

# Southwest

## La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians

The La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians has long occupied the inland areas of southern California. Their reservation, almost 10,000 acres situated 60 miles northeast of San Diego at the base of Palomar Mountain, is home to over half of its 700 tribal members. Much of the land remains open and undisturbed. Rob Roy, Environmental Director for the La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians, says the landscape ranges from around 900-5200 feet elevation and is host to a variety of ecosystems including oak forest, pine forest, and coastal sage scrub. The San Luis Rey River runs through the southern portion of the reservation, creating a lush riparian setting for the La Jolla Indian Campground, one of the tribe's main sources of revenue.



### Natural Drought and Fire Cycles Accelerated by Climate Change

California historically has experienced cycles of drought. The first one documented by western science was in 1841. Researchers teasing apart the effects of drought and climate change note, "Although natural variability dominates, anthropogenic warming has substantially increased the overall likelihood of extreme California droughts." (Williams, et al.). In other words, while California has long been accustomed to cycles of drought, climate change has increased the frequency of what is defined as a severe drought.

Increased drought has the potential to increase wildfires. Roy has worked for the tribe for over 17 years. He says, "We recognize that climate change is an on-going problem. The increasing frequency of wildfires and drought is something many people have noticed." He recalls the 2007 Poomacha wildfire that broke out on the reservation, quickly merging with a neighboring fire. He says, "It burned 93% of the reservation and destroyed a third of the homes. It was quite a disaster for the tribe and took years to recover from."

The Poomacha fire was one of many devastating fires that ravaged southern California that year. The fires collectively became known as the 'Fall 2007 California Firestorm.' The tribe responded quickly, partnering with the San Diego Foundation to purchase equipment for post-fire clean up efforts. They partnered with other tribes to help rebuild homes and repair drinking water systems. And while the tribe had long worked to reduce the risk of fire on their lands, they increased mitigation efforts to protect their land from the growing risk of wildfire. Working with other local tribes, La Jolla helped create the Inter Tribal Long Term Recovery Foundation. The mission of the Foundation is to help American Indian people and Tribal Nations in California affected by wildfires and other disasters recover and become resilient.

### Several Avenues towards Wildfire Mitigation

One project Roy describes was to create defensible spaces around homes. With a grant from the Wildland Urban Interface program, the tribe cleared brush from around 200 homes, making the structures more resilient in the case of a quickly spreading wildfire. A second project Roy references was creating fuel breaks. Fuel Breaks are areas of land where the vegetation is altered to slow burning in the case of a wildfire. While fires may still burn in these regions, these areas are generally easier to control. The tribe was able to create several fuel breaks using funds from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

The tribe also partnered with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through their Environmental Quality Incentives Program. The program focuses on preventing soil loss through erosion, a common problem following large fires. Through this program the tribe created several fuel breaks. Fire breaks

are cleared to bare mineral soil leaving no fuels to burn; fuel breaks remove heavy vegetation but leave low grasses to reduce soil erosion. The tribe opted for the latter, reducing the potential for both wildfires and soil erosion.

NRCS has also provided funding for the removal of invasive species. Removing invasive species reduces competition with native plants but also reduces the overall fuel load on the land. Invasive species common to the La Jolla reservation include Tamarisk and the Tree-of-Heaven.

### **Planning for the Future, an Integrated Approach**

Aside from these efforts, the La Jolla tribe wanted to envision farther into the future. The BIA requires all tribes to have a Forest Management Plan. However, in conversations with the BIA and NRCS the tribe decided to take a more overarching approach. The tribe decided to instead work towards an Integrated Resources Management Plan. This plan would look at the tribe's natural resources collectively, combining separate efforts such as forest management, climate adaptation, drought planning, and disaster mitigation.

The tribe began writing the forest management component. They hired a private company to survey the forested areas of their reservation, assessing its health, defining the ecosystems, and evaluating the feasibility of harvesting forest products. They have recently completed the forest management section and have submitted it to the BIA for approval.

The tribe is now working to merge earlier work into an Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan. The tribe had already completed a Drought Plan, and in 2009 were proud to be the first tribe in California to receive Congressional approval for their Drought Plan. Congressional approval of their Drought Plan accelerates emergency federal funding for the tribe in the case of a drought. In 2004, they were also the first tribe in California to receive Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) approval for their Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan. FEMA approval opens up additional funding sources in the case of future disasters.

The La Jolla Band of Mission Indians has proven that when faced with a natural disaster they recover stronger than before. Roy concludes, "I've always felt that collaboration is incredibly important. You can be strong on your own, but you can be stronger together with partners." Ultimately the tribe is paving its way to a more resilient future by progressing their vision and fostering innovative partnerships.

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### **Resources and References**

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[www7.nau.edu/itep/main/tcc/Tribes/sw\\_LaJolla](http://www7.nau.edu/itep/main/tcc/Tribes/sw_LaJolla)

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