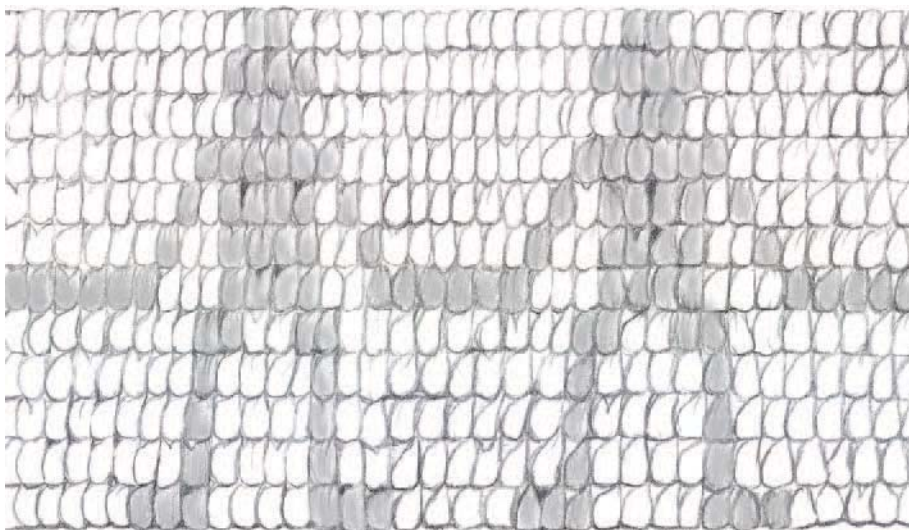
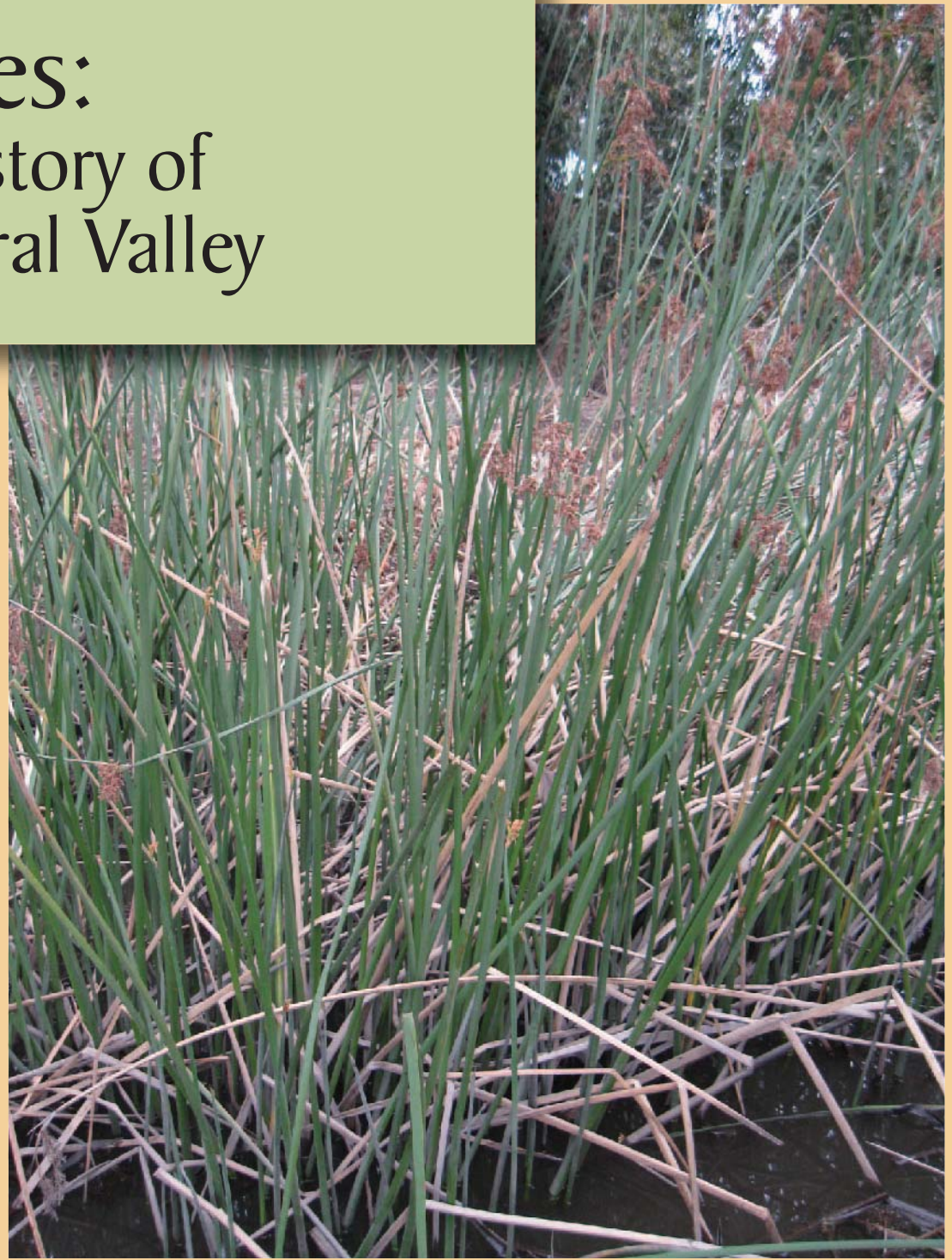


