The Cocopah Story

Manuscript Developed with the Director of the Cocopah Museum in

2004, Written by Susan L. Feathers

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Cocopah Indian Tribe is an important part of the history of the Southwest. Visitors to our region and residents of our community will recognize the value of understanding the true history and nature of Cocopah culture in its reflection of the dynamic and complex story of a river and landscape many cultures call *home*.

The purpose of this booklet is to present an accurate account of The River People whose culture reaches back to 1000 B.C. Such an accomplishment is exemplary in a region impacted by explorers seeking new land, and by waves of treasure hunters seeking gold, silver, beaver pelts, or land. It parallels the history of steamboats, the Gold Rush, and the arrival of railroads. The Cocopah culture prevailed over an international border that cut through traditional Cocopah lands (Gadsden Purchase) separating relatives, and the stopping of Colorado River flows past their traditional homelands.

Readers will understand how the history of the Colorado River is a key part of Cocopah history and life-ways. Deeply connected to its ebb and flow, our ancestors developed a way of life suited to the region's natural rhythms. With the advent of dams and canals to divert Colorado River water for agriculture and cities, our people were challenged to adapt to a rapidly changing natural and political environment. Throughout all these historical changes we have held to our cultural traditions. Today we are one of only a few of the original Yuman-speaking tribes that retain its original language.

This booklet presents a broad introduction to Cocopah history for visitors and public school students. With its publication we hope to offer an accurate account of our

history, beliefs, and way of life. Today we are a vibrant community with much to offer the modern student of Native American culture.

COCOPAH ORIGIN AND HISTORY

The Cocopah are descended from the Yuman-speaking people who arrived in what is now Arizona some 3000 years ago. Around 1000 B.C. ancestors of the Cocopah began to live along the Lower Colorado River region between present day Yuma and the delta region near the Gulf of California. After about 1500 A.D. Cocopah people moved into the delta region when pluvial waters receded.

The River People developed a way of life adapted to the river's seasonal ebb and flow, and to the lush riparian habitats near the river's edge. Forests of tall cottonwoods, jungles of willows, and reed-lined banks supported a rich diversity of wildlife from which the Cocopah people drew sustenance and materials for their technologies. They developed flood-plain agriculture, netted fish from the river, and hunted deer and small game in the mesquite forests.

When the first European explorers arrived, there were estimated to be about 5-6,000 Cocopah people living along the delta and lower Colorado. Diaries and journals kept by explorers, missionaries, fur-trappers, military men, ethnographers, and photographers have left a colorful record of the Cocopah culture from 1604 – 1917, when Woodrow Wilson designated the first Cocopah Indian Reservation on the Arizona bank of the river.

As waves of immigrants poured into the Yuma-valley crossing on their way to California for gold, the strategic importance of the river crossing was recognized by the U.S. government. Significant changes to the Cocopah way of life were brought about by the steamboat business bringing supplies from ships in the Gulf up to Yuma and beyond. Cocopah men became valued pilots with their knowledge of the river's currents and shifting sandbars; a different economy based on currency began to replace simple trade. And as towns and farms grew in the western region of a burgeoning new nation, dams to control the wild fluctuations in the Colorado's spring floods ended a riverine way of life for the Cocopah as the flow of water was slowed and eventually stopped above their traditional fishing and farming land.

Without direct access to the means of the new economy, and separation of tribal relatives by enforcement of the international boundary between the U.S. and Mexico, Cocopah (U.S.) and the Cucupa (Mexico) struggled to maintain tribal integrity. Frank Tehanna, a visionary Cocopah leader, realized the nature of the profound changes. He was instrumental in the establishment of the first Cocopah Indian Reservation in 1917 and fostering the education of Cocopah children in U.S. schools.

Today the Cocopah are important partners in the region's largest economy: tourism. The Cocopah Casino, Golf Resort, and RV Park demonstrate the resilience and enterprising spirit of the region's first people. About 1000 Cocopah live and work on or near three reservation sites in Yuma, Arizona today.

