



O'odham Living on the San Pedro River

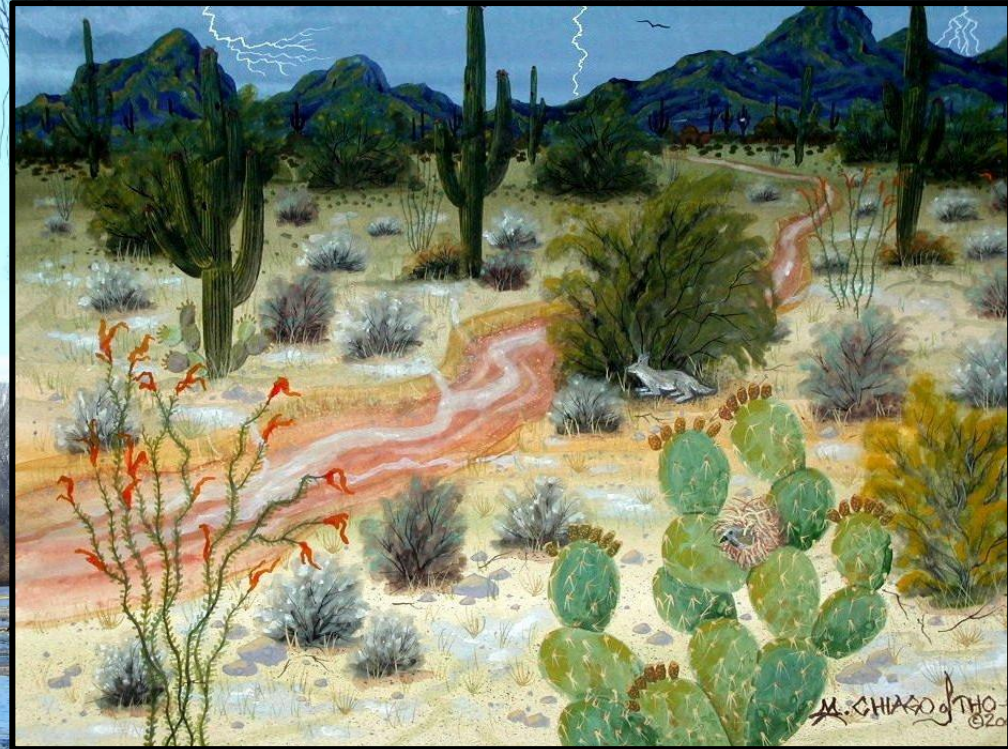
San Pedro River Valley

Arizona's San Pedro Valley is a natural corridor through which generations of native peoples have traveled for more than 12,000 years, and today many tribes consider it to be part of their ancestral homeland. There are many **Clovis sites**, places where distinct stone tools and mammoth bones were found, along the river. The O'odham, Hopi, Zuni, and Apache all have ancestors who competed for resources in the San Pedro River Valley.



Competition for Resources

There are several risks to life when living in the Arizona desert. The intense heat, lack of water, lack of food, and need for shelter rank among the highest. As you might imagine, competition for these **resources** can become extremely fierce.



San Pedro River

The San Pedro River provides vital water and many necessary resources for survival to many people, including the O'odham. The San Pedro runs through the Chihuahuan Desert and the Sonoran Desert. It begins in Mexico and ends at its **confluence** with the Gila River near Winkelman, Arizona.



Water Is Life

The most important resource for survival is water.

Şu:daḡī 'O Wuḡ Doakag means **Water is Life**.

The Akimel (River) O'odham carved out elaborate acequias, or canals, and basins to water crops.

The Tohono (Desert) O'odham would seasonally migrate between two village locations to follow water sources.



Photo courtesy of Amerind Museum

Water Is Life

The O'odham knew the location of potholes, the tinajas, where long-running streams carved out basins in the rock to cradle water in the dry season. They established planting, harvesting, and developed complex water storage and delivery systems.

"It is real desert people who lift their faces upward with the first signs of moisture," writes the poet Ofelia Zepeda. Her people followed the water upward into the mountains with the animals, basin to basin, finding the pools stored there.



Ofelia Zepeda
Poet Laureate of Tucson

O'odham Pit Homes

Another important resource was shelter. The O'odham built their homes by digging a round flat hole in the ground about a foot deep. This hole kept the house cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. Then they would put 4 posts in and wood beams to connect them (made from mesquite tree trunks and branches). Next they would pile other branches and brush to make their round pit house.