# People of the Tules: Archaeology and Prehistory of California's Great Central Valley

In 2006 Caltrans contracted with archaeologists to collect information from a prehistoric village site called CA-SJO-3 that lay in the path of a new freeway overcrossing. Excavations at the site recovered a wide variety of artifacts and food remains, and revealed evidence of great environmental and cultural changes through time in California's San Joaquin Valley.



*Yokuts Basket Design*





*Archaeologists Working at Site CA-SJO-3*

## A Great Marshland: The Environment Then and Now

Climate change is not a new phenomenon. The place we call California has seen periods of cooling and warming, wet weather and dry, which have shaped the land and the lives of the people who came here.

Some of the oldest artifacts in the state have been found on the shores of Tulare Lake in the southern San Joaquin Valley. These artifacts—called fluted spear points—have been dated to the end of the last ice age 13,500-11,500 years ago, shortly after glaciers had receded from much of North America. Little is known about the first inhabitants of California's Great Central Valley, those who used these early tools. We believe they were nomadic peoples, following the animals they hunted and the ripening plants they gathered.



*Fluted Spear Point  
From Tulare Lake*

*The name Tulare is from the Spanish word for tule—a marsh plant that once grew in broad bands along the lake shores and rivers of the Central Valley. Tules were a very important renewable resource for early inhabitants of the Valley.*



---

**From 8,000 – 4,500 years ago**, warmer and dryer weather continued to melt the remaining glaciers and ice sheets covering parts of North America, Europe, and Asia, and the water from the melting ice caused sea levels worldwide to rise dramatically. The rising Pacific Ocean flooded the low land that is now under San Francisco and San Pablo bays and created the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The marshy delta area was rich in food resources such as fish, ducks, turtles, and mammals—including large herds of tule elk. The abundance of food in the area allowed people to settle into villages and stay in one place for longer periods of time. Other parts of what is now California became very dry at this time, and life was more difficult for people living there.

**From 4,000 - 1,000 years ago**, the climate became cooler and very similar to our weather today. Increased rain and snow melt filled once-dry lake beds, and more water flowed into the Valley and Delta. The Native population of the state grew dramatically and flourished for three thousand years.

**Most of the archaeological deposits found at site CA-SJO-3 date to the end of this period, about 1,600 to 1,300 years ago.**

**About 1,000 years ago** a dramatic change affected some parts of California and the West. There is increased archaeological evidence of warfare, and many settlements were abandoned. Some archaeologists believe this was brought on by prolonged drought, perhaps by increased human population competing for limited food resources. This is a problem we see even today in many parts of the world. In California's Great Central Valley big villages remained through this period and new groups began moving into the area. The large Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers provided plenty of food and water, and the area remained vibrant.



**450 years ago** indigenous populations in the Valley were continuing to grow and tribal territories were shifting. The Native population of what is now California probably reached its highest level about this time—just prior to the arrival of the Spanish soldiers and missionaries, who would bring devastating changes.

**Today** we see a Great Central Valley that has been drastically changed by human hands. Many of the rivers that once flowed freely from the Sierra are now dammed and their flows controlled. Rivers and sloughs that once meandered through the Valley and overflowed their banks during winter storms are now contained by levees, man-made channels, and ditches. Marsh lands have been drained to build houses, and desert-dry lands are irrigated for crops. Many of the animals that once roamed the Valley are gone. The grizzly bear has been hunted out in the state, and the large herds of tule elk and pronghorn are now limited to a few small, isolated herds. While environmental change is not new, modern pollution is dramatically affecting the speed at which the climate is warming. We do not know what the long-term affects of this accelerated change will be.