TIMELINE

10,000 – 8000 B.C.	Nomadic tribes of people wander over the Bering Strait onto this continent from Asia
1000 B.C. – Time of Christ	Cocopah and other Yuman-speakers migrate from the North to the lower Colorado River region.
700 AD	People of Yuman-language ancestry live near the lower Colorado River near what is today Yuma, Arizona.
900 AD	Lake Cahuilla forms from Colorado River flooding. Communities of Yuman-speaking people live on its shores for nearly 500 years. The Cocopah, however, continue to live along the river.
1500	Cocopahs move further south to the lower Colorado River delta region, displaced by Indian tribes returning to the river region as *Lake Cahuilla* dried up over time.
1540	Hernando de Alarcon (a Spanish explorer with the Cornonado Expedition) sails up the mouth of the Colorado River delta from the Gulf of California. He is the first explorer to write about the Cocopah.
1604	Don Juan de Onate's expedition brings Father Escobar to Cocopa villages where he recorded 5 – 6,000 people in villages along the river and described their dwellings.

1702	Father Eusebia F. Kino visits the Cocopah and writes about their agriculture: planting corn, beans, squash, melons, and pumpkins in the soft, muddy areas along the river after it flooded its banks. He observes Cocopahs traded with Indians on the Pacific Coast.
1771-1776	Father Garces travels among the Cucupa (in what is now Mexico). He counts about 3,000 people where he travels and learns about the people and their way of life.
1800's	Lt. R.W.H. Hardy, an Englishman, explores the coast for pearls and coral. He records notes of songs sung by a Cocopah shaman woman – the first music recorded from this part of the world. James Ohio Pattie and friends travel along the river, trapping beaver for fur trade. They get into a few skirmishes and leave.
1846	United States declares war on Mexico to obtain New Mexico and California when it learns that England is negotiating with Mexico.
1848	U.S. wins the war with Mexico and gold is discovered in California.
1850's	Ft. Yuma and Ft. Mohave military forts established to protect travelers to the region.
1851	Lt. George H. Derby, stationed at Ft. Yuma, visits the Cocopah. Gathers information for a route for freighting boats to bring supplies to the post.

1852	*Uncle Sam* steam-boat journeys up the river to Camp Yuma. This begins 50 years of steamboat travel on the river. Cocopah men become steamboat pilots because of their knowledge of the river.
1853	Gadsden Purchase by the United States transfers 30,000 square miles below the Gila River from Mexico to the United States. Cocopah people living below the new border live the same way, going and coming, unaware that they and their relatives are now separated by an international border.
1857-1858	Lt. Joseph Ives studies river, plants, animals, and people along the Lower Colorado River. He leaves an excellent record of the natural landscape and ways of living among the Cocopah people.
1865	U.S. establishes the Colorado Indian Reservation to settle Indians in the Parker Valley. Cocopahs refuse to leave their homelands.
1877	Southern Pacific Railroad reaches Yuma. The RR Company buys up the steamboat companies bringing the business to an end.
1890's	U.S. attempts to build canals along the Colorado River to divert waters to farmland. They are a disastrous failure as the river waters are too powerful and unpredictable to control downriver.
1900	David P. Barrows, geographer, visits the Cocopah. He observes traditional floodplain farming still practiced.
	W.J. McGee, ethnologist, and Delaney Gill, photographer, lead an expedition on horseback assisted by Frank Tehanna, a famous

	Cocopah leader. They record the Tribe's cultural and natural history in interviews and photographs.
1909	Laguna Dam is built North of Yuma.
1912	"Arizona" becomes the 48th State.
1917	President Woodrow Wilson establishes the Cocopah Indian Reservation on the Arizona bank of the Colorado River.
1916 – 1930	E.W. Gifford studies and records Cocopah culture. He leaves an invaluable record of the natural history along the river before dams destroy the riparian oasis.
1922	Frances Densmore visits Cocopah in Arizona and records the music and musical instruments. She records that Cocopah culture has been little affected by western culture.
	Six states sign the Colorado River compact guaranteeing rights to Colorado River water for their growing cities and farms.
1928-1935	Hoover Dam built.
1938	Parker Dam built.
1940 – 1952	William H. Kelly with the help of many Cocopah elders and tribal leaders record the tribal language and history so it will not be forgotten by younger generations growing accustomed to the language of the white man.
1941	Headgate Dam built.
1953	Davis Dam built.

