PRIME DESERT WOODLAND PRESERVE SELF GUIDED TRAIL TOUR

Introduction

The Prime Desert Woodland Preserve was first proposed in 1985, as an area where visitors have the opportunity to learn about the animals, plants, and the region in which we live, as well as a place to simply relax and enjoy nature. The Preserve was made possible by efforts put forth by residents and the Lancaster City Council; one of those residents was Elizabeth “Elyze” Clifford, an environmental activist that rallied a coalition to preserve the special and unique desert woodland, and who the on-site Interpretive Center is named after.

The Preserve’s Environment

During a lengthy period that began around 5,000 BCE (before the current era), an episode of intense climatic warming was responsible for major environmental changes. The large lakes that were once present in the Antelope Valley dried up and their associated resources were gone.

The Preserve’s environment is known as a “riparian habitat” which is dependent on stormwater runoff and water from distant mountains. Riparian habitats are defined as low elevation areas where water flows, either continuously or intermittently, which provides support to the vegetation. Plants that grow in this environment are usually different from those growing nearby whose roots do not reach the water, creating an environmental uniqueness.

The environment of the Preserve is distinctive as most of the water flow consists of stormwater runoff from urban areas. As water enters the Preserve, it often carries street litter and impurities which is then filtered by the vegetation growing alongside the channels. The water then soaks into the soil and is recycled, utilizing nature for transportation and filtration to create clean water that plants and animals can then feed off of.

Fun facts:

- Desert areas are also called “arid,” meaning dry.
- A desert is a region that receives less than ten inches of rain per year. If rainfall occurs in the desert, it usually occurs in strong downpours, leading to flash flooding.
    - The average annual rainfall in Lancaster is approximately seven inches.
- The word *Mojave* comes from the Spanish word for “place without water”.
- Human water use in the Antelope Valley depends mainly on the pumping of groundwater from the valley's aquifers and on importing water from the California Aqueduct.
- Earthquakes and tremors are a natural part of the planet’s geography and although it is possible to measure them, predicting them is much harder.

Local Flora and Fauna

Flora

The Antelope Valley is home to a wide range of flora or plants, and fauna or animals. For plants and animals to survive in the High-Desert, all are adapted to the area's climate. Desert plants often have deep roots and waxy leaves where they can store water, they usually have thorns also which deter herbivores from eating them.

Some of the most common types that you might see in the Preserve include Creosote, Scrub Oak, Chia, Mojave Yucca, Joshua Tree, Pinyon Pine, Juniper, Mormon Tea, Cholla Cactus, Shadscale, Rabbitbrush, and the California Poppy, while the winter rains bring about other native grasses and wildflowers.

Native Americans exploited a number of these plants as a resource for food, tools, ceremonial objects, and household goods. Pinyon Pine, Chia, Buckwheat, and the hearts of Yucca whipplei all include plants that were used as foods. Creosote and Mormon Tea were often used to make medicinal teas. Plants used for other purposes such as tools, household or ritual objects include Juniper, Yucca, and Joshua Trees.

The Joshua tree is the largest member of the yucca genus and is endemic to the Mojave Desert. The Joshua tree is an evergreen, flowering species of plant which can reach heights above forty-five feet. Irregular branching often occurs due to the yucca-boring weevil which damages and destroys growing tips along the base of the tree. Generally, the Joshua tree blooms in the spring and produces fruit containing many flat seeds within. Various desert fauna feeds off of the fruit and thereby help to establish the creation of new Joshua trees.

The creosote bush is one of the most characteristic plant species of the Mojave Desert. It is named after its smell, which is reminiscent of creosote (a chemical commonly used as a preservative or antiseptic). The creosote bush is between three and nine feet in height and produces yellow flowers. Clonal colonies of creosote bushes can reach extreme ages. The King Clone, a colony found in the Mojave Desert, is thought to be one of the world’s oldest living organisms with an estimated age of 11,700 years.

Fun facts:

- Due to the loss of habitat many desert plants and animals face extinction, including the Joshua tree.
- Some Joshua trees are over 1,000 years old.
- Plants that store water in their stems are called succulents.
- There are about 2,000 types of cacti that come in different shapes, sizes, and colors.

Fauna

Animal survival for many means lying low during the daytime hours under a bush, in a nest, or burrow which can provide adequate protection from the heat. Since water is scarce, animals obtain moisture from the plants or animals they eat. Some animals in and around the Antelope Valley that call the western Mojave Desert and the Preserve home are:

Coyotes, Black-tailed Jackrabbits, California Ground Squirrels, Desert Kangaroo Rats, Desert Tortoises, Mojave Rattlesnakes, and Fringe-Toed lizards, and various birds such as the Greater Roadrunner, Cactus Wren, the California Quail, Red-Tailed Hawks, and Great Horned Owls.

Fun facts:

- Unlike dogs, coyotes run with their tails down and can reach up to forty miles per hour.
- The Desert Tortoise spends about 95% of their lives in their burrow which can be up to thirty-two feet in length.
- Red-tailed hawks have a third eyelid and their eyes change color as they age.
- In bighorn sheep, horn size is a symbol of rank and can weigh up to thirty pounds.

For more information on the flora and fauna that can be seen throughout the Preserve, check out the permanent exhibition at the Elyze Clifford Interpretive Center which is open Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm.

Regional Native History

However, long before the establishment of the Preserve, the early inhabitants of the Valley were made up of six primary Indigenous nations: The Kawaiisu, the Kitanemuk, the Vanyume, the Serrano, the Tataviam, and the Chemehuevi.

