

Cultivating an Abundant San Francisco Bay

Watch the segment online at <http://education.savingthebay.org/cultivating-an-abundant-san-francisco-bay>

Watch the segment on DVD: Episode 1, 17:35-22:39

Video length: 5 minutes 20 seconds

SUBJECT/S

Science

History

GRADE LEVELS

4–5

CA CONTENT STANDARDS

Grade 4

History–Social Science

4.2.1. Discuss the major nations of California Indians, including their geographic distribution, economic activities, legends, and religious beliefs; and describe how they depended on, adapted to, and modified the physical environment by cultivation of land and use of sea resources.

VIDEO OVERVIEW

The early human inhabitants of the San Francisco Bay Area, the Ohlone and the Coast Miwok, cultivated an abundant environment.



Native people of San Francisco Bay in a boat made of tule reeds off Angel Island c. 1816. This illustration is by Louis Choris, a French artist on a Russian scientific expedition to San Francisco Bay. (The Bancroft Library)

In this segment you'll learn:

- about shellmounds and other ways in which California Indians affected the landscape.
- how the native people actually cultivated the land.
- ways in which tribal members are currently working to restore their lost culture.

TOPIC BACKGROUND

Native Americans have lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for thousands of years. Shellmounds—constructed from shells, bone, soil, and artifacts—have been found in numerous locations across the Bay Area. Certain shellmounds date back 2,000 years and more. Many of the shellmounds were also burial sites and may have been used for ceremonial purposes. Due to the fact that most of the shellmounds were abandoned centuries before the arrival of the Spanish to California, it is unknown whether they are related to the California Indians who lived in the Bay Area at that time—the Ohlone and the Coast Miwok.

The Ohlone, also called Costanoans by the Spanish, lived in the areas known today as San Francisco, the East Bay, and the South Bay, whereas the Coast Miwok made their home in the North Bay. Organized into small independent tribes, the Ohlone and Coast Miwok maintained villages in locations including present-day Crissy Field in San Francisco and Big Lagoon in Muir Beach. Approximately 20,000 people lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, and they spoke many different languages.

The Ohlone and the Coast Miwok made use of the abundant life in the San Francisco Bay region through seasonal rounds of hunting, fishing, and gathering. They gathered shellfish, seeds, and native plants and hunted deer and elk. They cultivated the land by encouraging the growth of certain plants through periodic burning of the landscape. Their complex culture included song, dance, and rituals. These early inhabitants of the Bay Area fashioned tools, fishing nets, watertight baskets, and boats. They also maintained sophisticated trade systems with other tribes.

With the arrival of Europeans, the California Indians were exposed to new diseases, and that, combined with Spanish colonization, caused their population to decline. The Mexican rancho period and Anglo-American policies and attitudes also played significant roles in reducing the numbers of native people. By 1900, only 25,000 of the 300,000 native people living in California survived. Today, against considerable odds, many descendants of the Ohlone and the Coast Miwok are organized into tribes, and tribal members are working to maintain and restore their native culture. These efforts include protection of ancestral sites, the practice of traditional plant uses, story telling, basket weaving, and restoration of native languages.

VOCABULARY

abundance

plentiful supply

cultivate

to promote growth through preparation of the land

monitor

to study or examine over time

resource

an available supply that can be used when needed

shellmound

an area where California Indians dumped shells and other refuse, also called a midden

tule

a freshwater marsh plant with a tall, thin, and sturdy stem that Native Americans wove to make boats, baskets, and clothing

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITY

- In pairs or small groups, discuss what you know about California Indians. How did the native people of the San Francisco Bay Area shape the landscape? Did they leave any traces of their way of life?

VIEWING ACTIVITY

- Watch the segment once without taking any notes. At the end of the segment, record any thoughts, feelings, or impressions.
- Watch the segment again, this time taking notes on anything interesting or surprising.

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS

- What feelings did you write down after watching the segment the first time? Review the notes you took while watching the segment the second time. What was interesting? What was surprising?
- What did you learn about shellmounds? What do they tell us about native cultures?
- How did the California Indians cultivate the land? How does this change some ideas that the San Francisco Bay Area was just wilderness before the Europeans arrived?
- What do you think caused the California Indian population to go from 300,000 to 25,000 by the year 1900?
- It is stated in this segment that the San Francisco Bay Area was an “abundant land” during the time of the Ohlone and Coast Miwok peoples. What does this mean? How is the Bay Area different today? How is it the same?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

- In this segment, Chuck Striplen discusses monitoring tule over time. Choose a plant in the schoolyard to monitor over the course of the school year. How do human actions affect the plant? What actions could be taken to protect it or cultivate its growth?
- Research the Ohlone or Coast Miwok village that would have been closest to your school site. Investigate why that site might have been chosen. What resources were available there or in nearby areas?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phaela Peck is a science teacher, environmental educator, and writer based in San Francisco. She has an M.A. in environmental education and has developed curricula for numerous science and environmental education organizations in the Bay Area.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Abalone: Education, Native American Cultural Center Online

<http://www.nativecc.com/Education.html>

This website provides links to lessons plans, maps, native plant information, and other educational resources.