1956	North Cocopah Reservation added.
1957	Palo Verde Diversion Dam constructed.
Up to 1960	Cocopah interaction with U.S. government is minimal.
1961	Bureau of Indian Affairs begins to make efforts to better the life of the contemporary Cocopah people.
1963	James Crawford completes a major linguistic study. The Cocopah language is the sole surviving language of the Yuman-speaking peoples.
	Supreme Court supports Arizona's right to Colorado River water.
1964	First Cocopah Tribal Council formed.
1965	Cocopah Tribal building completed.
1968	Central Arizona Project authorized to build a system of canals to bring river water to the central part of Arizona.
????	All American Canal diverts Colorado River water at Yuma to Imperial Valley farms. River water flow below the Morelos Dam stops. No water flows next to the West Cocopah Reservation, a people whose life centered on the wild river's life-giving waters.
1982	4,000 acres added to the Reservation to provide land for the Cocopah people to develop new business and residential space.
	Casino, golf course, RV park, restaurant, Cultural Center.
2003	Restoration projects with Bureau of Land Management and Arizona Game and Fish to establish nature center and trails.

2006 First college graduate of the Cocopah people

COCOPAH LANGUAGE

Cocopah language originates from the Yuman linguistic family of the Hokan-derived languages. The closest Hokan relatives of Yuman speakers are the Chumash of southcentral California. Hokan-derived language is one of the ancient languages of the Pacific Coast region. Some ethnographers have proposed that the arrival of Shoshonean-speaking people (who moved from the Great Plains area into south central California) transected the pan-Pacific language speakers, leading to the development of distinct regional languages.

Regardless of these theories, all of the surviving eastern members of the Yuman language group live today in southwestern Arizona and in the state of Sonora, Mexico. The Cocopah people today are engaged in a tribal-wide initiative to ensure the preservation of their language by passing it on to their youth.

COCOPAH FOODS

Cocopah people were successful floodplain farmers. Before the Colorado River was dammed, the river flooded during May and June. In July, the waters began to recede. The river ran red with heavy silt which was deposited along the receding water's edges. Seed were planted in the rich soil using digging sticks. Vegetables were supplemented with meat from small game hunted in the cottonwood forests and mesquite bosque that lined the river contours. In years when flooding was excessive, people moved to the nearby

mountains where they hunted and harvested legumes from mesquite or palo verde trees and collected grains and fruits from native vegetation. The Cocopah people traveled on rafts to the delta region where the Colorado River poured into the Gulf of California. They fished and harvested abalone and other shellfish and gathered wild rice.

All together the Cocopah gathered or grew 37 seed varieties, 16 types of greens, 16 varieties of berries and cactus fruits, and 7 types of roots and tubers.

Wild Plant Foods

Mesquite pods (for flour)
Mesquite beans
Screwbeans
Wild Potatoes (2 varieties)
Tule (pith, root, and pollen)
Wolfberries
Cattails (young shoots and pollen)
Two other leguminous trees
Water grass and wild rice
Amaranth
Agave (core baked)
Fruit of the blue palm
Sunflower seeds

Agricultural Foods

Pumpkin (dried in strips; seeds)
Watermelon (4 varieties)
Muskmelons (4 varieties)
Maize (4 varieties)
Beans (5 varieties each of tepary, cowpea, black-eyed pea; amatox)
Heshmicha (wheat-like grain)
Sugar cane

Wild Animal Protein

River fish: native salmon, bonytail, mullet, and humpback (dip net, spear, or gill net)

From the Gulf of California: shellfish, seabass, and sardines

Desert mule deer (ambush, arrows)

Cottontail or jack rabbit (stone or arrows)

Ducks, geese; eggs of other birds

Quail (stone or by hand in rainstorms)

Fishing Technology

Cocopah fishers wove gill nets 60 feet long and 4 feet wide. A single fisher could use it in still water. He floated the upper edge with two-foot long canes set at five foot intervals and left them overnight. A dip net was also employed. It was suspended from two ten-foot poles with one end of the pole resting against the fisherman's stomach. Poles were tied with mesquite bark. Fish were also shot with arrows and caught as they floated to the surface.

COCOPAH DWELLINGS AND TRANSPORTATION

Cocopah dwellings were constructed for comfort and utility. The winter dwelling was constructed of posts, poles, and thatch, and banked with earth for insulation. A step-down doorway provided a subterranean floor with extra protection from the cold. In hot summers people lived under simple ramadas which provided shade while allowing for maximum circulation of air.

