

# Anza-Borrego Tour

April 2013

“When Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza’s first expedition entered the Borrego Valley from the southeast on March 12, 1774, they had traveled for days through Kumeyaay country and were about to enter the territories of the Cahuilla. After three days of northwesterly travel through Coyote Canyon, they had crossed most of the land of the Cahuilla and were heading toward Mission San Gabriel.

The explorers noted that the Cahuilla and Kumeyaay shared many cultural ways. They lived at mesquite groves and had small settlements at springs. Their artifacts were similar and well-suited for a desert life. They used clay posts and woven baskets, and wore scant clothing. They were people who made similar use of their environments, yet they spoke different languages.

The Indians of the Anza-Borrego Desert lived a semi-nomadic life. In winter, the Kumeyaay wandered from the Laguna Mountains down into Mason Valley, Vallecito, and Canebrake. Likewise, the Cahuilla moved from the Santa Rosa Mountains down into Rockhouse Canyon and Borrego Valley. In spring and summer, they left the desert and south the mountains.

The Indians hunted deer, bighorn sheep, and jackrabbits, but the great variety of desert plants provided most of their diet. Agave, mesquite, pinyon, and oak were the most important sources of food. In the desert, the agave was harvested in spring and mesquite beans were collected in early summer. Autumn signaled the time to gather pinyon nuts and acorns. The mesquite beans and the pinyon nuts could be stored, pounded into flour or eaten raw, but the agave and the acorns required special preparations.

Women prepared most of the food for the families, but harvesting the agave was delegated to the men. With a digging stick, sharpened and fire-hardened at its tip, the agave was dug up and the base and the stalk were placed in a pit with heated rocks and slowly cooked for about two days. The baked agave was carried to the villages in nets made of yucca or agave fibers.

Rock art in the Anza-Borrego Desert is of two types: petroglyphs that are pecked or abraded on the surfaces of rocks, and pictographs that are painted or drawn.

Rock art has different meanings to different people. For some, these pecked or painted designs are scribbles or doodles; but to the Native Americans they were made for a purpose and often have sacred meaning. Some may represent powerful magical images created by the shaman-artist who was inspired by dreams or séances with the spirits.

The interpretation of rock art is tenuous, but ethnographic information reveals that some rock art was made in connection with puberty rites of both boys and girls. Rock art may also have been a way to record historical events. It was certainly used to mark such important natural happenings such as the solstices and equinoxes. Much of it was perhaps sacred and secret, and when the artist died the special meaning was lost.”

*“Native Americans” by Manfred Knaak, Anza-Borrego Desert National History Association, 1987*

## Cahuille Site in Clark Valley



Chuck Bennett describing site



Site Petroglyphs



The SAS group

On Friday, April 13<sup>th</sup> members of the Sacramento Archeological Society, the Colorado Desert Archaeology Society, the Society for California Archaeology, and guests gathered, hunted and pecked their way to a small but very interesting petroglyph site in Anza-Borrego State Park. Our tour guide, Chuck Bennett, so ably kept us all moving on the approximately three-mile round-trip tour to see the rock art and other features including possible grinding rocks. Chuck's knowledge of the area and his stories and comments added so much to the tour. The petroglyphs are located on the east side of Clark Dry Lake at the base of the Santa Rosa Mountains in northeastern San Diego County. Access to the site was a dirt road (to the north off of state highway 22) that meandered through Clark Valley and towards Rockhouse and Butler Canyons.

Our happy hikers filled several vehicles, passed much biota including mesquite, barrel cactus, and Ocotillo (known for beautiful red flowers), Chicory, Monkey Flower, Creosote, and Desert Lavender to name just a few. We hiked across the valley floor through numerous stream cuts/washes (dry for our trek), so everyone enjoyed walking up and down and up and down and...! At the site, the older rock art dates to some 500 years and has been interpreted as an early Cahuilla style pecked into boulders at the base of the mountains. The desert patina was reddish brown. The dozen or two rock art images were created at various times as the vividness of the images, or lack of it, indicates different ages of the art. The more faint images are probably older because the desert "varnish" has repainted the worked surfaces comprising the images in varying degrees thus reducing the image clarity. Other age differences can be seen when an image or set of images lies on top of other older images. Petroglyphs are typically pecked, incised, scratched etc. into the rock surface; and differ from pictographs which are typically painted onto rock surfaces.

To be sure, desert temperatures in this area could have been in triple digits even during this time of year (April). They weren't!! Our trekking weather was wonderful so we were quite thankful for the climate that day. It was a very fun way to view rock art that has meaning to those who created it but may forever hold the precise meanings as secrets. Thanks to all who made it such a pleasant trip.

## Mine Canyon Road - Kumeyaay site



John Foster explaining site



Bedrock milling



Cupules: Dimpled granite

On April 13<sup>th</sup> at the Kumeyaay winter village site up the Mine Canyon Road during the rain John Foster who had excavated the site years ago showed additional features of the life of Kumeyaay people. We saw grinding rocks and cupules. The cupules formed as indentations in granite are common to many sites. They may have had sacred or utilitarian function for the creators.

## Morteros Interpretive Trail – Kumeyaay site

The Morteros Interpretive Trail in Little Blair Valley Cultural Preserve provided an excellent opportunity to experience the environment of the Kumeyaay people. On April 15, 2012 we were privileged to be present at the dedication of this trail. It was the culmination of hard work by the Colorado Desert Archaeological Society (CDAS) and we appreciated the tour led by the site steward, Sam Webb. Along the trail you are introduced to the Kumeyaay way of life: (1) an agave roasting pit, (2) juniper berries, (4) cupules, (5) bedrock milling, (7) pictographs, (8) rock shelter, and (3 and 9) the pristine landscape enjoyed by this native people.



Dedication of Morteros Trail



Agave roasting site



Bedrock milling



Pictographs

## Pictographs in Little Blair Valley

A more extensive viewing of pictographs was the reward for going on the **Pictograph Hike** led by archaeologist, **Sue Wade** on April 15<sup>th</sup>. Not only did we find a lovely panel of rock

art but Sue showed us numerous smooth grinding depressions in the otherwise rough granite and roasting pits. We thank you Sue.



Pictographs at Little Blair Valley roasting sites



More pictographs



Group looking for agave