

Yuha Desert Audio Tour

Introduction

“The road is fairly good, having only some ups and downs over some hills on leaving Santa Rosa, ridges of sandy and hard earth with many black, flat stones that are not very large.”

So wrote Father Pedro Font, a member of Juan Bautista de Anza’s colonizing expedition, which traveled through the Yuha Desert in 1775. As you spend the next couple hours exploring the natural and cultural resources of the Yuha Desert Area of Critical Environmental Concern, abbreviated as ACEC, you will get a chance to test his description of the area.

The Yuha Desert, a section of the Colorado Desert, is one of the hottest and driest deserts in North America- second only to Death Valley. This extreme environment has resulted in a unique ecosystem inhabited by plants and animals perfectly adapted to its climate. The flat tailed horn lizard and the crucifixion thorn are examples of special wildlife and plant life found in the area. The Yuha Desert is also one of the few places in the United States where you can find examples of geoglyphs, large-scale images of animals, figures, and shapes created on the desert surface by Native Americans who have inhabited the area for centuries. It was also these original inhabitants of the Yuha who provided the desert with its name. Yu-ha, meaning “there is water” in Kumeyaay probably first referred to what is now known as the Yuha well area and overtime was adapted by Euro-Americans to refer to the whole region.

On this audio tour, you will be directed to three cultural sites within the Yuha Desert: the Yuha Geoglyph, the Juan Bautista de Anza Overlook, and the Yuha Well. The terrain of the roads is rough so a vehicle with 4-wheel drive will be needed to reach the sites. Since the Yuha is an ACEC, please stay on the designated roads. All three sites are easily reached by open

access roads, which allow OHVs as well as street legal vehicles. A map of the routes is available on the BLM website. Enjoy your visit to the Yuha Desert!

Overlook

The stone monument with the bronze plaque standing before you directly overlooks the Yuha badlands and marks a good spot to get a panoramic view of the mountains that define the Yuha Desert area. This monument, dedicated in 1990, commemorates the Spanish explorer Juan Bautista de Anza's two expeditions through the Colorado Desert. His first expedition in 1774 scouted a reliable land route connecting northern Mexico with the missions along the coast of California. This provided the Spanish with a quicker and safer way to move supplies between their different territories. Then in 1775-6 Anza led over 200 settlers north from Sonora, Mexico to San Francisco where they built a mission and a fort. Imagine if you had to find a route across the Yuha Desert without the help of either a map or a car- what would you feel looking out across this landscape?

As Anza and the settlers left Santa Olalla, their camp on the bank of the Colorado River, and started their trek across the Yuha Desert, they split into three groups so that they would not exhaust its scanty water and vegetable resources. The expedition traveled north and west through bitter cold using Signal Mountain, which is located to the east or to your right, as a landmark to guide them to the Yuha Well, or as Anza named it, Santa Rosa de las Lajas- Santa Rosa of the flat rocks. The Yuha Well, which is located in the north end of the wash below you, is the first good watering hole beyond the Colorado River. The tallest hills that you can see in the wash are the fossilized shell beds where you can find remnants of ancient sea creatures on the

ground. Father Pedro Font, a priest traveling with Anza's colonizing expedition, observed when passing through this area:

“On account of . . . the abundance of shells of mussels and sea snails which I saw today in piles in some places, and which are so old and ancient that they easily crumble on pressing them with the fingers, I have come to surmise that in olden time the sea spread over all this land.”

Upon arriving at the Yuha Well, approximately 300 miles from their start in Tubac, Mexico, the settlers discovered the water was not flowing, so they spent that evening and the next morning deepening the wells. Then, the expedition continued north and west beyond the Superstition Mountains, which are the cloudy, fuzzy mountains located to the north or straight ahead of you, and on to San Sebastian Marsh where they rested and held a fandango, a celebration with singing and dancing.

The San Sebastian marsh is named after Sebastian Tarabal, an Indian who guided Anza on both his expeditions. When Anza's expedition reached the Yuha Well, Sebastian Tarabal recognized a mountain pass to the north as the place where he crossed the mountains when he fled from the coast. The marsh, situated at the foot of the pass, is named after him because his knowledge of the area greatly helped the success of the expeditions. After resting at the San Sebastian Marsh, the expedition crossed a portion of the mountains located on your left, known as the Peninsular Range or Jacumba Mountains, and continued to the Spanish missions along the coast.