Wa cawip

The old style Cocopah dwelling was either rectangular or square (usually 15 feet square by six feet high). A ramada was constructed on the side. The construction of the winter dwelling was accomplished by driving upright posts (mesquite or cottonwood) to support roof beams. Rafters were laid perpendicular to the beams. A layer of branches (arrow weed) was woven to the rafters and covered with a thick layer of mud. On the sides, posts were leaned against the central roof frame and covered by bundles of arrow weed and earth. The entrance was projected about two feet beyond the eastern wall made of four posts and layered with arrow weed and mud the same as the main house. The entrance was covered by a finely woven, soft willow bark curtain, or rabbit skin curtain during the winter. Little cooking was done inside although a smoke hole was made at the center of the roof. Live hot coals were prepared outside and brought into the house to a small central depression in the floor for warmth.

Temporary Dwellings

Ramadas for shade were constructed next to the house or in areas where people worked together during the day. They were made of four posts, pole rafters, and arrow weed bundles.

Summer homes were made of six poles bent and tied in the center. The spaces were filled with small uprights to which willow branches or arrow weed were laid on.

Storage Platform

Cocopah people stored food high above the ground from animals and moisture. They constructed the platform the same as the house without the final layer of mud on top. A long ladder gave people access to the roof where food was stored in large loosely woven

baskets and pottery jars. “Bird’s nest” baskets consisted of arrow weed twigs and small branches with leaves woven into a coil 2-4 inches thick. Coils were lashed together with willow bark or twigs. A top made of cross poles covered with stems of willow or arrow weed and layered with mud provided a secure covering.

RIVER TRANSPORTATION

A simple log propelled by hands or a wooden paddle, or used along side a swimmer as a float, provided a means of short travel on the river. Two kinds of rafts were employed: a basket that resembled a bird’s nest made of willow and cottonwood roots, and one made of logs for longer trips. The log raft had a clay floor at one end where a fire was kept continuously going, and a metate provided a place for food processing.

Smaller “cargo” like infants was floated in a round straight-sided clay vessel with a flat bottom. In calm waters the swimmer pushed the vessel along in the water; in swifter currents a rope made of cowpea twine was used to pull it.

Tule reed and balsa rafts have also been described.

COCOPAH CLOTHING AND BODY ADORNMENT

In general Cocopah men and women wore little clothing due to the extreme temperatures of the Sonoran Desert. In 1540 Alarcon reported that men wore a colored rope around the waist with feathers hanging down. Their ears and noses were pierced to hold bone and shell ornaments. Later men wore a breechclout called an “am-kohap.” In the 18th and 19th century it was made of cloth. A belt made of unraveled cloth served as an attachment for a long strip of cloth fastened to the belt and passed under the crotch and

over the belt in the back. A blanket was used by younger men as adornment. Sandals made from deerskin (in the earlier days) were worn to protect feet from the hot desert pavement. Later cowhide was used. Sandals had a double sole stitched together with leather thongs. Later nails were used. Toe thongs held the sandal to the foot.

A wrist guard was worn by men for decoration. It covered most of the lower arm; made with hide with a buck skin fringe that hung down and was painted distinct colors. Beads were shown at the top of each fringe.

Men wore their hair in long braids sometimes with more than 40 braids. When running or engaged in other vigorous activity they tied the braids together in the back to keep it out of their way. For battle, men tied their hair up with feathers in bundles that radiated on the back of the head. The greatest warriors wore crow, owl, or heron feathers. Shamans could wear hawk or eagle feathers if they had dreamed of the hawk or eagle.

Cocopah women in the sixteenth century were reported to wear only bundles of feathers which hung from the waist front and back. Later they prepared willow bark skirts. The willow was soaked in water for several days and then worked to soften it and form long strips that they looped over a waist rope. Closer to the nineteenth century the skirts were made from cloth.

Women wore their hair cut short in the front and grew it long in the back. Children wore short hair until about age eight when they were allowed to grow it long in the back. Cocopah people have fine, luxurious hair. They used the black sap of the mesquite tree to mix with water forming a dye to deepen the color of their hair. This also served as a way to prevent scalp problems due to the medicinal properties of mesquite sap.

Young girls after they had menstruated about six times were tattooed on the chin by a friend of the family. The tattoo was applied using several mesquite needles tied together and rubbing charcoal into the design afterward.

Face and Body Painting

To protect themselves from the blistering sunrays, Cocopah men and women covered the scalp and body with paints that contain mineral pigments which reflect sunrays. Red hematite, black manganese dioxide, white pigment from an unidentified rock, and yellow bulrush pollen were mixed with oil from pumpkin seeds and applied to skin to reduce chapping and prevent sunburn.