O'odham Ramadas

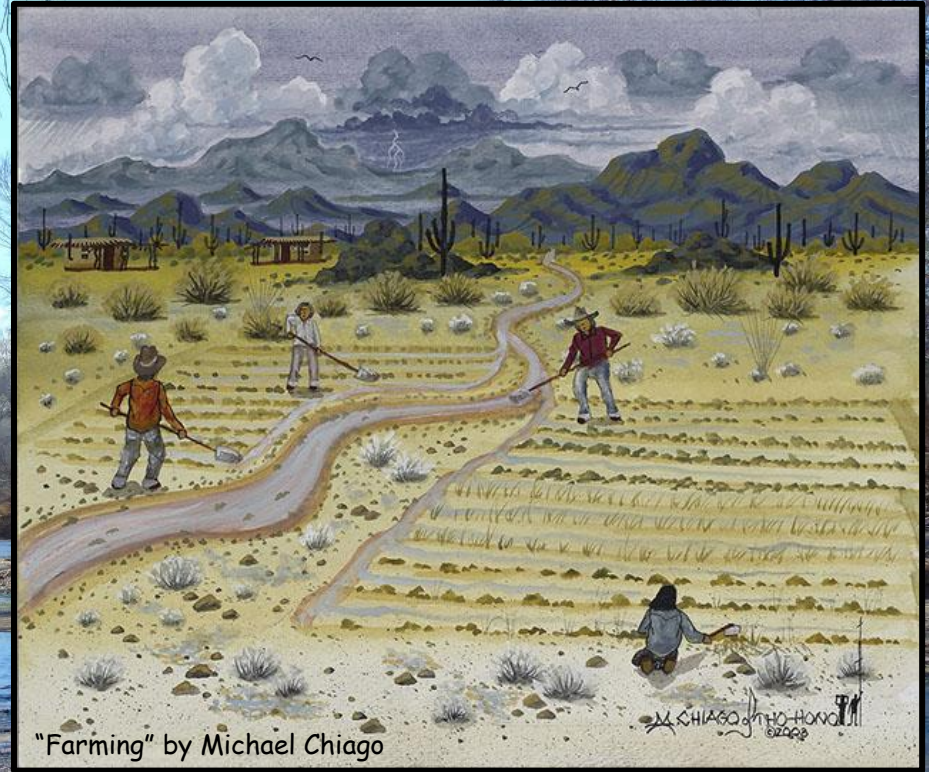
The O'odham would build Ramadas near their pit houses, an important part of their social culture. A Ramada is made by standing up four poles and placing smaller branches on top to make shade. They would use the pit houses to sleep in, everything else would be done under a Ramada.



O'odham Farmers

Food was another essential resource. The O'odham farmed a variety of desert crops, including tepary beans, squash, melons, chilies, cholla buds, prickly pear cactus pads, mesquite beans, acorns, and saguaro fruits.

The crops were watered when the monsoon rains came.