Often overlooked in the story of Anza's expeditions is the vital role Native Americans played in their success. As Charlene Ryan, the director of cultural programming for the Soboba Band of Luiseno Indians pointed out in a recent article:

“Anza is credited with blazing this route, but in reality the Natives had been using these trails for years, centuries probably. They knew when to go, where you could get water, vegetation. He must have had all that information before he put one foot on that trail.”

In his diaries Anza acknowledges the importance of the Native Americans and of having a good relationship with them:

“March 7, 1774

I have not thought it well to obtain anything by means of violence or force from people who see us for the first time.”

His policy of trade rather than violence meant that during the colonizing expedition the Native peoples were willing to help him. On one occasion Anza recounts:

“[The Yuma] invited all members of the expedition to eat, giving them in abundance beans, calabashes, maize, wheat, and other grains which are used by them, and so many watermelons that we estimated that there must have been more than three thousand.”

The Yuma Indians, known today as the Quechan Indian Tribe, also helped the expedition cross the Colorado River and provided it with safe-passage through the territory of neighboring tribes. More help was provided by the Kumeyaay-most likely of the Kamia band-the same group that may have created the Yuha Geoglyph. Finally, throughout his journey, Anza relied on numerous-and often unnamed- Indian guides for information on the best trails, watering holes, and resting places.

After crossing the Yuha Desert, the hardest part of Anza’s and the settlers’ hard journey was over and they were one step closer to their new home in San Francisco.

Overlook to Geoglyph

Driving along, you may notice different types of landscapes. Some parts of the desert look bare while other parts are layered with dark rocks. The sprawling formation of closely packed rocks is known as desert pavement. Desert pavement took thousands of years to create. Over many centuries, wind and water removed loose soil and pebbles leaving larger rocks behind. Exposure to the elements caused the top surface of these rocks to turn a dark brown- this is known as desert varnish. Some of these rocks may have turned over displaying a red discoloration on their underside from their many years of contact with the surface.

Geoglyph

Once you see the iron pipe fence you know you have reached the Yuha Geoglyph, which is the next stop in the audio tour. Behind the fence stands a stone monument which explains the history of the Yuha Geoglyph. As you drive closer, you can edge off the road on to the shoulder to park your vehicle.

As you look around, the desert may appear barren, but if you look closer, evidence of a thriving Indigenous culture exists. “if you take the time you can see it” This is the voice of Preston Arrow-weed, Quechan elder, tribal educator, and tribal singer who has helped preserve the culture of both the Kumeyaay and Quechan people. Throughout this portion of the audio tour you will hear his thoughts.

One day in 1962 a Border Patrol pilot was flying over the Yuha Desert when he saw a collection of enigmatic lines and shapes below covering more than 300 square feet on the Yuha mesa. The ancient remains the pilot saw stimulated many questions: who made them and how, why were they made, and what could they have meant. The site the Border Patrol agent saw

came to be known as the Yuha Geoglyph. It's made up of four box like shapes with multiple lines weaving in and out between them, one of which leads into a spiral. Geoglyphs, or intaglios (as they are sometimes referred to), are images or figures that people create on the Earth's surface. These images are made purposefully when people remove the desert pavement, exposing the lighter soil beneath. They could also be created as a result of repetitive dancing or walking over the same area for many years. You may have heard of the Nazca Lines in Peru. They are a famous example of geoglyphs in another part of the world, similar to what we have here. The Nazca Lines include intaglios of a spider, a monkey, and a whale, among others; some of them measured at 900 feet across! The Yuha geoglyph is different in that its elements are abstract and not immediately recognizable. You can see the entire Yuha geoglyph on the black and white aerial photographs at the stone monument.

