

Otay Watershed Background, by SANDAG

About 3,000 years ago 100 or less Native Americans lived in the Otay River Watershed at "La Punta". Archeologists think they lived there year round, because they had water all the time in the Otay River. The Otay River watershed had plentiful plants which grew wild, acorns from oak trees within traveling distance, shell fish, amphibians, birds and mammals. They also could get grains from the native grasses.

The healthy wetlands along the Otay River had no problems at that time.

During the mission period, perhaps, some cattle were grazed in the Otay area. The cattle could be left totally on their own to eat and grow.

After the Mexican Revolution in 1810, California became part of Mexico. Some retired soldiers wanted the land of the missions. Janal, Otay, La Punta, and De La Nacion ranches were granted to people. A few more cows were bought to the Otay Valley.

When the cattle were introduced, they brought alien seeds, which soon took over in the Otay Watershed, replacing the slower growing native grasses.

In 1849 gold was discovered in California. Hundreds of thousands of people came to California every year. Although most of the people went to northern California, some people came down to San Diego.

In the 1870's and 80's, the farms of Otay Mesa, South Chula Vista and the Tijuana River Valley were mostly growing grains. The town of Otay was a small market town for these farms.

The population in 1891 was around 400 people. In 1887, a man named Babcott constructed a dam at Lower Otay Lakes. Later on, he built another dam at Upper Otay Lakes.

On January 27, the dam broke and the flood wiped out the town of Otay and all the farms. They didn't rebuild Otay. People continued farming through out the depression. Truck farms dominated until the 1870's. Back then Montgomery High School was a tomato field.

Over the years, all these changes affected the Otay River watershed and the river itself. When Babcott built the dam, the river no longer flowed except when it rained. Many plants, fish, and amphibians died, and other animals left. Agriculture and the cattle as well as the mining destroyed the wetlands, and many alien plants started to grow all over the watershed. Mining in the Otay River left large holes which are now ponds: some have water all year but some have water only when it rains. These ponds now support what is left of the plants, some fish, and animals.