“An ‘Unvanishing’ Story,” National Park Service

<http://www.nps.gov/history/seac/sfprehis.htm>

“An ‘Unvanishing’ Story” discusses the history of the San Francisco Bay region and the Ohlone in San Francisco’s Mission Bay. Links to artifact images are also included.

Coast Miwok at Point Reyes, Golden Gate National Recreation Area

http://www.nps.gov/pore/historyculture/people_coastmiwok.htm

Find more in-depth information about the Coast Miwoks at Point Reyes, including their hunting and gathering habits during each season. Links to ranger-led programs for third- and fourth-grade students at Point Reyes are also listed.

Ohlones and Coast Miwoks, Golden Gate National Recreation Area

<http://www.nps.gov/goga/historyculture/ohlones-and-coast-miwoks.htm>

The National Park Service provides this brief overview of the Ohlones and the Coast Miwoks, along with recommendations for further reading.

CREDITS

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VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

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NARRATOR: It is unclear when the Bay's early human inhabitants arrived. Were they survivors of the vast era of change when the Bay was formed? Or were they an entirely new people?

ROBIN GROSSINGER: One thinks of California Indians and Bay Area Indians as not having left that much of an effect on the landscape, but there were, up until recently, hundreds of fairly imposing, significant features—these shellmounds, or complexes of mounds made largely out of shells.

ANDY GALVAN: If you're living [around] the Bay and you're throwing the refuse downwind from your village, after 100, 200, many, many years, a mound is growing. Your village is here now, and the mound is here. The rains come and your village gets wiped out. And you say, "You know what? Let's go put some dirt on top of the mound and put our houses up there, and we'll start throwing the shells over there." This goes on for 4,000 or 5,000 years in the San Francisco Bay region.

GROSSINGER: And the shellmounds themselves are really a testimony to the persistence and the kind [and] extent of native culture in the area.

NARRATOR: Previously, people gathered grasses as a staple. Now they also gathered the abundant acorns the oak woodlands provided—that and the rich supply of shellfish the vast Bay produced.

MALCOLM MARGOLIN: We love to imagine this was wild land. There were a few Indians that every so often an acorn would fall off a tree and they'd snag it. But the fact of the matter is, this was a deeply cultivated land. It was burned regularly, and burning affected the grasslands and affected the brush lands. It fostered the right kinds of grasses, the right kinds of trees. They created an environment that was good for themselves.

NARRATOR: Around the estuary, as many as 20,000 people lived, speaking an astounding variety of languages, and loosely defined today into two groups: the Coast Miwok in the North Bay and the Ohlone in the east and south.

CHUCK STRIPLEN: My name is Chuck Striplen. I am a member of the Mutsun band of Ohlone Indians.

NARRATOR: By 1900, the 300,000 native people who once occupied California were reduced to perhaps 25,000. Much of their 5,000-year-old culture vanished. In 1935, the last speaker of an Ohlone language died. Today, survivors try to reclaim a lost culture.

STRIPLEN: Within our community, the knowledge of building these boats, actually, has been reconstructed from specimens that we've looked at in museums. There are members of other local tribes—some of the Pomo, some of the Coast Miwok—that have retained that knowledge within the community, and we are seeking guidance from them.

From my perspective—I've trained as a scientist and also as a practitioner of these traditional arts now—it allows us to regain the relationship with those resources. It's kind of a long-term monitoring process. We're now interacting with the tule, and hopefully we'll do so years and years and years in the future. And what that allows us to do, in a very precise way, is actually monitor the health of the tule over time. It allows us to notice and be aware if there are any changes going on in the ecology of this system.

NARRATOR: The world the Ohlone and Miwok inhabited was an astounding place—one of the richest environments in all of North America.

JOHN HART: It was an abundant place to live. It was a good place to live. You had the resources of the land, but most particularly you had the resources of the water. You had salmon runs, you had other fish, and always you had shellfish and invertebrates, crabs and what not.

MARGOLIN: It was thick with wildlife. There were grizzly bears, there were condors, there were bald eagles, there were mountain lions. You had here an amazing wildlife presence. If you were a person during those times, you would have been a person living in a world that was dominated by animal presence all around you.