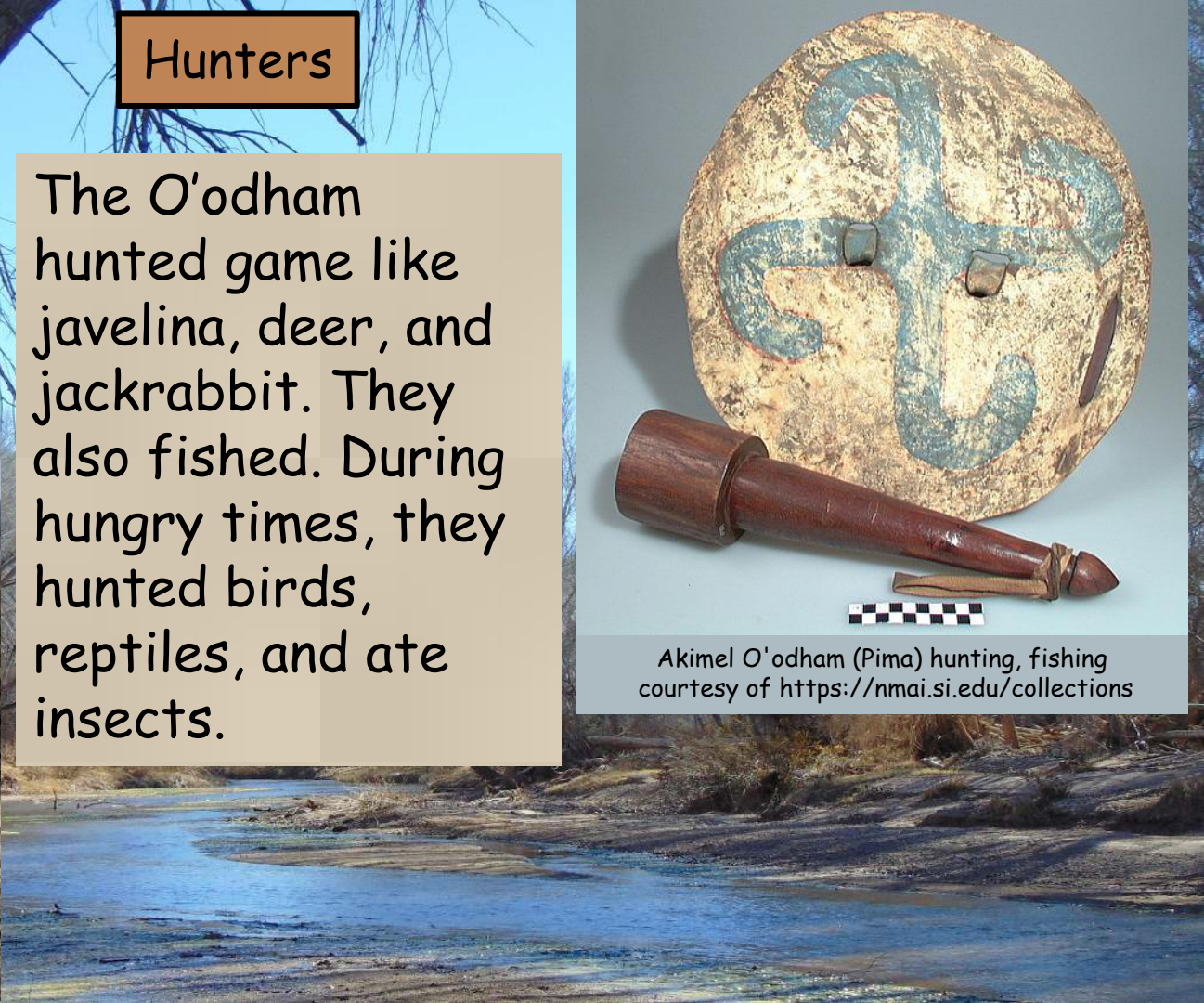
"Farming" by Michael Chiago

Hunters

The O'odham hunted game like javelina, deer, and jackrabbit. They also fished. During hungry times, they hunted birds, reptiles, and ate insects.



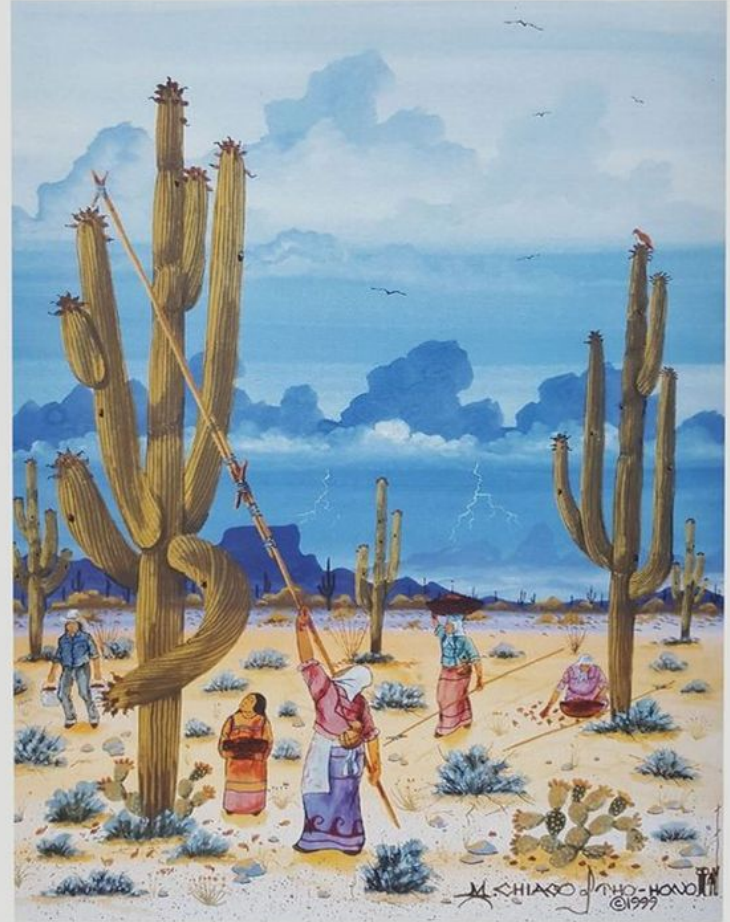
Akimel O'odham (Pima) hunting, fishing
courtesy of <https://nmai.si.edu/collections>



Gatherers

The O'odham gathered many wild plant foods such as saguaro fruit, cholla buds, grass seeds, prickly pear pads, yucca, agave, and mesquite bean pods. Some wild foods like mesquite beans (peshitas) were staples. They were gathered in large quantities throughout the year.

"Saguaro Harvest" by Tohono O'odham artist, Michael Chiago



Utilitarian

Resources

The O'odham used many desert plants for utilitarian (useful) purposes such as food, building materials, clothes, and medicine. The San Pedro River Valley was the O'odham's grocery store.

The O'odham made baskets and gathered food and supplies to ensure they survived all year.

This tradition continues today.



courtesy of the Arizona Historical Society

Lost Resources

The San Pedro River is lined by beaver dams and cottonwood trees. Beavers were so plentiful, when fur trappers rode through in the early 1800s, some called The San Pedro River "The Beaver River." Centuries of trapping led to a local extinction by the late 19th century.



Beavers were once plentiful along the San Pedro River.

San Pedro Today

The San Pedro River is the last undammed desert river in the Southwest.

It is rich in history and home to 350 species of birds and 80 species of mammals.

The San Pedro is one of only two riparian national conservation areas in the country.

Other San Pedro River stories that might interest you:
<https://southernarizonaguide.com/along-the-san-pedro-river/>

Learn More About Arizona's San Pedro River Valley