For a better view of what remains of the geoglyph, walk along the southern side of the fence (or the side off to your right if you are facing the stone monument), but please be careful of the dramatic drop ahead. The visibility of the site will depend on the time of day you are visiting; early morning and late afternoon are best. As you near the end of the fence line you should be able to see a rectangular image within the fenced area. From the upper left corner of the rectangle a line shoots out to an enclosed circle. The importance of this site to local tribes is expressed by Mr. Arrow-weed, "those things are a reminder of a past something that happened long time ago I think its evidence that people once lived here a long long time ago and some of the things they have done is to so like its like a record for people in the future can see that"

When you look at this site from the ground it is hard to see the images that the pilot saw from his plane or the aerial images on the monument. Instead, what you clearly see are the circular vehicle tracks created by vandalism. The first act of destruction to this site occurred

sometime before 1962. After this incident, an archaeological team from San Diego State University-Calexico worked to restore the site from 1965 to 1973. Two years later, despite the added protection of a fence, the site was again vandalized. To the local Native Americans these sites represent a piece of their history and when they are vandalized it is an act of disrespect. “when I see those things happen when they have no regard for these things that are important then I think they don’t have no regard they don’t care and because these are reminder of the past very old things and the reason why I believe that happens is because Its not a part of them its Native American so its not important to them” it doesn’t anger me as much as it saddens me to see that to see what they’re doing”

When you look at the geoglyph what do you see? What does it mean to you? It is difficult for archaeologists to interpret the Yuha Geoglyph because of its complex imagery. Early archaeologists interpreted the site as a symbol of fertility. Recent interpretations relate it to ritual and ceremonial practices performed by the Kumeyaay. Ceremonies could have been held here for many reasons such as healing, purification, rites of passage, celebration of tribal origin and human and Earth creation. Within popular culture it has been suggested that aliens played a role in the creation of intaglios, but this theory lacks any evidence. “I’ve heard other people say its flying saucer and all that believe me I believe in flying saucers too but for my own thinking it’s the those deities that are up in the air they fly around go up there these were the ones that they wanted to show like there the red tail hawk that flies up there a lot and I know of course the eagle too”

Cultural resources and archaeological sites such as the Yuha Geoglyph hold value not only because of what they can teach us, but also for their ongoing importance to and use by Native Americans. After all, it was the Indigenous tribes that guided incoming settlers, including

Anza on his expeditions, to food, water, and other resources. The future survival of this and other cultural sites depends on respecting them today.

Geoglyph to Well

As you continue on your way towards the Yuha Well, you'll notice the terrain become significantly more difficult. Roads leading to the well will take you into the badlands of the Yuha Desert. The maze of washes within the badlands are ever changing; wind and even small amounts of rain can drastically alter the look of the surroundings. Evidence of the ancient sea bed that once covered this area appears in the form of sandstone slabs jutting out from the desert walls, or from beneath the sand. The pieces of sandstone can be hard to detect in the wash area, so drive with caution.

The Yuha Well

Can you imagine what a journey through the desert would have been like long before all your modern amenities and comforts were invented? As you looked across the expansive vista at the overlook, could you picture hundreds of settlers pulling all their belongings with pack animals through this wide dry desert? Now, just imagine how indigenous populations living generations ago survived in an environment like this. Some people native to the Southern California and Northern Baja California regions are collectively known as the Kumeyaay. Long before Juan Bautista de Anza forged his passage through to the California coast, the Kumeyaay people had been living and adapting to the extreme environment of the Yuha desert.

When traveling through the desert, finding water can be vital to staying alive. Although the Yuha desert was not likely used for long-term habitation, different Kumeyaay family groups often crossed it on their way to trade goods, or perhaps to travel to areas of important ceremonial use; maybe even to sites such as the Yuha Geoglyph. The water found at the site you are visiting now, known today as the Yuha Well, would have been a necessity for anyone crossing the desert.

