American Indian Responses to Environmental Challenges

Campo Kumeyaay Nation: Our Environmental Challenge

Narrator: Kumeyaay wetlands have been decimated by years of cattle grazing.

Fidel Hyde, Senior Technician, Campo Environmental Protection Agency, Campo Kumeyaay Nation: And you know, I always wondered...I always knew there was something strange, there was something different, and I never knew until I got involved with EPA that because of the cattle grazing, nothing was growing.

Michael Connolly, Environmental Consultant and Former Tribal Councilman, Campo Kumeyaay Nation: The cattle, what they do is they eat the babies. So as the new trees are coming up, they are continually mowing them down, so trees never are able to get established. So eventually over time, you see a lot of the non-native plants began to replace the native plants. We’re about a mile east of the Campo reservation. It’s a good example of what happens when you have cattle grazing for over 100 years in an area. One of the plants you see here is the sage. It is the Great Basin sage. Sage is a disturbed-area plant. The only way for sage to come in and really dominate an area is if it is continually disturbed. This is Campo Creek, and at one time it had a fully developed riparian habitat. And there were willow trees that filled up the center, willows and cottonwoods. And, then along the sides then were the oaks. And the oaks would cover this whole valley here. Just 10 years ago, that was a live oak tree. And its roots got washed out from all the erosion and it fell over and died.

Narrator: Other factors besides cattle grazing affected the wetlands.

Michael Connolly: Oak trees were considered a kind of a pest tree by a lot of the settlers. They came into this area in the 1870s and they cut down a lot of the oaks, opened up areas so that they could then graze their cattle. So we’re seeing a gradual shift to more and more of a desert type of environment from a chaparral. When the water level was high, there was a big wet meadow around the riparian area. The ranchers and farmers, they saw it as swamp land that you had to get rid of. So in a lot of cases they’d actually go in and cut a channel down through the middle to intentionally drain it.

Bill Moffett, Well-Drilling Contractor, Campo Kumeyaay Nation: I’ve been a well drilling contractor, and I’ve done a good portion of the wells for the housing here. You could find water almost anywhere if you dug, you know, in the lower valley. A couple feet and water would seep up. In other areas, well, you would have to go a little deeper. I have seen 800-, 1000-foot, 1300-foot wells in this area now to get even close to what we used to have here within the 100- and 200- feet range.
Narrator: The loss of water and wetlands also affects Kumeyaay culture. For example, basket making materials are harder to find now.

Ana Gloria Rodriguez, Basketmaker, Baja Kumiai Tribe: So one of the problems right now is that we'll—with the water, you know, we don't have that much material like before, or people moving close to the areas where we have, or traditional plants, you know, to do baskets and stuff. So now we don't have access to that. We use all this stuff for, to survive. Everything is natural from Mother Earth. And everything, when we don't use it anymore, they go back again to Mother Earth.