Men used mineral pigments for adornment applying it in specific patterns depending on age and the occasion. In general men used vertical patterns while women used horizontal ones. For warfare great warriors painted their entire face with black manganese dioxide. Lesser warriors painted their faces with half red and half black pigment. The body could be painted black, white, or red in different patterns.

Men made willow bark (mechichobit) and rabbit skin (hurlwas) blankets. These were used by everyone for warmth in cooler temperatures.

Cocopah Artistry and Craftmanship

Pottery (elumas)

A variety of forms of pottery were made by Cocopah women. Young girls learned from their mothers. The pottery was thin, light, and well-formed.

Hard clay from the west side of the Colorado River was collected, pulverized, and tempered with pulverized shards. The clay was soaked overnight. A fine, clear sand was collected from a particular location and worked in by hand if the pot was a large vessel. Coils were formed with a mushroom shaped anvil and a wooden paddle. The coils were smoothed by fingers dipped in water. No slip was applied.

Newly formed pots were dried for one and a half to two days then fired. The pots were fired in holes lined with mesquite logs for an even slow burn which took all night. Women tended these fires. The pots were separated from the mesquite logs by driftwood collected from sandbars on the river. Final hardening was accomplished by cooking a mixture of grasses and maize in the new pot.

Designs were made from red hematite pigment applied before firing, and a black boiled concoction of mesquite sap and arrow weed plants applied after firing while the pot was still hot. Little bundles of willow bark fibers formed the brush for painting.

Today, traditional pottery making is being revived in both youth and adult projects.

Gourd Making

Native gourds were grown for functional uses such as dippers and containers for liquids. They were also prepared as ceremonial rattles. A gourd was burned to make a hole through which twine or rawhide was woven for hanging, or for an opening for liquids. Depending on the shape (long thin neck and small body made a good ladle; short neck and large round body made a good container) many functional containers were crafted.

Gourds used for rattles in ceremony and in music were prepared in the following manner: a hole was burned in the neck area for a handle to later be secured. Hot water was poured into a dried gourd and allowed to soak for a couple of days to remove the pulp and the seeds. Either some seeds were left, or hard seeds or stones put in to create the rattle sound. A branch was secured with natural resins or tar from native trees such as the mesquite or cottonwood tree. Gourds were often painted and adorned with feathers of shells. This art form is still in practice today as can be observed at the Cocopah Museum.

Beading

In the nineteenth century with the advent of the steamboat business at the Yuma Crossing Cocopah men were employed as steamboat captains because of their intimate knowledge of the Colorado River currents and flows. They were first paid in glass beads. Thus, a new tradition was born in the Cocopah art forms. Today the Cocopah beaded yolks made from over 50,000 beads are carefully woven over many months of work and are a treasured regional art form. These yolks are purchased by Indigenous women for traditional regalia, by Cocopah women and families for ceremony, and by the public for their exquisite beauty and patterns. In addition to these yolks, modern day Cocopah craftsmen (women and men) bead many jewelry items as well as animal forms sold as pins. The Cocopah Museum gift shop sells a large variety of Cocopah beaded objects.

De Grazia, the well-known Southwestern artist, made the beaded Cocopah yolk famous in his rendering of “The Little Cocopah Girl”—a work commissioned to raise money for the Cocopah Nation in the 1980’s.

Cocopah Origin Story and Religion

The River People lived a life attuned to the seasonal rhythms of the river and surrounding mountains. Each plant and animal was viewed as a gift of the creator. The Cocopah follow ancient traditions to this day. Their origin story is one of two twin creators, Komat and Sipa, who emerged from the Earth. Finding it covered completely with water they first created land with the help of the ants. They created animals, people, a sun, and a moon. Sipa later taught people how to live giving them bows and arrows, fishing nets, pottery jars, clothing and all the things they would need. He gave black-eyed peas and the tepary bean, important staples in Cocopah diet. Sipa taught the people how to play games. He showed them the way to the sacred mountain Wi Kama. Bird songs, still sung at ceremonies today, were another gift from Sipa.

Rules of behavior were given by Sipa and today are taught through the role of the orator in Cocopah culture. Orators can be parents or respected members of the tribe who give long, well thought-out talks that describe proper behaviors and attitudes. Even today the Cocopah are an orderly community who require little authority to maintain peace among themselves. Not until the twentieth century were leaders recognized. Today the Shapai Axamy or Good Man is a person who exemplifies a wise person available for advice when people need it. Cocopah do not value accumulation of wealth or belongings preferring to share bounty among the tribal members. *Giveaways* are traditional at almost every ceremony.

