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California Indians



In 1990, California had the second-largest Native American population with approximately 242,000 Native American residents, second only to Alaska in 2000, according to the U.S. Census, there were 220,657 American Indians in California (for those designating only one race, and excluding Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians in California).² Most of these people are native born while many other Indians have come from other states either through military service, United States government or for employment purposes. There are 29 recognized Indian tribes and 95 Federal Indian reservations in California with about 40 Indian groups seeking to gain federal recognition. Before the Europeans, the native peoples of California lived in all areas of the state. There was no empty land, as long as that land could support human life. The diversity of the United States is there such a variety of cultures and a multiplicity of languages. California Indians have dozens of languages and dialects from several language families (Hokan, Penutian, Algonkian, Shoshonean, Athabascan, etc.). The multiplicity of languages, cultures, and individual tribal histories create a fascinating tapestry of California Indian history.

California is an amazing and varied region with mountains, valleys, and the Pacific ocean coast. Native peoples lived in these regions for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived a few hundred years ago. Archaeologists have found evidence that people were present in some parts of California at least 19,000 years ago. Evidence shows that human occupation in parts of California goes back to about 9000 B.C.E., California Indians began a transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture that also depended heavily on seed collecting. By approximately 3000 B.C.E., peoples had developed subsistence patterns that were quite varied. Agriculture and diversification had advanced sufficiently by about 500 years ago and customs of many historical peoples had been established. Pottery and village life became more complex. The tribelet became the predominant political organization and the largest autonomous group. It is estimated that around 300,000 California Indians in the 18th century, in about 200 different cultures and California Indians spoke over 300 different dialects and languages.⁵ With all the diversity in geographic settings and languages, California Indians still tended to share many cultural similarities. They all had agriculture as a staple food. They also relied on such foods as fish, deer, elk, a buckeye, and epos root. They had shamans who cured by sucking out of the body. They used datura in religious and rite-of-passage ceremonies. The primary political organization was the tribelet, with an emphasis

and private property. They also made fine baskets. From as early many California Indian groups created rock art.⁶ Trade between well developed in California. Organized warfare was rare. Ceremonial important role in the lives of most California Indians. Most group defined rituals related to puberty, death, and subsistence. Marriage place when the couples were very young, just after puberty. Nor Indians had rather rigid and closed class systems based on wealth customs. Some groups kept slaves. Chiefs, shamans, and wealth than one wife. There are similarities in aboriginal California cultures similar climatic and ecological zones. Technologies and materials tools, homes, and other items are similar in various regions of the trapping and fishing technologies were shared across tribal lines. In many regions, environments, and variations in California - in its cultures, its languages, its lifestyles. To learn more about California examine the variations among the tribal groups, investigate the Indian group, and discover their regional similarities as well. In 1791 Hudson Bay Co. sponsored a fur trapping/scouting expedition to the expedition introduced smallpox, influenza and measles to the Indian single expedition resulted in a 50 percent reduction in the entire population, destroying entire villages and tribes. In the 1850s, the devastated the Indian population. By 1860, less than 20 percent population remained.⁸

¹*The Gale Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes*, Vol. IV, California Northwest, Pacific Islands. Detroit: Gale, 1998.

²U.S. Census Bureau, *Census 2000 Summary File 1*, Matrices P3 PCT8, and PCT11 (<http://factfinder.census.gov/>)

³Heizer, Robert F., vol. ed. *Handbook of North American Indians* Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978


⁴Klein, Barry T. *Reference Encyclopedia of the American Indian*. NY: Todd Publications, 1995.

⁵Kroeber, A. L. *Handbook of the Indians of California*. New York: Bulletin 78 of the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1925.

⁶Pritzker, Barry M. "California." In *Native Americans: An Encyclopedia of Culture, and Peoples*, 148-219. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1999.

⁷Tiller, Veronica E. Velarde, ed. *American Indian Reservations and Reservations*. Albuquerque: Tiller Research, 1996.

⁸Facts compiled by archaeologist Peter Jensen, Ph.D.

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