

The Kalapuya of the Willamette Valley

The Chelamela band of the Kalapuya Indians lived near the Long Tom River, and the Santiam band lived near the Santiam River. Other bands lived throughout the Willamette Valley south of Willamette Falls. Around 1775, the Kalapuya population in Oregon was estimated to be 13,500.

Kalapuya Uses of the Land

The Kalapuya created open savannas by regularly burning the valley grasslands. One person per band was in charge of these intentional burns. Burns helped in hunting, gathering camas and other roots, increasing the number of acorns (a dietary staple), clearing and fertilizing the land for growing tobacco, and roasting seeds and grasshoppers for eating.



The fires created open prairies interspersed with groves of oak. Ecologists believe that if the prairies had not been regularly burned, maple, Douglas fir, and grand fir forests would eventually have covered the valley floor. Prior to European settlement, the Willamette Valley was shaped by Kalapuya values and preferences. The existence of the prairies made it much easier for European settlers to move into the Willamette Valley.

Mound-builders

The early Kalapuya built large mounds throughout the valley. About 100 of these mounds were built in the Muddy Creek watershed in Linn County, and a ceremonial mound covering one acre about 40 feet high was built near Monroe. Since these mounds were often built in low-lying camas-gathering areas, archaeologists believe they were created to provide dry living spaces in case of unexpected floods. They were composed of sandy earth carried in baskets from riversides. Household goods and some human burials have been found within the mounds. Most were destroyed by early farmers, though some still exist on private land.

What happened to the Kalapuya?

The Kalapuya had no immunity to European diseases, and their population was decimated by a series of epidemics. The first epidemic occurred in 1782-83, and swept westward from the Midwest, killing approximately 2000 people. In the 1790s, venereal disease spread inland from the Columbia after the arrival of the first explorers' ships. In 1830-33, a devastating malaria epidemic killed as many as 6000 Kalapuya and Chinook on the lower Columbia and in the Willamette valley. By 1841 there were only 600 Kalapuya survivors. By 1844, only 300 survived.



As the Kalapuya disappeared, the landscape they created was settled by immigrants. New plant and animal species were introduced and began to shape the land to suit Euro-American values. Sheep, cattle, horses, wheat, corn, and fruit trees were introduced. Fires were suppressed rather than encouraged, and many former savannas became "grublands" as trees and underbrush began to take over. Eventually dams, dikes and canals controlled the regular flooding that had shaped the Valley ecosystem.



The Kalapuya Ecosystem

Plants for food:

Acorns, wild onion, wappato, roots of camas, balsam, foxtail, blue lupine, "seashore verbena" and tiger lily; tarweed, tobacco, wild cherries, hazelnuts, pine nuts, currants, mule's ear, blueberries, elderberries, huckleberries, gooseberries, cranberries, "buffalo berries," raspberries, salal berries, salmonberries, thimbleberries, blackberries, strawberries, thistle, honeysuckle, bracken, "wild tulip" or "brown lily"

Other plants growing in the valley:

Larkspur, cranesbill, yarrow, aster, scarlet gilia, monkeyflower, California poppy, buttercup, ocean spray, snowberry, cheat grass, Oregon grape, tufted hairgrass, sloughgrass, meadow barley, bluegrass, evening primrose, Clintonia (a lily of the valley), various ferns, nettles

Animals used for food:

White-tail and black-tail deer, elk, beaver, bear, river otter, muskrat, squirrels, gophers, rabbit, cougar, bobcat, raccoon, robins, pigeons, grouse, pheasant, quail, geese, ducks, and other waterfowl, salmon, trout, eels, sturgeon, mussels, clams and whale (on coastal trips)

Sources

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Balsamroot photo by John Game; tarweed and yarrow photos by Brother Alfred Brousseau; Camas photos by Jennifer Gilden.

For more information, see "Guide to Using Willamette Valley Native Plants Along Your Stream," published by the Linn Soil & Water Conservation District and South Santiam Watershed Council.