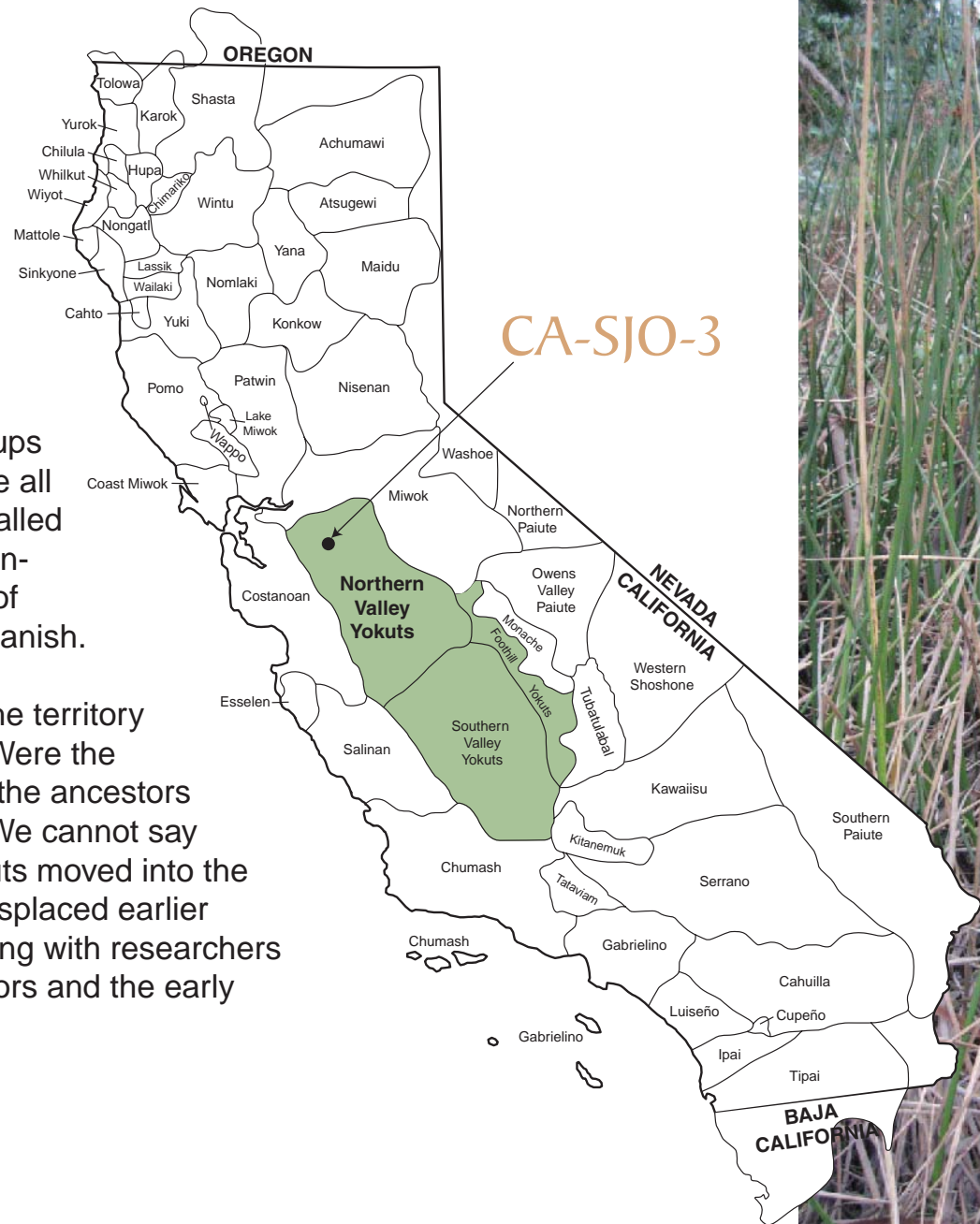
Today the Valley is a Patchwork of Cities and Agricultural Fields.



## The Village of CA-SJO-3

When early European explorers first came to California they found many Native cultures, made up of perhaps 300,000 people speaking 90 different languages. When Spanish soldiers and missionaries first rode into the San Joaquin Valley in the 1770s, about 50 different tribal groups (or tribelets) called the area home. These people all spoke similar languages and were collectively called Yokuts by early linguists (scientists who study language). The Yokuts may have had a population of about 41,000 people before the arrival of the Spanish.

The village now called CA-SJO-3 is located in the territory of the Coybos, a Northern Valley Yokuts group. Were the people who lived at the village 1,600 years ago the ancestors of the Yokuts, or members of an earlier group? We cannot say for sure, but some linguists believe that the Yokuts moved into the area from the south about 450 years ago and displaced earlier peoples. Today, Yokuts tribal members are working with researchers to help shed light on the lifeways of their ancestors and the early inhabitants of CA-SJO-3.



## What was life like for the people who lived at CA-SJO-3?

The village was situated on a small rise above the San Joaquin River and surrounding marshlands and probably was inhabited by 30 or 40 people from several intermarried families. It was likely occupied most of the year, but the villagers may have left for a time during sweltering summer days or when winter flood waters threatened. The houses had packed-earth floors and were made of wooden pole frames covered with mats woven of tule. Tule can grow to be 12 feet in height and an inch or more in diameter. The people of the Valley used these hollow reeds to make many of the things they needed, weaving tules into mats to sit on, binding them into bundles and lashing them together to make rafts and boats. They wove tules into baskets and made them into skirts; they also ate the seeds and roots.



*Photos of Tule Gathered into Bundles and Formed into a Traditional Boat. Courtesy Dino Labiste.*



*Photo of a Tachi Yokuts Woman with a Bundle of Tule. Courtesy Kings County Library.*

*Archaeologists found the tiny shells of three types of snails that live on tule—pond snails, rams horn snails, and pebble snails. These were brought to CA-SJO-3 on the plants the residents collected to make their mats, houses, boats, and baskets.*