Cremation Ceremony

The Cocopahs cremate their dead two days after death. Following the cremation, the deceased's dwelling, clothing, and belongings are also burned. These are believed to go to the deceased's spirit for use in the other world. The spirit goes to the four winds first then travels to the Land of the Spirits. Cremation ceremonies are elaborate and require relatives to wear specially made clothing that is burned on the cremation pyre as a gift to the departing spirit.

Keruk and Chekap Ceremonies

These form memorial services for the dead. Keruk occurs when a relative has a dream about the departed relation. This is interpreted as the spirit returning to ask for things needed in the spirit world. These things are burned to be transported to the dead.

Chekap is held periodically in memorial to the dead. It is called the "Crying Ceremony" to honor deceased relatives. A special Cry House is an important part of the Cocopah community life.

Things Sacred to the Cocopah

Best Known Dances

Annual Festivals and Celebrations

Cocopah Weapons and Warfare

The Cocopah were fine warriors though peace-loving people. They kept a large warrior force (over 300 warriors by one account when the community numbered about

3,000 people). Among the river tribes the Pima, Yuma, and Mojave frequently challenged the Cocopahs for land and water locations. Warfare among the river tribes was highly destructive often reducing tribal numbers significantly and in some cases causing groups to merge with other tribes friendly to them. The Cocopah and the Maricopa aligned against the Yuma and Mojave when challenged. Today the Quechan (descendants of the Yuma) are friendly with the Cocopah and cooperate on mutual endeavors.

Cocopah war leaders (kwcnami) wore a distinctive nose pendant. The rounded upper piece was made of clamshell and a lower flat piece of abalone. A man of great power in the eyes of the people usually assumed the role of leader. If he dreamed of the hawk and received predictions of his fate as a warrior, he became a war leader.

Shamans (skviya'patai) had a special duty to set the time and day of a raid and to indicate the strength of the enemy. He would accompany the war party to perform healing functions. Shamans were also important in warning of attacks from enemies. Their special knowledge was achieved through dreams.

Boy began training for warfare in childhood when they were instructed on how to dream. At age 10 to 12 they went through tests of endurance. They bathed in chilly water, ran long distances, walked in hot sand, and ran naked through willow forests in the winter when the bare branches cut into their skin causing painful wounds. Young boys accompanied war parties, hanging back and finishing a kill of wounded enemies.

Scalping had important significance for the war party. After the battle, a special warrior was designated the honor of scalping a dead enemy with especially long, fine hair.

Weapons

Bows - made from willow, shaped with a stone knife; wrapped in wet willow bark and heated in a shallow pit in the sand to shape; cowpea fiber for cord.

Arrows - cane or hardwood; some w/o a stone point (for deer); others with red or black stone points heated to harden.

Quivers - whole coyote skin, hair out, winter-killed; head formed the bottom, tail hung on the outside; feathers of hawk attached.

Clubs - mesquite wood for a straight sided, longer club; ironwood for the famous Yuma "potato masher" club head shaped like a cylinder at the top; handle had perforation for cord strap.

Lance - short screwbean branch 3 - 4 feet long with white or black feathers on one side

Scalp knives - flint or hard stone

Myths and Legends

***Coyote and the Frog Girls**

After Sipa's death the two frog girls had lived long enough for their hair to grow and now it was nice and long. They dressed their hair; put beads on their wrists and around their necks and went walking along the ocean. They also had their faces painted: their eyelids were blackened, their tattoo lines were emphasized with additional black paint, and they had vertical redlines on their cheeks with a cross line under each eye. They were talking about getting married.

Coyote, by this time, had recovered his senses and was returning home. He was also all dressed and ready to get married. His face was painted; he had beads around his neck and wore a raw-hide wrist band decorated with fringe and white painted circles. His hair was fixed, and he had two eagle feathers stuck in the back.

When the girls saw him, they both wanted him. They began quarreling about which one would have him and finally decided that both would marry him, and he could sleep in the middle. But first, before they let Coyote see them, they decided to see whether or not he was any good. One took off her willow bark skirt and threw it in the road and then they both hid. They thought to themselves that if Coyote only smelled the skirt, he would be all right, but if he raised his leg and began pawing the ground this would show that he was *hacak* (an evil person).