As you walk around the site, you may be thinking “where’s the water?” At different times, water could be reached by digging below the mesquite hummocks. Today, you’ll see some wells: one made of concrete and others made of sheet metal or wood. These modern wells, dating from the early to mid 1900’s, are evidence that this site has been in constant use. However, none of them are in working order today. On further exploration you may start to notice the vegetation slowly reclaiming the site. Mesquite bushes, found in thick hummocks throughout the site, were at one point an extremely important food plant for people native to the Colorado Desert. If you’re visiting the Yuha desert during the spring, mesquite can be recognized by the long yellow flowers resembling large caterpillars. In the fall those flowers mature into flat tan fruits that look like bean pods. These fruits, including the seeds, were eaten by Native Americans. Another plant that may be visible around the site is arrowweed. As its name indicates, arrowweed was commonly used to make arrow shafts. Its other uses have included roofing material and the construction of granary baskets. When the plants are young, arrowweed roots can also be roasted and eaten. These slender, willow-like shrubs will produce lavender and light pink flowers from late spring to early summer. Because both the mesquite and arrowweed plants are known to grow in areas where water can be found close to the surface, the Yuha Well, with its valuable water supply, would have been easily recognized by the Kumeyaay people.

Today the site is commemorated by a monument located at the Sunbeam rest area along eastbound Interstate 8, and also by a historic wooden sign. This sign, visible as you walk towards the top of the hill, tells the importance of the Yuha Well as a stop along the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail. Because of the journals kept by Anza and two priests who accompanied him, we have a clear picture of the trail that was forged, the stops that were made, and also of the people that helped them complete their journey.

Anza's first expedition to find a land route to Alta California was a difficult one. After leaving the Colorado River to the east, Anza and his group had a hard time finding fresh water. Before he reached the Yuha Desert, Anza sent a group of men to look for water in the direction they hoped to travel. These men were fortunate enough to come across a small group of Kumeyaay who showed them an area with abundant water. On March 7th 1774, Anza wrote:

“.....we reached a place with some pasturage where our advance party was halted. They told me that a league and a half from here there was an abundance of water of good quality which had been shown them by six natives whom they met in this very place.”

The next day, Anza and this first expedition found the water they desperately needed. In his next journal entry, Anza wrote:

“At seven o'clock we set forth over good terrain toward the northeast, in which direction we traveled about a league and a quarter, in order to reach some wells of the best and most abundant water which could be desired, and to which I gave the name of Santa Rosa de las Lajas.”

This location, now known as the Yuha Well, would come to be a vital stop for Anza's next expedition of colonist traveling to San Francisco.

From his first expedition through the Yuha desert, Anza knew that the small walk-in wells dug by the natives would not supply enough water to support the whole party of colonizers. In order to supply water for the colonists, and their livestock, Anza ordered a group of his soldiers to dig 6 more wells at the site. By the time the first of Anza's groups made it to the wells, the water was still not flowing. To increase the flow of water, Anza joined his soldiers in deepening the wells. Though burdened by an increasingly cold winter storm, Anza and his men worked at watering the animals from late at night into the following day.

On December 11, 1775 Father Pedro Font wrote:

“These wells have good but scanty water, and to water the animals we worked at them from the time we arrived until the next day at noon. Six wells were opened and the horses were watered with coritas, as is done in such places. At first we were worried because the water did not flow, but we labored hard to deepen the wells somewhat, and the Most Holy Virgin of Guadalupe, our patroness, was pleased that the water should run, but if it had not been thus, there was great risk that the expedition would perish for lack of water.....”

The water available at the Yuha Well enabled Anza and his colonizers to reach San Sebastian Marsh and continue their journey to San Francisco. If the Kumeyaay had not guided Anza to the well, can we assume his expeditions would not have been successful? While we may not be able to answer this question, it's obvious that Native Americans played a vital role in the settlement of California.

Wrap up

Well, that was our final stop on the Yuha desert audio tour. Whether your visit includes camping, OHV recreation, or just a quick site-seeing tour, remember that the Yuha desert is an ACEC so

please remain on designated roads, and leave no trace of your visit behind. The natural and cultural resources of the Yuha desert are fragile as well as irreplaceable, so we ask that you refrain from disturbing the plant and animal life. We hope you enjoyed the audio tour and now have a better understanding of the cultural history of the Yuha desert. For more information about the Yuha desert, and about other areas to explore such as the San Sebastian Marsh, the Tumco Historic Mining District, and Fossil Canyon, please be sure to stop by the Bureau of Land Management El Centro Field Office. Hope to see you out there!