

Atascadero Lake and the Salinan Tribe of Native Americans

The area of the California Central Coast that would eventually be known as Atascadero is included within the tribal boundaries of the Salinan tribe of Native Americans. Salinan villages were once located throughout the entire Salinas Valley, with their northern boundary near to what is now the City of Salinas, southward to the Santa Maria River. On the coast, they ranged from as far south as today's Guadalupe in Santa Barbara County, northward to Dolan Rock. Their eastern boundary was marked by the Diablo and Temblor Ranges and the Carrizo Plains. The name Salinan, which was taken from the nearby Salinas River, is believed to have come into use in the 1890's, but local tribal tradition indicates that their native name is T'epot'aha'l, meaning "The People". The language of the Salinan tribe is Hokan, which is dated back as far as 6,000 to 8,000 years and is one of California's oldest known languages.

The Salinan people once lived a very simple life and their days were usually filled with hunting and gathering food, along with preparing, preserving and enjoying it. The native Salinan people are quite likely to have sometimes been drawn to this natural, low lying and shallow basin where water from rainfall and run-off would have gathered, that would one day eventually become Atascadero Lake. There are many plants and trees surrounding the Lake today that are species of plants still used by members of the Salinan Tribe. For example, acorns from the various oak trees provided a plentiful food source, which were typically ground with a stone pestle and mortar, to be made into a mush or bread. There are actually six different species of native oaks that grow here, providing a plentiful supply of acorns with a variety of tastes and textures that were used in the making of traditional Salinan meals. Additional Salinan food supplies found nearby are pine nuts, buckeye nuts and choke cherries.

Other natural resources to be found at or near Atascadero Lake that are utilized by the Salinan people include willow branches, tule reeds and fern roots, which were the primary materials the Salinan women used for making baskets; they would also use these reeds and grasses to make simple living huts and to fashion skirts and other clothing out of them. However, prior to the Mission era and thanks to the generally mild climate of their territory, the native Salinan people often didn't wear a lot of clothing.

The Salinan Tribe holds a deep respect for the natural world and wildlife, including hawks, condors, owls, vultures and eagles. Eagles are of special importance to their culture, as they were believed to be the messenger to the originator of all things. Atascadero Lake is often home to many of these avian species and local photographers have captured some wonderful images of them here at the Lake, as they nest and fish for their meals.

Depicting typical Salinan village activities, from legendsofamerica.com/salinan-people-of-california