When Coyote came up, he smelled the skirt, walked around, and smelled again, then raised his leg and pawed all around the skirt. The girls left without letting him know that they had been near. Then the girls went along the beach and finally sat down and started making beads. The girls spent all their time at this work and the beads piled high all around them. Then the girls died, and both turned to stone with the beads. One of the mountains is called *wi hipa*, the other we *sokami*. These are on the ocean, far way in the west where the land ends.

*From *Cocopah Ethnology* by William H. Kelly, page 119.

***Toys and Games**

Toys

A traditional Cocopah toy was a string 8-10 inches long, knotted at one end so it could hold 15-20 doughnut shaped rings of gourd, and attached at the other end to a slender 6-inch stick. The object was to toss the string in such a way as to impale all six gourd rings, one after the other, with the stick.

Games

Peon

The most popular game for men was called peon in Spanish and *mccuut* in Cocopah. It was a game of skill in which a team of four players tried to "read' the movements, tone of voice, and actions of the other team to determine whose hands held four white egret bones, and whose held four blackened sticks of arrow weed. Fifteen arrow weed sticks serve as counters. Teams make bets as well as on-lookers and supporters. While the team holding the objects is passing them back and forth to confuse the other team members, a chorus of singers behind each team sings songs related to the game. Peon is still played today but is open to both men and women.

Hoop and Pole Game (*a.cuR*)

Both men and women play. The hoop is small (about 7" in diameter.) The pole is long (6-7 feet). The object was to hurl the pole at the rolling hoop and stop its momentum causing it to fall upon the pole.

*From *Cocopah Ethnology* by William H. Kelly, p. 71.

Cocopah Today

Location

The Cocopah Indian Reservation is located in low lying desert approximately 13 miles south of Yuma and bounded by the Colorado River. Just five miles north of San Luis, it is situated 180 miles east of San Diego and 180 miles west of Phoenix. As the Community is divided into three parcels, the tribe's 816 members reside on either East Cocopah, West Cocopah, or North Cocopah reservations.

The North Cocopah stretches along a gentle turn in the Colorado River where it runs south toward Mexico. Here the Cocopah Tribe manages an RV park, 18-hole golf course and resort. Thousands of Winter Visitors from all over the U.S. and Canada vacation there, enjoying sports, recreation, and the winter sunshine. The North Reservation lands cover over 780 acres.

At the **East Cocopah** on Highway 95 the Cocopah have just completed a new Casino The restaurant offers fine dining and live music. Most of the acreage (1,710 acres) has been set aside for business development. Residents at the East Reservation send their children to Yuma schools.

The **West Cocopah** is further south and west of Yuma surrounded on three sides by farms and canals. The west side of the reservation borders the Colorado River below Morelos Dam. At Cocopah West, the Tribal Government and Departments have chambers and offices. Most of the 3,876 acres of land are set aside for agricultural leasing. Residents at the West Reservation send their children to Somerton Schools.

Population

There are approximately 1000 Cocopah people living on or near the three reservations. The Cocopah also have close relatives living in Mexico. Having once been a united people, the Gadsden Purchase separated the tribal communities. The Cocopah and Cucupa (in Mexico) visit each other and occasionally hold ceremonies and celebrations together.

Land

Altogether the three reservations comprise 6,368 acres. The majority of Cocopah lands are held in trust by the federal government. Cocopah lands are part of the Sonoran Desert region which stretches from just north of Phoenix, Arizona to the Baja, California peninsula. Cocopah lands are in the Lower Colorado River Valley subdivision dominated by creosote bush (*L. tridentate*), and white bursage (*Ambrosia dumosa*) – the two most drought tolerant perennial plants in North America. This region is the hottest and driest of the Sonoran Desert subdivisions. Summer highs may exceed 120 degrees with surface temperatures often reaching 180 degrees. The annual rainfall average of 3" requires plants to be highly adapted to aridity and heat. Flat valleys are cut by the Colorado and Gila Rivers where water-living trees and plants dominate in riparian habitat. Riparian habitat is an oasis with forests and an abundance of wildlife. Tall cottonwood and sycamore trees interspersed with desert willows shade the understory. In nearby washes palo verde (*Cercidim spp.*) and ironwood (*Olneya* tesota) trees shade ephemeral streambeds. The Cocopah once lived along the Colorado River which flooded its banks each year providing rich floodplains for planting, and an abundance of fish year round. Today the damming of the Colorado River for irrigation of farmland and for municipal

drinking water has greatly reduced the flows. At the North Cocopah reservation, the Colorado is a smooth running blue ribbon.

