

Chapter 2: Spanish Descriptions of our Land

The landscape of our Community has changed dramatically over the past several centuries. Our environment—especially the plants and animals—and our villages have been altered by the loss of our water. While Spanish explorers initiated these changes, their recorded words also help us reconstruct what our environment once looked like. Jesuit priest Father Eusebio Kino was the first to visit our villages, describing “large cottonwood groves” along the Gila River. Further west, he observed our people “sustaining themselves with the abundant fish and with their maize, beans and calabashes.” Passing through our villages, Kino was given “so much and so very good fish” from our ancestors, who themselves also ate fish.

Some time later, another priest named Jacobo Sedelmayr noted our people lived in three large rancherías, or series of villages. These villages were centered in the corridor between modern Sweetwater and Sacate. Our largest villages were in the Casa Blanca area where the river ran “entirely underground in hot weather.” At the time, our villages were on either side of the river and “on the islands” within the river. We enjoyed “broad acres for cultivation of crops.” Further west, there were “broad savannas of reed grass and clumps of willow and a beautiful spring with good land for pasture.” The Spaniards gave it the name Santa Teresa, although it later became known as Maricopa Wells. In the area of modern District Seven were “creeks, marshes, fields of reed grass and an abundant growth of [willows] and cottonwood.”

Our land was a rich environment centered on the flowing Gila River. The river and its tributaries provided a source of drinking and irrigating water. At times—especially during the heat of summer—the river might disappear below the ground. There were once eight islands in the Gila between Blackwater and Pima Butte, with some one to two miles in length. The river typically flooded these lands every year, depositing nutrient-rich sediment on them and on the

river bottomlands. Before our water was taken away from us and floods changed the channel of the river, the Gila River was broad and shallow.

Dozens of species of birds lived along the Gila River, as did many riparian plants. There were many cienegas or low-lying wetlands along the river, with the largest on the Santa Cruz River between Maricopa Wells and the village of Santa Cruz. Along with mesquite bosques, there were meadows of salt, Sacaton and other native grasses. The area northwest of Bapchule was thick with vegetation, once being called “Louisiana” because it resembled a bayou.

The river was also home to thousands of beaver. By constructing dams, these animals helped contain any rapid rain runoff in the Gila and its tributaries. When the beaver disappeared from the river system in the early 1800s, animals and birds suffered as well. The Gila River was always a fragile environment and any change in the river ecosystem impacted the river itself, including the plants and animals it supported.

Draping the river was a thick canopy of cottonwoods and willows. Many a traveler passed through our villages and described how the river was “told a long way off by the green cottonwoods which fringe its banks.” The woodlands along the river were once so thick that they obscured the view of the river. East of our villages the river channel was so narrow and thickly populated with cottonwoods that the trees lining either bank met in the middle and formed a canopy over the river.

Away from the river were large bosques (or forests) of Honey Bean and Screw Bean Mesquite. These trees lived on the low alluvial plains along the Gila, Salt and Santa Cruz rivers and the many washes feeding these streams. The largest bosque stretched from the confluence of the Gila and Salt rivers south and east along the Gila and Santa Cruz rivers in the southern part of modern District Six to Pima Butte. It is here that the famous “New York Thicket” was found,

with many of these trees three feet or more in diameter. Mesquite wood helped our people build good sturdy homes and was used to heat and cook by our women. Mesquite beans were harvested and stored in large arrow-weed baskets. When ground into flour, the protein and carbohydrate rich flour was used to make bread, pudding and an assortment of other foods. Lack of rain did not affect the ability of these trees to produce fruit, as their root system extended deep into the water table below the surface. When our water was taken away, many of these trees began dying and were lost as a resource to our people. As a result, mesquite is no longer our “staff of life.”

Not all of our land was clothed in mesquite. Much of it included native grasses. One of the grasslands was near Maricopa Wells, one was east of the Sacaton Mountains and still another was along Queen Creek near present-day Goodyear. These grasslands were large and could provide “abundant pasturage for several hundred to more than a thousand head of livestock.”

We have always seen ourselves as part of the desert. This means we have always lived with the land. Until a little over a hundred years ago, natural desert foods provided by the creator accounted for a good portion of our diet. There were nearly sixty native plants—not including thirty later introduced by Europeans and Americans—that were harvested and eaten at various times by our people. These natural “greens” were an important part of our diet.

One of these natural crops, the fruit of the saguaro, was so important to our people that we began our new year with the Saguaro harvest moon (late June or early July). Saguaro fruit was used for a number of purposes, including the making of syrup and jam. The seeds were ground into a meal that we could use to make porridge. Agaves and Cholla buds were also important natural crops harvested by our people. We harvested agave *hearts* and dried them to eat later. Pit-roasted agaves were a delicacy. Cholla buds (Buckhorn or Pencil) could be gathered

in the spring and pit-roasted and eaten fresh or dried for storage. We always had a plentiful supply of food and were always willing to share with those in need.

But it is irrigated agriculture for which we are best known. We grew at least six major food crops: corn, squash and pumpkins, tepary beans, lima beans, grain amaranth and grain chenopod. All of these could be easily stored for later use. These crops were irrigated and grown in an environment where an average of 6 to 8 inches of rain fell annually. We diverted water from the river by building brush dams. Head gates, or diversion points from the river, were usually located several miles upstream from our fields.

The land surrounding our villages was described as pleasant and luxuriant. It was “irrigated by aqueducts, which are built from the river to the surrounding country with little difficulty because the land is so level.” The land was “very beautiful, entirely level, and exceptionally good for raising all kinds of grain and plants.” When Juan Bautista de Anza Jr., visited our people in 1775, he found “plentiful pasturage close by the river.” Anza also noted our exceptional croplands. “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.” Our fields of maize were “of similar proportions.” Another priest named Fray Diego Bringas explained that every “species of grain” could be grown in “fields cultivated by each family.”

We planted crops that were adapted to our desert climate. These crops matured quickly, produced few leaves—but many seeds—and were drought tolerant. At least two crops were planted each year: one in the spring, after the mesquite leafed out and the fear of frost had passed, and one in July or early August, when the summer rains fell. Enough time had to be allowed so that this second crop could mature before the fall frost arrived. We grew at least seven types of corn, although these varieties grew shorter than modern day commercial corns

and had less foliage, which means they also lost less water through transpiration. Our tepary beans were adapted to the desert and were the most important bean we grew. The Pima lima bean, adapted to the high salinity of the desert soil, was another important crop that was drought tolerant. When Father Kino introduced wheat among our people in the late 17th century, we began to grow three crops a year. This meant we farmed pretty much all year-around.

The introduction of wheat and other legumes contributed to the increased concentration of our villages on the south bank of the river (to protect against increasing Apache raids). By the late 1700s, we were selling surplus crops to the growing Spanish presidio of Tucson. Within a century we were providing most of the food for what is today south-central Arizona Territory, including the mining and military districts. Some of our people used the tailwaters from their agricultural fields to irrigate a second crop of wild and semi-wild greens. These crops provided “vitamins and minerals” that were not as “abundant in the starchy crops of the main fields.” If we managed it properly, we could take food home from this “second garden” almost any day of the year.

Thus, our land was a diverse area of flowing streams, riparian woodlands, desert plants, grasslands and rich farmland. This environment provided for our needs for centuries. Altering this fragile environment—through the loss of our water supply—could only lead to significant environmental and cultural change for our people.