

The ocean and Native peoples of California

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Ohlone Indians in a tule boat in the San Francisco Bay, 1822. Image by: Louis Choris via Wikimedia.

The sea influenced people in California long before Europeans arrived. Although people lived throughout the state, villages and other important sites were built mostly along the coasts and major rivers. The ocean and rivers offered a wealth of resources that natives used for themselves and for trading with neighbors.

Three distinct boat types were well developed in native California. These were the tule balsa, the dugout redwood canoe and the planked canoe called tomól.

The Tule Balsa

Native people in California, such as the Miwok, Ohlone and Yokut, developed rafts called tule balsas. They made the rafts from freshwater plants called tules. The Coastal Miwok called them sákas.

Tule reeds were very common near the water. Reed balsas were made when needed and often discarded after they became too soggy. The design was simple. The only tool needed was a sharpened clamshell to harvest the reeds. The tule was cut and set aside to dry. Tule

stems are hollow like straws, which allows them to float. The builders would split some of the reed to make rope, while the rest of the tules were bundled into bunches. The bundles would be tied up with the rope and then joined together into a raft.

The finished boat could carry several hundred pounds, and a paddle was used to move the boat forward. The boats were used for fishing and traveling. Native people in the Central Valley, like the Miwok and Yokut, needed them during the rainy winters to travel on rivers and in flooded areas that surrounded their settlements.

The Dugout Canoe

To the north, the Yokut and other coastal people built dugout canoes to travel along the coast and in the Klamath River. These crafts were made by carving out the inside of a solid redwood log. The Yokut used trees that had been blown down by storms or struck by lightning.



The canoe builder would begin by splitting the log into two long pieces. The center of the log is much heavier than the outside. Therefore, to make the canoe more stable, the center of the log would become the bottom of the canoe. The outside of the log was made into the top of the canoe. This is the opposite of what might be expected from the the shape of a split log.

The canoe builder often used small fires to help carve out the log. Builders would then use shells to carve out the boat. To travel downriver, or with the current, a wide paddle was used to steer swiftly through flowing water. Upriver, or against the current, one or two people would steer the canoe along the edges of the river, where the current is weakest, using a long pole. Women were often seen navigating the Klamath River by themselves, traveling upriver with their boats loaded to the top.

The Tomól

To the south, the Chumash people of the Santa Barbara coast developed the only native boat made of wooden planks in North America. These were built by a respected group of Chumash people called the Brotherhood of the Tomól. The group built canoes using driftwood they found, and shaped the wood into planks using a sharp tool. The planks were sanded smooth with sharkskin and held together with tar. Holes were then drilled into planks to sew them together with rope made from plants.

Father Pedro Font, a Spanish explorer, witnessed the building of a tomól in 1775. He wrote in his diary: "some ... are decorated with little shells and are painted red with hematite (iron ore). I measured one and found it to be 36 palms long and somewhat more than three palms high." Explorer Juan Bautista de Anza wrote: "In each village they have 15 to 20 canoes in use and in each one they were making not less than 7 to 10 new ones."

The Chumash used these boats to fish and hunt seals and sea lions. They traveled along the coast and to the Channel Islands, which had many native settlements. It is estimated that thousands of Chumash lived on the three northernmost islands: San Miguel, Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz. Some of these crafts are still made by modern Native builders. It is important to remember that many of the different Native American cultures of California remain alive and in our communities today.