

Native Americans, Urban Waters, and Civic Engagement: The L.A. River

Robert Bracamontes and Robert García

The Army Corps of Engineers drowned the Los Angeles River in concrete in the 1930s to prevent floods. The people of Los Angeles including Native Americans now have the opportunity to work with the Corps, the National Park Service, Department of Interior, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and state, regional, and local government to restore the lost beauty of the River with equal justice for all.

The Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum exhibit “Reclaiming the Edge: Urban Waterways and Civic Engagement” emphasized that greening urban rivers is not just about conservation values — as important as those are — it’s about the people who live along the rivers, and the range of values at stake, and the future of our children and our world. The exhibit covered the L.A. River and five others around the world.¹ The *New York Times* highlights revitalization of the L.A. River as a best practice example for “more sustainable, livable and socially just cities.” Nicolai Ouroussoff, *Reinventing America’s Cities: The Time Is Now*, N.Y. Times (March 29, 2009).

Robert Bracamontes ‘Bob Black Crow’ writes about river revitalization and the L.A. River:

How should I turn back the clock for you to see through my Ancestors’ eyes? We sat on the banks of rivers waiting for the fish to bite. The basic necessities of life existed an arm’s length away. The water meant life. It still does today. The river, its water, is the life line of our people. For the present settlers it is a tributary for pollution, commerce and invasion. For us it is everything.

Native Americans inhabited most of what is now California for more than 10,000 years before European contact. There are nearly 170,000 Native American residents throughout the nine counties of Southern California, with more than 30 federally recognized Native American tribes, according to 2000 census data. This is almost certainly an undercount, because many people who have indigenous ancestors are of mixed racial or ethnic backgrounds and may not be categorized as Native American in official counts. Many Native Americans also belong to tribes or groups that have not yet been recognized by the federal government, including the Acjachemen or Juaneño people.

Some members of Native American tribes live on reservations in Southern California, while others live among the general population. The map shows Indian reservations in Southern California and access to green space. Native Americans do not enjoy equal access to green space, parks, and recreation.

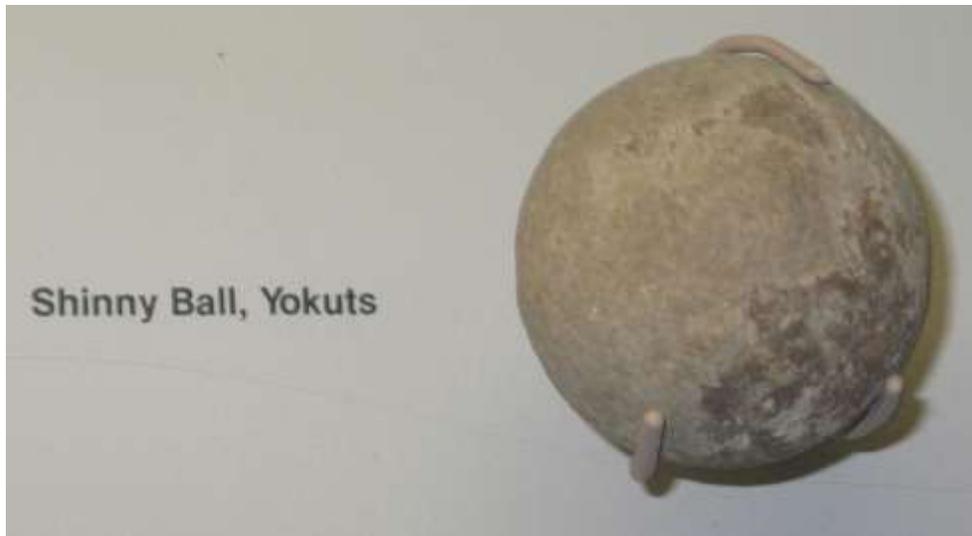
¹ Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum, *Reclaiming the Edge: Urban Waterways and Civic Engagement* (Oct. 15, 2012 – Nov. 3, 2013), http://anacostia.si.edu/exhibits/current_exhibitions.htm.



Source: [The City Project, Healthy Parks, Schools and Communities: Green Access and Equity for Southern California](#)

The Tongva or Gabrieleño Native Americans who lived on and near the Cornfield for approximately three millennia were for the most part exterminated by succeeding onslaughts of Spaniards, Catholic missionaries, Mexicans, and Yankees beginning in the late 1700s. About 200 Tongvas lived in the village of Yaangna, the largest of some 100 villages that were home to about 5,000 Native Americans in the Los Angeles region, when the Spaniards arrived in 1769. Eventually, the Tongvas were relocated to the east side of the River. In the mid-1800s, Yaangna was destroyed. Today the village of Yaangna is commemorated only by a plaque at the Union Station train station.