Most of the local tribes had populations between 500 to 1,000 individuals that were concentrated in semi-sedentary settlements; this means they lacked permanent settlements and borders and moved frequently. While the tribes shared certain cultural and linguistic (language) patterns or traits, each was politically independent with only a village chief for authority.

The Antelope Valley had an abundance of natural springs and provided a natural access corridor that linked the California coast with early trails that extended south to Mexico, north into California's Central Valley, and east as far as the Southwest culture region. This combination resulted in the flourishing of major trade and interaction routes through the Antelope Valley along with a number of sizeable villages because the Antelope Valley residents could take advantage of both coastal and desert resources and adaptation.

In the winter months, groups would come together to create more permanent settlements near the foothills and mountains. These groups would forage for food (both plant and animal) in wide areas around these semi-permanent dwelling sites, while temporary campsites were used for long-distance hunting and gathering forays. However, during the warmer months, groups would

disperse into smaller clusters and move to the valley floor to collect seasonally available plant and animal food supplies.

The acorn, obtained in foothill canyons, became a major dietary staple in the Antelope Valley and other western Mojave Desert areas, as well as in most of the Californian region. Another important dietary staple was the pinyon pine nut, which contained high amounts of protein and fat. Most importantly, acorns and pine nuts would be stored for use during the winter months.

Some nuts were eaten raw while harvesting but most were processed by toasting and winnowing. They were then ground into flour using grinding stones (manos and metates) for making paste and soup.

To hunt animals efficiently, stone projectile points for both darts and spears were carefully and beautifully flaked from a wide variety of materials in a considerable range of shapes. Animals that were commonly hunted for food and other materials were bighorn sheep, deer and antelope, small mammals (like rabbits), fish, and waterfowl.

Being Good Stewards

The Preserve encompasses an area of more than 120-acres of uninterrupted desert landscape and along with housing many native plants and animals, it also serves as protection for various artifacts ranging from Native habitation and historic glass and cans. Therefore, when visiting and walking the grounds, it's important to be mindful. During visits, keep in mind that nothing should be left behind aside from footprints; so, hold onto all trash until it can be discarded in a designated receptacle, stay on the trail at all times, and don't crush the brush!

Fun facts:

- A glass bottle may take up to 1 million years to decompose in the environment, however, recycling a glass bottle saves enough energy to power a light bulb for about four hours.
- Styrofoam and plastic bags take up to one thousand years to decompose.
- Paper comes from trees and can be recycled a maximum of six times before its fibers become too weak to hold together.
- Unlike paper, aluminum can be recycled forever. Recycling a can made of aluminum produces energy enough to run a television for three hours.

Outdoor Installations

***THEN* | *NOW* | *A DREAM* by Nathaniel Ancheta and David Edward Martin**

THEN | *NOW* | *A DREAM*, an installation that includes four life-size sculptures of a pronghorn antelope made from rebar and discarded material, found its permanent home here at the Preserve. What was, what is, and what might have been merged in what was originally a site-specific installation located at the foot of the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve.

Made from common construction materials and found materials scavenged from the site, the sculptures were painted an uncanny shade of super-saturated blue. The four pronghorn antelope sculptures represent the landscape's past and look with hope to the blooming of the poppies on the hills and fields beyond. The antelopes represent several layers of tension between belonging and unbelonging; animals that once roamed the landscape by the thousands are conspicuously absent given the area's designation in the Antelope Valley, an unnatural blue that provides a unifying coating to a variety of discarded consumer items.

***Paleolithic Herd* by Devin Thor**

Devin Thor presents three pieces from his raw, unique stone works that make extinct paleolithic creatures live again as a life-size sculptural herd. The use of material makes these flat works

fascinating in texture as well as image. In the use of color (russet, gold, brown) and material (sandstone, rebar, and found/discarded materials), they appear as if they arose from the earth itself. The herd, which includes a buck, a doe, and a fawn, allows the viewer to, even if only a little, get a glimpse at what the Antelope Valley once was.

Seeming prehistoric, their beautiful simplicity serves as an elegy to the losses of the past, and a pristine prayer for a better future. According to Thor, his paleolithic creatures are "*a homage to our prehistoric ancestors, but also an exploration of the global influence of humans on our environment…*" adding that "*modern humans have modified the planet and now must take on a stewardship role, otherwise we might face extinction ourselves.*"

Thor is a geologist as well as an artist, which is likely a reason for his choice of material. The rough brown surface creates an elegant but primal visual perspective, representing a tribute to the beings themselves and the land where they once roamed. His minimal approach is relatable with an easily recognizable shape and universal figures that open the world of the past with hope for tomorrow. A poignant reminder that despite the bulk and weighty purpose of these beings, they were too fragile to survive. In the end, the sculptures represent a cautionary tale for the preservation of species, including our own.

***Little Giant* by Ann Webber**

Ann Weber is an American artist who transforms the ordinary medium of cardboard into impressive large-scale sculptures reminiscent of pods, gourds, and organic spires. She views the

psychological component of her artwork as one of the most important aspects; between representational and abstract, Weber invites the viewers to bring their above several associations to her artwork.

Composed with a palette of simple circles and cylinder forms, Weber's work represents the symbolic male and female forms in the natural world while tying in architecture and historical references to evoke memories, relationships, and morality in her sculptures. By casting ordinary cardboard into bronze or fiberglass for public art projects, Weber illustrates that things are not always what they appear to be and the humble origin of the materials are part of the innovation, charm, and humor of artwork like *Little Giant*.

Weber states that *"when you put a seed in the ground, the first thing that happens is a sprout. I felt what my content was, or what I was saying, had to do with these very primal kinds of forms...Ultimately my interest is in expanding the possibilities of making beauty from a common and mundane material."*