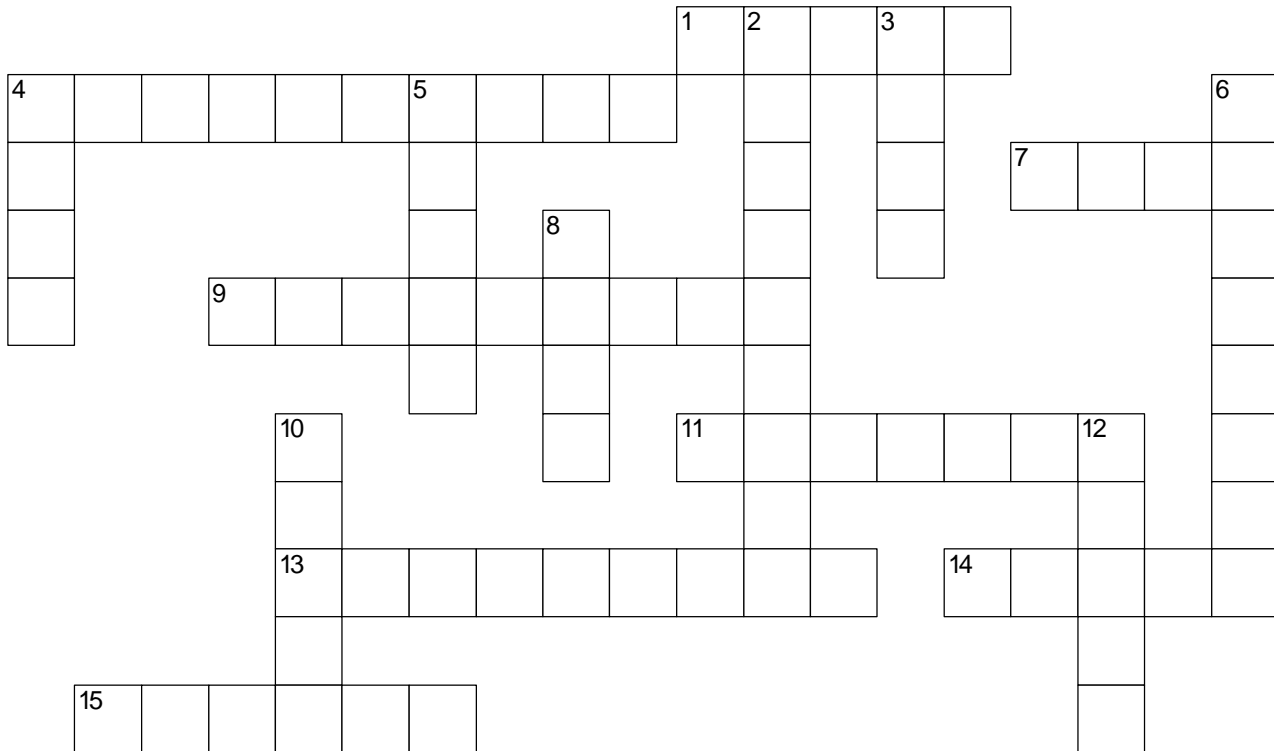
- Restoring the use of water to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh
- Putting Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh rights to the use of water to beneficial use
- Demonstrating and exercising sound management to ensure continuity of the Community’s traditional economy of agriculture

Students will be able to:

1. Analyze descriptive terms related to Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh uses of the land and draw conclusions from them.
2. Describe some traditional land and agricultural uses of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh.

Objectives

Historic Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh Agriculture



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ACROSS

1. Refers to the plants in an area.
4. These tall, leafy trees once grew along the riverbank.
7. William Emory described the soil along the river as being of this quality.
9. The longest river in southern Arizona
11. These low-lying lands once were found all along the Gila River and its tributaries.
13. Sedelmayr referred to irrigation canals as one of these.
14. Tepary and Pima Lima are varieties of this vegetable:
15. The three sisters included corn, beans and this:

DOWN

2. John Bartlett described the grass around Maricopa Wells as being of this type:
3. Sedelmayr described this type of grass growing near the confluence of the Gila and Salt rivers:
4. Another name for maize
5. Standing in the middle of one of these Akimel O’otham fields, Juan Bautista de Anza could not see the other end because of its length.
6. Once surrounded Akimel O’otham fields.
8. Kino noted the river was full of them;
10. This type of grass grew near Sacaton
12. Types of fields cultivated by Akimel O’otham families