According to Chief Anthony Morales and tribe member Mark Acuna, Gabrieleño families played “shinny,” a game similar to soccer, and enjoyed other field sports along the Los Angeles River.



Shiny ball at the Southwest Museum of the American Indian in Los Angeles.

“California’s native games and toys are a reflection of the natural history of the state-its mountains, rivers, deserts, wetlands, woodlands, and seashore-and California’s first people.” Native Californians had a “passion for football-type games.” They “drove, tossed, or batted balls of mountain mahogany, braided buckskin, or polished stone, stuffed deerhide or seasoned laurel knots.” In most shinny- and soccer-like games, teams tried to score by getting the ball past the other team and through goal posts, or through a hole.” Soccer-like games involving balls and goal posts were river games-games played along river beds throughout California, according to Jeannine Gander in the book *Grass Games & Moon Races: California Indian Games and Toys* (1995).

Chief Morales supports active recreation for children along the River. As part of the epic struggle to create urban parks along the L.A. River, Chief Morales urged government officials to “work together to ensure that the children the Cornfields and [nearby] Taylor Yard are not displaced the way the Tongva people once were.” Community advocates succeeded in stopping warehouses and commercial projects there. The Cornfields are now Los Angeles State Historic Park. Taylor Yard is now Río de Los Angeles State Park.

The Native American Heritage Commission (NAHC) is the “trustee agency” for the protection and preservation of California’s Native American cultural resources under state law. The NAHC supports “cultural preserves” to provide a higher level of protection for Native American cultural items and burial grounds. Without adequate maintenance and security, Native American cultural resources may be vandalized or destroyed, erasing an important historic link with indigenous California and the natural environment.

The Corps has consulted with the California Native America Heritage Commission, received records of Native American resources along the Los Angeles River, contacted tribal representatives, and plans to continue efforts to inform and consult with tribal representatives regarding any cultural concerns that they might have.

In many counties of Southern California, the overweight and obesity rates for Native Americans are among the highest for any racial or ethnic group. Across the region, 44% of Native American fifth, seventh, and ninth graders did not meet minimum physical fitness standards in the 2007-2008 school year, compared to 41% of students in California.

Native Americans are also economically disadvantaged. The median household income for Native Americans in Southern California is \$36,462, compared to \$42,896 for all people in the California. Twenty one percent of Southern California's Native Americans live in poverty, a level that is 50% higher than the total of 14% of all people living in poverty across the state.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ¹ - NATIVE AMERICAN ²			CALIFORNIA - All Races	
	COUNT	PERCENT	COUNT	PERCENT
Total Native American Population	169,160	-	33,871,648	
Children (under 18)	52,595	31%	9,221,463	27%
Seniors (65 and over)	9,495	6%	3,586,794	11%
Education (for population 25 and over)				
Under 9th grade	15,094	16%	2,446,324	11%
9th - 12th grade, no degree	18,670	19%	2,496,419	12%
High School Degree (includes equivalent)	22,019	23%	4,288,452	20%
Some College, no degree	23,596	24%	4,879,336	23%
Associates Degree	6,757	7%	1,518,403	7%
Bachelor's Degree	7,260	7%	3,640,157	17%
Grad or Professional Degree	3,782	4%	2,029,809	10%
Income / Poverty				
Median Household Income	\$36,462	-	42,896	-
In Poverty	35,340	21%	4,706,130	14%
Percent of people in poverty under 18 years of age	14,029	9%	1,757,100	37%
Percent of people in poverty over 65 years of age	1,394	1%	280,411	6%
Rent / Own				
Own	23,142	46%	6,546,237	57%
Rent	27,045	54%	4,956,633	43%
Transportation				
No Car Access	6,961	14%	1,091,214	9%
Health				
Passed 5 of 6 Physical Fitness Exams ³	1,137	26%	366,228	27%
Passed 6 of 6 Physical Fitness Exams ³	1,308	30%	443,504	32%

¹ Includes: Imperial, Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Ventura Counties

² Defined as respondents selecting "American Indian or Alaska Native" only

³ Data calculated for grades 5, 7, and 9 from Data Quest, California Department of Education 2007-08
http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/gfs_calworks.asp