Education

School aged students attend Somerton and Yuma school districts. The Cocopah Education Department and the Cocopah Cultural Center hold summer enrichment programs supported by the Johnson O'Malley federal program. About 200 Cocopah children attend school locally, and 10 currently attend community colleges or universities. ??More about goals??

Government

The Cocopah Constitution established a Tribal Council made-up of five members: a Chairman, Vice Chairman, and three Council Members. All of the council officers are elected by Cocopah Tribal members every two years.

Religion

The Cocopah Tribal members have maintained their traditional religious beliefs and ceremonies. Great value is placed on sharing resources and the non-accumulation of wealth. Ceremonies that reinforce traditions occur with the passing of relatives or mourning the deceased and paying them special homage; ceremonies for newborns, for young boys and girls when they become adults and many others. Often ceremonies involve gift-giving all the members of the community, gifts to a departed relative, or cremation at death. Songs of sacred tradition accompany most ceremonies.

Cocopah Cultural Center and Museum

The Cultural Center and Museum were established in 1996. The Cultural Center serves as a functional gathering place for the promotion of Tribal cohesiveness and unity. The Museum displays the history of the Cocopah: the River People who traveled the waterways on reed rafts, poling them down to the mouth of the Colorado River to collect wild wheat. Dioramas of the traditional Cocopah lifeways, basket and pottery making, are permanently on display, as well as changing exhibits by Community members. Native American literature can be purchased including two excellent histories of the Cocopah people. A gift shop at the Museum offers an array of Indigenous arts and crafts including beautiful beadwork which remains an evolving Cocopah art tradition. Tribal dolls, Native American cassette tapes and CD's and jewelry are sold there.

Health

The Cocopah Tribal Government and the U.S. Indian Health Service cooperate to provide a range of health services to the Cocopah people without charge. The Tribe has initiated its own programs to grow and produce native foods with exceptional nutritional value and disease preventing qualities. These were the foods eaten by the tribal community for millennia and promoted excellent health. The presence of a fast-food culture with food high in fat, sugar, and salt has contributed to a high incidence of diabetes. Desert legumes are high in soluble fiber preventing high blood sugar. All across Southern Arizona people are realizing the value of native food varieties that grow naturally in the dry soils of the Sonoran Desert: mesquite beans, tepary beans, cholla

buds, acorns chia seeds. What appears as a desert is a true cornucopia for a knowledgeable harvester.

Arts and Crafts

Cocopah craftsmen are known for intricate and uniquely designed beadwork. From beaded jewelry to wrist and head bands, necklaces, and shoulder-wide traditional yokes for formal ceremony and dancing, there is not one design the same. The tribal colors of red, black, and white, blue, or yellow make dramatic patterns. For thousands of years the Cocopah have grown gourds along the Colorado River banks. Artisans make traditional rattles for ceremony from painted gourds filled with seeds or stones from the surrounding hills. Many Cocopah artists are youth who paint murals and paintings with traditional themes that reflect the great tradition of the Tribe. These can be viewed at the Cocopah Museum.

Attractions

The Cocopah Tribe has established many attractions for visitors: an 18-hole golf course and resort at the North Cocopah reservation; the Cocopah Casino and restaurant at the East Cocopah; Museum and Gift Shop at the West Cocopah reservation. The Museum is open to the public Monday through Friday from 8 am to 5 pm. In addition, the Museum staff will host groups of visitors who call ahead to request a tour or presentation about the historical changes that have shaped the Tribe's way of life today.

References

Gifford, E.W. (1933). *The Cocopah.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kelly, W.H. (1977). *Cocopah ethnography*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Martin, D.D. (1995). *Yuma crossing*. Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press.

Stone, C.L. (1991). *The linear oasis: Managing cultural resources along the lower Colorado River.* Bureau of Land Management: Cultural Resource Series (n6).

The Cocopah Indian reservation land use and development plan (1982).

Williams, A.A. (1974). *The Cocopah People.* Phoenix: The Indian Tribal Series.

Williams, A.A. (1975). Traveler's among the Cucupá. Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop.