

From: History Alive!

1.4 First Americans' View of Their Environment

Wherever they lived, Native Americans had a strong connection to their surroundings. They viewed themselves as a part of the community of plants, animals, and other natural objects. As a Sioux said, "From Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, there came a great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things—the flowers of the plains, blowing winds, rocks, trees, birds, animals—and was the same force that had been breathed into the first man."

Nature's Spirits Native Americans generally believed that each part of nature had its own spirit. Each person had to maintain a balance with these spirits.

These beliefs were expressed in various customs. Southwest farmers, for example, made corn a part of every ceremony. Hunters gave thanks to the animals they killed.

Using the Land Unlike Europeans, Native Americans did not believe that land could be owned as private property. But each group was deeply connected to its homeland—the area where its people lived most of the year. If necessary, Native Americans would fight to protect their right to this land.

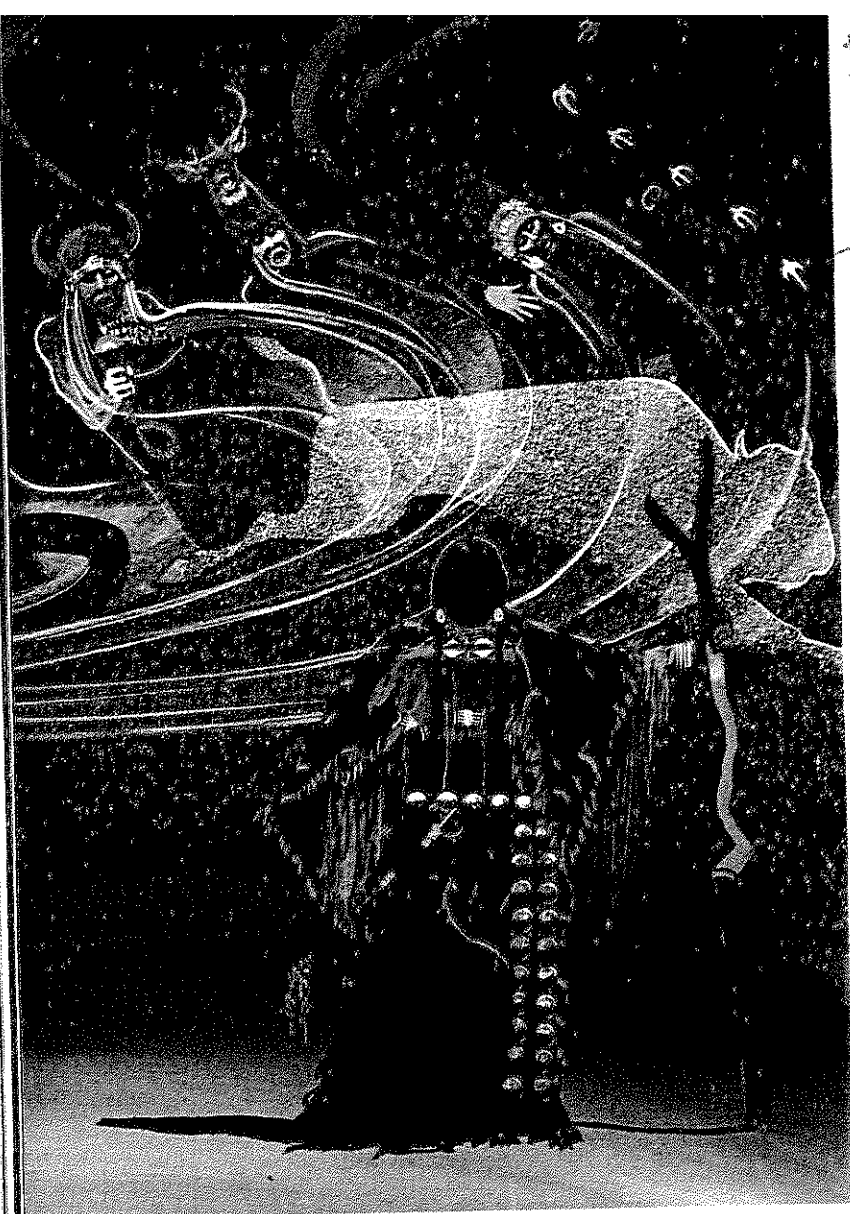
Native Americans adapted the land to suit their needs. Woodlands people set fires to clear heavy forest growth, so deer could browse and berries could grow. Southwest farmers built ditches to carry water to dry fields.

These practices had seldom harmed the environment. As one Native American historian explains, "We dug our clams here, caught our salmon over there, got...seagull eggs on another island.... By the time we came back here, this place had replenished itself."

Native Americans tried not to waste anything taken from nature. A California woman recalled, "When we...kill meat, we eat it all up. When we dig roots we make little holes.... We shake down acorns and pine nuts. We don't chop down the trees."

1.5 Native Americans of the Northwest Coast

The Northwest Coast cultural region extends from southern Oregon into Canada. Winters along the ocean are cold but not icy, and summers are cool. To the east, thick forests of fir, spruce, and cedar cover rugged mountains. The mountains trap Pacific storms, so there is heavy rainfall much of the year.



Native Americans believed humans, animals, plants, and even inanimate objects had their own spirits. Because of this belief, Native Americans felt related to all parts of nature.

Abundant Food Northwest people found food plentiful, particularly from the sea. They built their villages along the narrow beaches and bays of the coastline, and on nearby islands. They gathered clams, other shellfish, and seaweed from shallow waters. They ventured onto the sea in canoes to hunt seals, sea lions, and whales, as well as halibut and other fish. The forests provided deer, moose, bear, elk, beaver, and mountain goat.

For each kind of creature, hunters developed special weapons. To catch seals, for example, they made long wooden harpoons, or spears. The harpoon had a barbed tip made of bone that held firmly in the seal's hide once it was struck. At the other end, hunters fastened a long rope so that they would not lose either the weapon or their prey.

In early summer, masses of salmon swam from the ocean up the rivers to lay their eggs. Men built wooden fences across the rivers to block the fish, making them easier to net. Women dried salmon meat so that it could be eaten all year long.

Builders and Carvers The forests of the Northwest provided materials for houses and many useful objects. Using wedges and stone-headed sledgehammers, men cut long, thin boards from logs or living trees. They joined these planks to build large, sturdy houses. To keep out the rain, they made roof shingles out of large sheets of cedar bark.

Women cut strips from the soft inner bark and used them to make baskets, mats, rope, and blankets. They even wove the strips of bark into waterproof capes.

With abundant food nearby, the Northwest people had time to practice crafts. Women made decorative shell buttons and sewed them onto their clothing with ivory needles. Men used tools such as wooden wedges, bone drills, stone chisels, and stone knives to carve detailed animal masks and wooden bowls.

Native Americans of the Northwest relied on the thick forests, abundant seafood, and plentiful game to meet their needs.



1.6 Native Americans of California

The California cultural region stretches from southern Oregon through Baja California. Ocean storms bring winter rains to this region. But summers are hot and dry, particularly inland.

The California region includes not only the coast, but also the coastal foothills, an inland valley, deserts, and the western side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Over 100 small groups made their homes in these diverse environments, more than in any other cultural region.⁶

Many Sources of Food

Groups living along the coast of Northern California depended on salmon for much of their food. Farther south, coastal people relied more on shellfish. Away from the coast, groups hunted deer with bows and arrows. They set snares to trap rabbits and used nets to capture

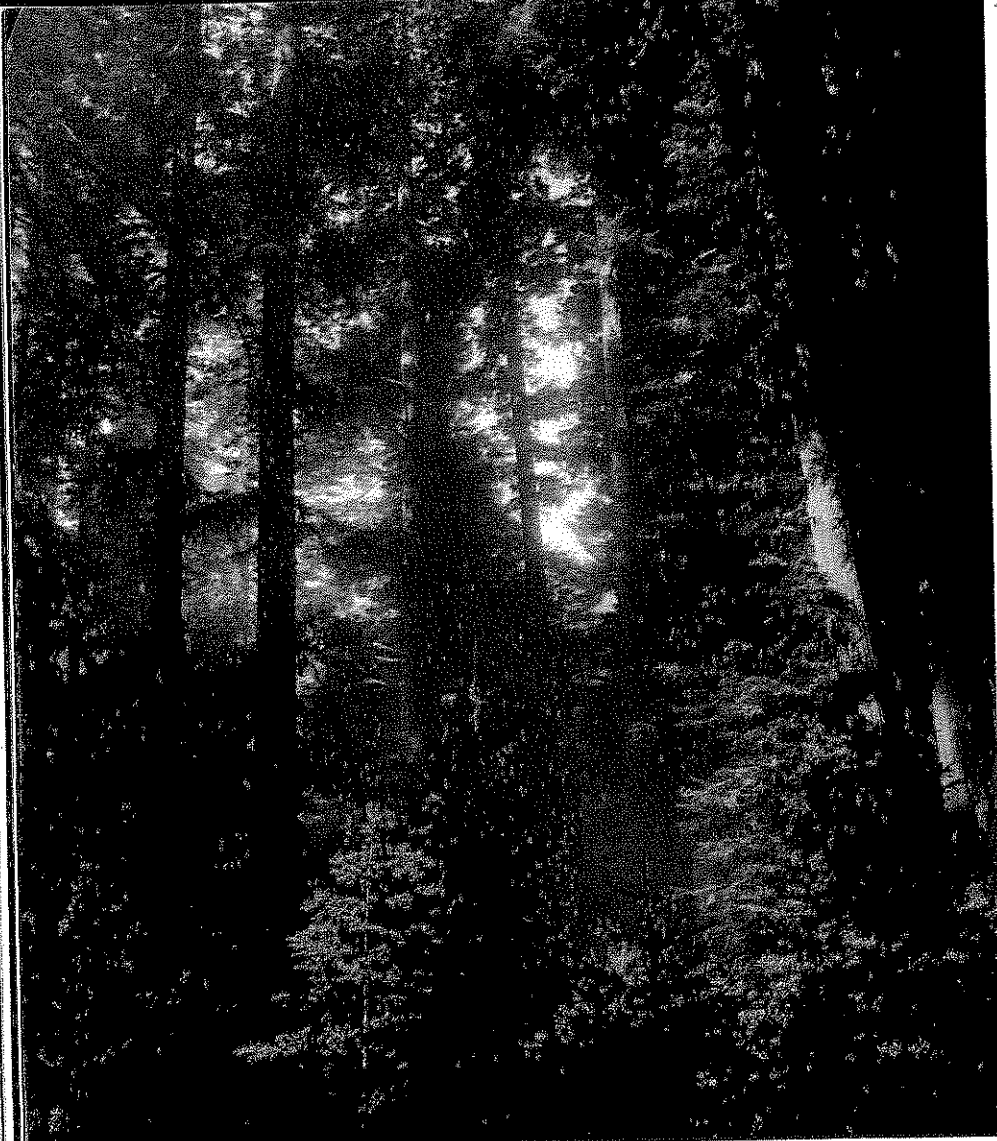
ducks. California people also gathered roots, berries, and pine nuts.

Most people in the region relied on acorns from oak trees as a basic food. In the fall, women harvested the acorns, shelled them, and pounded the nuts into meal. Water was rinsed through the meal to remove its bitterness. Women cooked the meal by mixing it with water in tightly woven baskets and then dropping hot cooking stones into the mixture.

Clothing, Houses, and Baskets As they worked, the women wore simple aprons or skirts made from grasses or other plants, or sometimes from leather strips. In colder months, they wrapped themselves in animal hides.

Because the climate was mild, California people built simple homes. In forested areas, men used tools made from the antlers of deer and elk to strip large slabs of bark from redwood trees. They draped these into a cone shape to form a house. In marshy areas, people wove thick mats of reeds to drape over a cone-shaped framework of poles.

California people wove plant materials into many useful items. They made cooking baskets, storage baskets, sifters, and fish traps. Women used fine weaving and elegant patterns to make beautiful baskets, decorating their work with clamshells and bird feathers.



The California cultural region contains many different environments. Along the coast, huge redwood trees cover coastal mountains. In the inland areas, oaks and berries grow on rolling hills.

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1.7 Native Americans of the Great Basin

To the east of California lies the Great Basin, a low area between the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains. The mountains on either side of this region block the rain, making this land mostly desert.

The plants that grow in this area are those that need little water, such as low grasses, sagebrush, and craggy piñon trees. Only small animals, such as rabbits and lizards, live in this harsh region.

With limited food and water, only a few families could live in a place at one time. For this reason, people of the Great Basin traveled in small groups and spent much of their time looking for food.

Extreme Heat and Cold Wherever people camped, they made temporary shelters of willow poles shaped into a cone and covered with brush or reeds. Almost all year, they carried water in baskets coated with sap from pine trees.

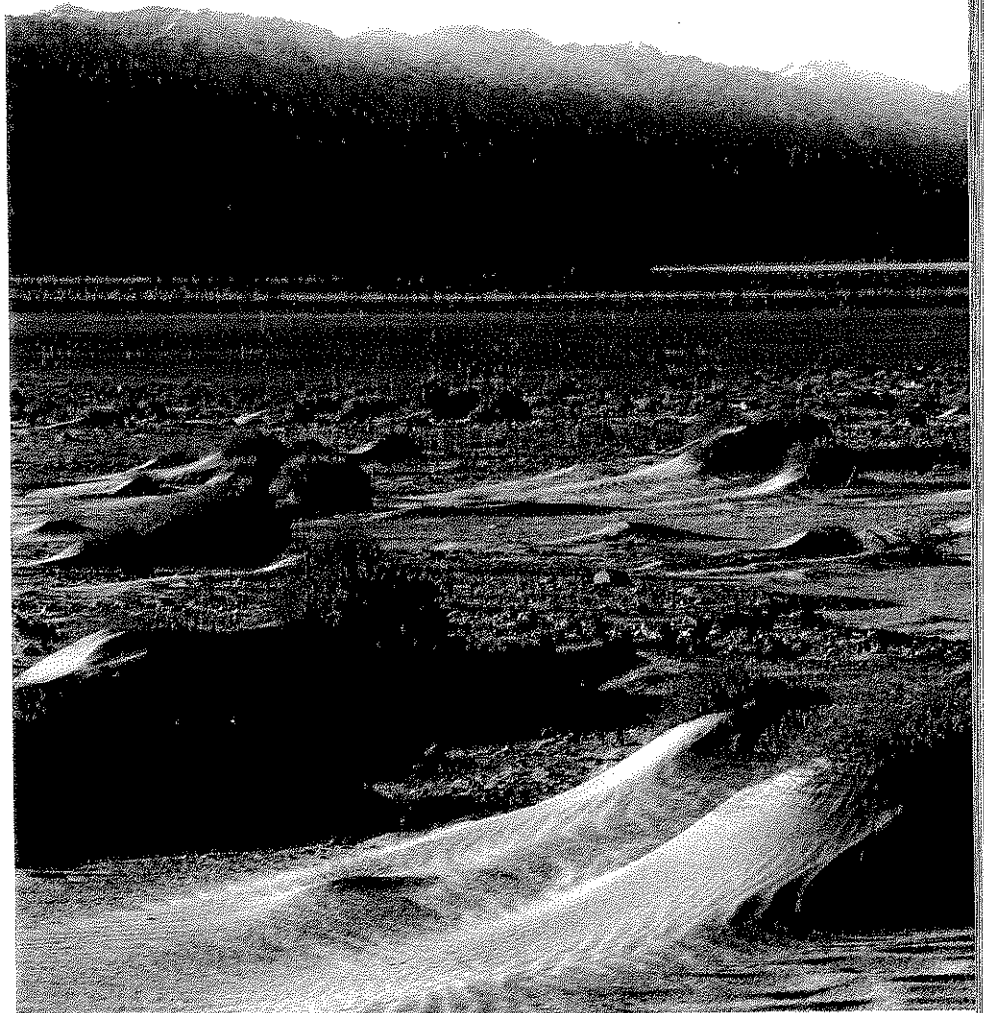
When winter came, temperatures dropped below freezing. To keep warm, people made robes out of rabbit hides. First they twisted long strips of hide so that only the fur showed. Then they wove these strips on a willow loom. Each adult robe required about 100 rabbit skins.

Searching for Food In this arid (dry) environment, people followed food sources from season to season. In spring, they camped by valley lakes and streams swollen with melted snow. Men attracted migrating ducks with floating decoys made from reeds. When birds landed, the men chased them into nets. Meanwhile, women gathered duck eggs and the tender shoots of cattail plants.

When the streams dried up in summer, Great Basin people enjoyed snakes and grasshoppers as treats. But mostly they ate plants, almost 100 kinds. Women used sharp sticks to dig up roots. To knock seeds loose from plants, they wove flat baskets called *seed beaters*. From the mountain slopes they gathered ripe berries.

In autumn, bands harvested pine nuts and hunted fat jackrabbits. As winter arrived, the Great Basin people bundled into their rabbit robes in the warmer hills. In huts and caves, they lived off food they had dried earlier, waiting for the ducks to return in spring.

Life was difficult for Native Americans who lived in the Great Basin. Because of extreme temperatures and sparse rainfall, few plants and animals survive there.



1.8 Native Americans of the Plateau

North of the Great Basin lies the Plateau cultural region. This region is bounded by the Cascade Range to the west, the Rockies to the east, and the Fraser River, in present-day Canada, to the north.

The mountains in this area have dense forests. The flatter, central part is drier and covered with grass and sagebrush. Winters are long and cold, while summers remain gentle.

The Plateau people hunted and gathered with the seasons. The cool, wet climate made it fairly easy to find enough to eat. So, too, did the Plateau's two mighty river systems, the Columbia and the Fraser.

Sturdy Houses and Clothing Plateau people built their villages along major rivers. The rivers provided drinking water, fish, and driftwood to use for houses and firewood.

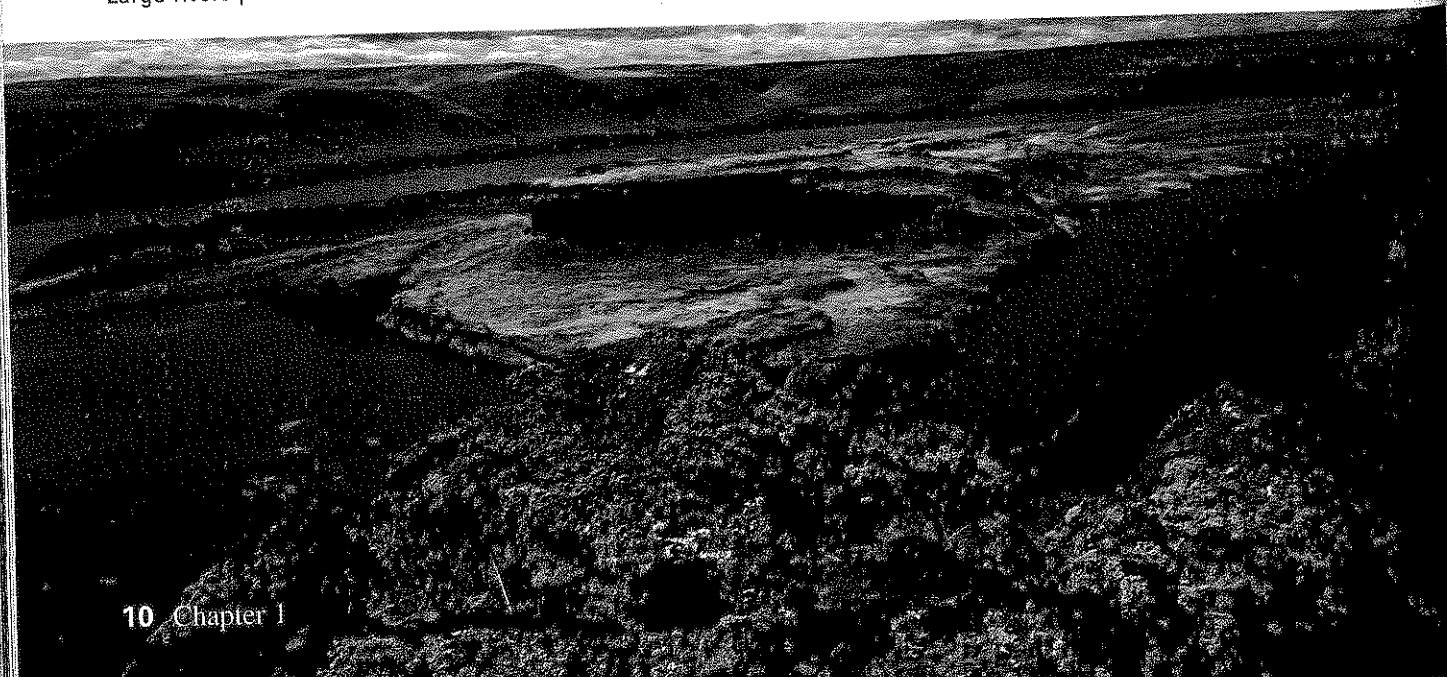
Food was so plentiful that some groups were able to live in their villages year-round. To stay cool in summer and warm in winter, they built their homes partly underground. They dug a pit, lined it with a frame of logs, and covered everything with saplings, reeds, and mud.

Plateau people used their weaving skills to create many kinds of baskets, as well as elaborate hats. As the cold months approached, they spent more time making clothes. In the fall, men hunted antelope and deer. Then women scraped and softened the hides for dresses, leggings, and shirts. They decorated their work with designs of seeds and shells.

Camas and Salmon Although hunting usually provided plenty of meat in the fall, most of the time Plateau people relied on fish and plants for food. In spring, they gathered sprouts of wild onions and carrots from the low grasslands. Their particular favorite was camas, a starchy root related to lilies. Women uprooted it with willow digging sticks for eating raw, for roasting, and for grinding into flour.

The food most important to Plateau people was salmon. When the salmon migrated upstream, men stood on wooden platforms built over the water. From there, they could spear or net fish easily.

The Plateau cultural region features flatlands, rolling hills, and steep gorges. Large rivers provide water.



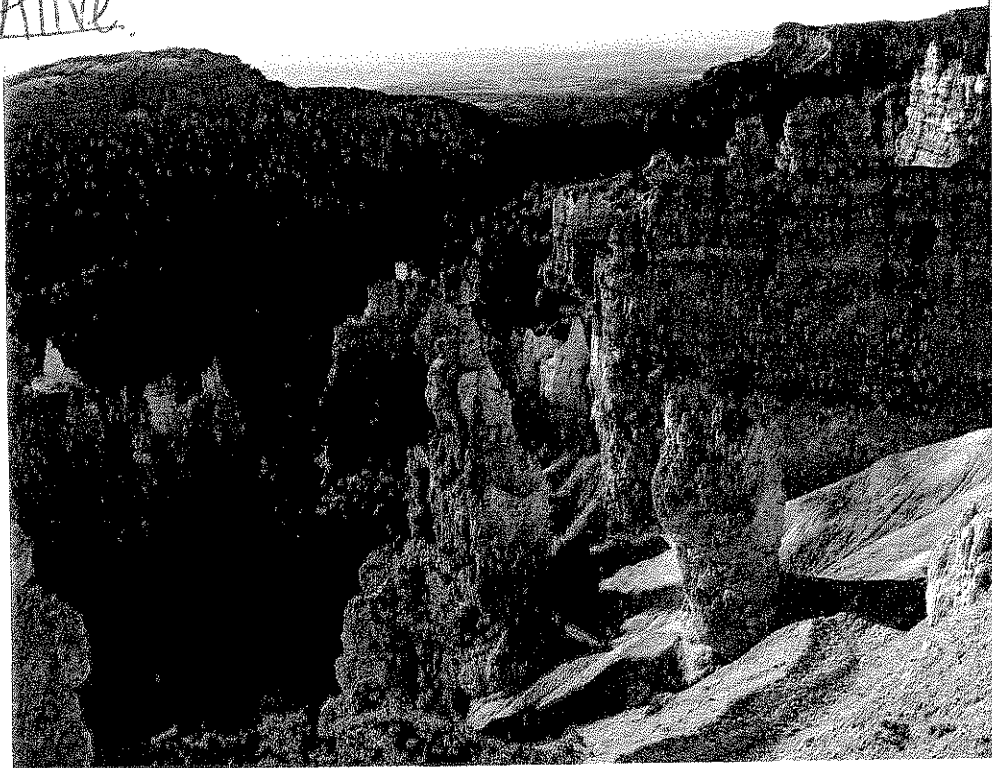
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1.9 Native Americans of the Southwest

The Southwest cultural region includes present-day Arizona, New Mexico, southern Utah and Colorado, and portions of Texas, Oklahoma, and California. This region has many environments—canyons, mountains, deserts, and flat-topped mesas. It even has two major rivers, the Colorado and the Rio Grande. But rain seldom falls anywhere.

The heat and lack of water made living in the Southwest a challenge. Yet some Native Americans learned to love this arid land. “The whole Southwest was a House Made of Dawn,” goes an old Indian song.

“There were many colors on the hills and on the plain, and there was a dark wilderness on the mountains beyond.”



Survival in the Southwest was a challenge. The area contains mountains, flat-topped mesas, canyons, and deserts. Sparse rainfall prevents the growth of many trees and plants.

Mesa People Different groups found different ways of surviving in the Southwest. Some lived as nomadic (wandering) desert hunters. Along the Colorado River, small groups hunted, gathered, and farmed. Others planted fields of corn, beans, and squash on the tops of high, flat areas called *mesas*.

The mesa people lacked trees for building homes. Instead, they made homes from the earth itself. Using bricks of *adobe* (sun-baked clay), they built thick-walled houses that protected them from summer heat and winter cold. Their villages looked like apartment houses that reached up to four stories high and had hundreds of rooms. A single village, called a *pueblo*, might house 1,000 people.

To protect their bodies from the sun, mesa people wore clothes made of cotton that they grew, spun, and wove into cloth. Using plants and minerals, they dyed fabrics with bright colors.

Corn Culture Despite living in a desert, the early mesa people learned to grow corn, beans, and squash. Corn was by far their most important crop.

To make the most of infrequent rain, farmers planted near naturally flooded areas like the mouths of large streambeds or the bases of mesas, where rain runoff flowed. Men dug irrigation ditches from the streams to the fields, and built small dams to hold summer rain.

Girls spent many hours a day grinding corn kernels into cornmeal. The women cooked the cornmeal into bread in clay ovens. In clay pots, they cooked stews of corn, rabbit meat, and chili peppers.

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1.10 Native Americans of the Great Plains

The Great Plains cultural region is a vast area of treeless grasslands. The Great Plains stretch for 2,000 miles from the Rockies to the Mississippi Valley, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. The eastern part of this region has more water and softer soil than the western part. In the drier west, short, dense grasses provided perfect grazing for millions of buffalo.

Buffalo Hunters On the Eastern Plains, various groups took up farming, going on buffalo-hunting trips only a few months each year. On the Western Plains, Native Americans followed buffalo herds much of the year.

In the spring and early summer, small groups lay in ambush where buffalo came to

drink. The hunters gripped hardwood bows reinforced with strips of buffalo tendon. Taking aim, each man let loose a wooden arrow tipped with a sharp stone and arrayed with feathers to help it fly straight.

In the fall, huge buffalo herds gathered, and Plains people traveled in larger bands. The men sometimes made a trap for the buffalo by heaping stones into two short walls to form a V-shaped passage. The walls forced the buffalo closer together as they approached a cliff. Behind the herd, people set a grass fire or made loud noises to panic the buffalo. The animals stampeded between the walls and over the cliff edge. Below, waiting hunters finished them off with spears or bows and arrows.

Using the Buffalo Buffalo provided the main food for Plains people. Women and children cut up the buffalo with bone knives. Extra meat was dried and kept for winter.

Plains people used every part of the buffalo. Buffalo hides were turned into shields, waterproof containers, warm robes, and bedding. For clothing and bags, women softened the hides with bone scrapers and rubbed in buffalo brains and fat.

Buffalo hair and sinew were twined into bowstrings and ropes. Horns and hooves became spoons and bowls, or were boiled down to make glue. Dried buffalo dung provided fuel for fires.

Buffalo provided materials for housing as well. Using tendons as thread, women sewed 8 to 20 buffalo skins together. The skins were then fastened around a tall cone of poles to make a *tipi*, a Plains word for "dwelling."

Plains people became even more successful when Spanish explorers introduced horses to the region. With horses, hunters could bring down more buffalo and move faster and more comfortably to new hunting grounds.

The Great Plains region is mostly treeless grassland with cold winters and hot summers. Buffalo and other animals grazed freely over a vast territory.



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1.11 Native Americans of the Eastern Woodlands

The Eastern Woodlands cultural region reaches from the Mississippi River eastward to the Atlantic Ocean, and from Canada to North Carolina. Here, winter snows and summer rains produce endless forests, lakes, and streams.

Two language groups emerged in this region. In most of the territory, people spoke Algonquian languages. In New York and around the southern Great Lakes lived the Iroquois-speaking groups described in this section.

Plentiful Woods The forests provided most of what Iroquois people needed to live. For food, hunters prowled through the forests to track deer. Men also hunted bears, trapped beavers, caught birds in nets, and speared fish. Women gathered fresh greens, nuts, and berries. They made syrup by boiling down sap from maple trees.

Instead of walking through the thick forests, Iroquois often paddled log and bark canoes along lakes and rivers. Because waterways also provided fish and drinking water, the Iroquois built their villages nearby.

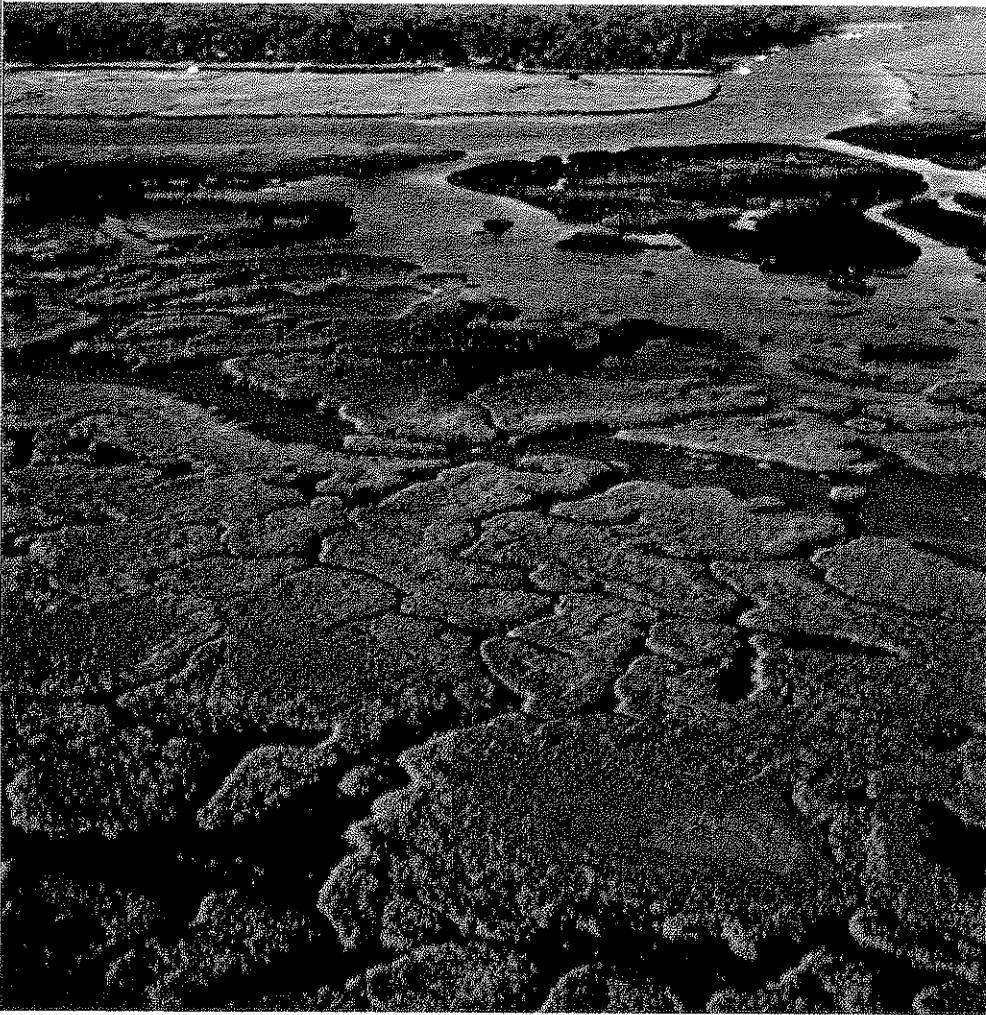
Each village had dozens of sturdy log-frame houses covered with elm bark. Such longhouses were usually about 20 feet wide and over 100 feet long. Several related families lived in sections of the longhouse.

Women Farmers To clear a space for farming, Iroquois men burned away trees and underbrush. Women did the rest. After hoeing the soil, they planted corn, sometimes several varieties. Around the cornstalks, they let beans twine. Squash stayed near the ground, keeping down weeds and holding moisture in the soil.

When the planting was done, women tanned deerskin to make skirts, capes, and moccasins (soft shoes). They ground corn with wooden sticks in hollowed-out tree trunks or between two stones. In the fall, they stored the harvest, often in large bark bins in the longhouses. Iroquois crops included sunflowers, tobacco, and many vegetables that are still planted in American gardens today.

Dense forests are home to deer, beavers, and other wildlife, and provided food, clothing, and shelter for the Native Americans of the Eastern Woodlands.





The Southeast cultural region includes river valleys, mountains, coastal plains, and swamps. The mild climate allowed Native Americans of the Southeast to grow corn, beans, squash, and other crops.

so fast, they could harvest two crops a year. Farmers raised enough food to feed the people building the mounds.

A single Southeastern town might have had 2 to 12 mounds arrayed around a central town plaza. Around these mounds, people clustered their houses. They built their homes from strips of young trees woven into a rectangular frame and plastered with clay. Roofs were pointed and made of leaves.

A Fertile Region Beyond their homes, fields lay in all directions. With the region's long growing season, Southeastern people relied on corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers for most of their food.

Women worked the fields with hoes made of stone, shell, or animal shoulder blades fastened to wooden handles. Men sometimes hunted, using blowguns for squirrels, rabbits, and turkeys, and bows and arrows for large animals like deer. They even brought home alligators and turtles.

To complete their varied diet, women gathered edible plants like sweet potatoes, wild rice, and persimmons. Because they wore simple, short deer skin skirts, they didn't spend much time making clothing. Instead, they used stones, shells, feathers, pearls, bones, and clay to fashion rings, earrings, arm rings, and hairpins.

1.12 Native Americans of the Southeast

The Southeast cultural region stretches from the southern part of the Ohio Valley to the Gulf of Mexico, and from Texas to the Atlantic Ocean. This region's fertile coastal plains, river valleys, mountains, and swamps all have long, warm, humid summers and mild winters. In this green countryside, the people of the Southeast found growing crops fairly easy.

Towns Built Around Mounds

Some Southeastern peoples built towns dominated by large earthen mounds. The first mounds were burial sites. Centuries later, people made mounds several stories high as platforms for temples.

Building these mounds took months, even years, because people had to move the dirt one basketful at a time. Workers building mounds had no time to help grow or find food. But Southeastern groups had developed a type of corn that grew

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