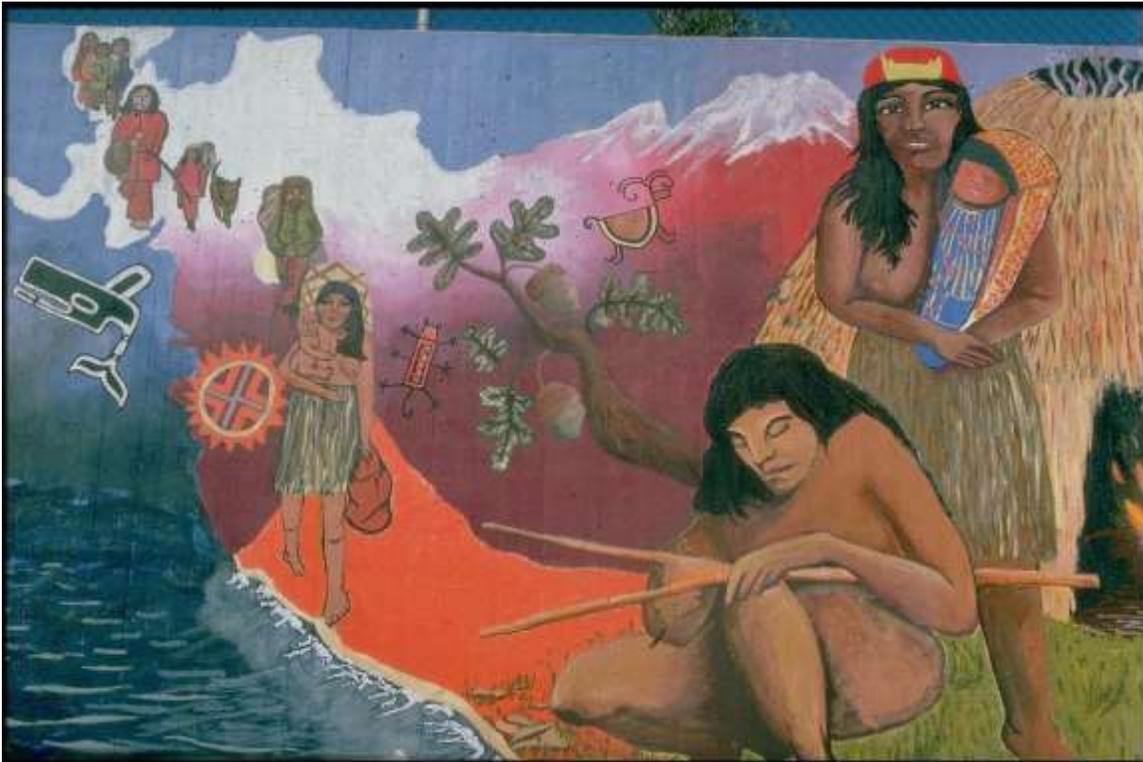
Source: [The City Project, Healthy Parks, Schools and Communities: Green Access and Equity for Southern California](#)

Poor health and lack of economic resources today reflect the history of Native Americans after contact. Robert Bracamontes writes:

When Europeans arrived on our land, little did we know that we were awaiting the American Holocaust. Many of us were naive about the Genocide unfolding. It

still continues today, but even the settlers of present pretend it never happened, that it is alive, well and ongoing.

United Coalition to Protect Panhe, an organizing campaign led by Native American including Mr. Bracamontes, working with The City Project helped stop a toll road that would have devastated the ancient village of [Panhe and San Onofre State Park](#). The Sacred Site and Park lie along the San Diego and Orange County lines. Several other state parks are sites of Native American cultural resources, encompassing historic Native American villages, religious and ceremonial areas, and thousands of Native American burial sites.



*The Native American Village of Yaangna along the L.A. River
Great Wall of Los Angeles Judy Baca SPARC*

Native American cultural resources are included in other parks and in schools as well. For example, El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument includes the area originally occupied by the Gabrieleño village of [Yaangna](#). University High School in Los Angeles includes the site of Kuruvungna Springs, a village of the Gabrieleño people. Puvunga, a Sacred Site for the Gabrieleño as well as the Acjachemen or Juaneño people, is located at what is now California State University at Long Beach. Putiidhem is located at what is now Junipero Serra Catholic High School in San Juan Capistrano. Puvunga and Putiidhem are part of the annual [Ancestor Walk](#).

Robert Bracamontes writes:

I am Acjachemen, Nican Tlaca, indigenous to this land. For us the land gives us food, a place to play peon, a place where we are put to rest in peace, a place for ceremony, a place where life and culture are one. Some have viewed the land as something to steal, to make great profit from by taking and selling it for selfish ownership. We need our land back, we need to protect it for future generations. I hope those of you speaking about helping realize this is not a novel or a movie. This is not about a movement. This is about a living breathing tribe thousands of years old. It is about all of my living relatives, my Ancestors, and the new lives entering the world today. We cannot think that History is not a continuous fluid event. I am Acjachemen.



Tribe Circle | Photo by [Ricardo Duffy](#)

Kuruvungna Springs. Photo by The City Project