

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project
Education Initiative



Restoring water to ensure the continuity of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh tradition of agriculture

Origins of the Akimel O’otham & Pee Posh Water Crisis: the 1860s

Part 5

In April of 1863, Charles Poston, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Arizona Territory, informed Commissioner of Indian Affairs William Dole that the most important part of his job was the protection of Akimel O’otham water rights. “They have been uniformly friendly to our authorities and hospitable to our emigrants,” Poston wrote. It would be unfortunate if “in the eager rush for farms and city sites the land above them should be occupied ... and their supply of water reduced.” Even as Poston spoke, the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh had experienced a decade of profound change. Beginning with the Gadsden Purchase, the fiercely independent and industrious tribes watched their water resources steadily dwindle as settlers took up farms upstream. As their fields dried up so, too, did their admiration for their new neighbors.

Scores of Americans favorably commented on the friendliness and industry of the Confederated tribes. In 1846, Lieutenant Colonel William Emory reported that the Akimel O’otham had “generously” furnished horses and food to travelers passing through their villages. Mexican War veteran Cave Coats, enroute to Yuma, found their villages scattered for 18 miles along the Gila River. On an eighty square mile river plain, Coats observed “a series of the finest fields” he had ever seen. During the California Gold Rush, some 60,000 non-Indians passed through the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh villages, receiving both kind treatment and food. Sylvester Mowry observed in 1857 that the Indians had “supplied many a starved emigrant, and restored his broken down animals.”

When the United States completed the stage line from El Paso, Texas, to San Diego, California, in 1858, it proved to be a boom to the desert tribes. In 1859, the Confederated tribes sold more than 250,000 pounds of wheat to the stage line. Within three years, that amount increased to over 1,000,000 pounds. By 1865, Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh agriculture played a significant role in Arizona Territory. It would have been “impossible,” Poston noted, for soldiers stationed in the territory to survive without this agriculture. Even the “mail districts, the mining districts north of the Gila, and the capital of the territory (Prescott)” were fed by O’otham and Pee Posh agriculture.

Following ratification of the Gadsden Purchase Treaty with Mexico, in 1854, the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh found themselves under American administration. In June of 1855, O’otham Chief Antonio Azul and eight other Akimel O’otham, Pee Posh and Tohono O’odham leaders visited Emory, then working on the US-Mexico boundary survey at Nogales. Foremost among Azul’s concerns was the effect of the treaty on the rights of his people. Emory informed the leaders that the United States guaranteed them all rights they had enjoyed under Mexico. Satisfied, Azul and the other leaders agreed to a statement outlining the substance of their talks.

Emory’s promises went unfulfilled and the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh grew increasingly concerned. Three years later, village chief Juan Jose became enraged when nearby soldiers refused his offer of five dollars in gold for shovels and axes. Even Antonio Azul grew distrustful, telling Mowry that he was tired of unfulfilled promises made by the government. In response, Congress appropriated \$10,000 and authorized Commissioner of Indian Affairs James Denver to purchase presents acknowledging Akimel O’otham loyalty and friendship to the United States. On February 28, 1859, the “Pima Reservation” was established and included 64,000 acres of land along the banks of the Gila River.

Although delighted with the gifts, the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh were unhappy with the size of the reservation. Azul objected because the it did not include sufficient grazing lands, protecting only village sites and farms along a 4-mile by 25-mile stretch of the Gila River. Mowry, in charge of surveying the reservation, assured Azul that the reservation was simply designed to protect Akimel O’otham fields and villages and that more land would be added.

Despite assurances, the Akimel O’otham had cause for concern. Indian agents Ammi White and Levi Ruggles, both representing the United States and ordered to protect O’otham interests, cornered the Akimel O’otham wheat market and both speculated in land east of the reservation. Ruggles helped establish Florence while White was one of the founders of nearby Adamsville. In fact, Ruggles was a partner in the largest private land holding in the Gila River Valley, devoting more of his time to his business interests than issues concerning the two tribes.

Tensions escalated as more non-Indians settled along the upper Gila River. Responding to Akimel O’otham complaints about diminishing river flow, Major General E.O.C. Ord recommended that all the land above the reservation—including the settlements in and around Florence—be set aside as part of the reservation. He also personally requested that Ruggles be removed as Indian Agent. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Devin, commanding the sub-district of Southern Arizona, warned Ord that if the Akimel O’otham did not receive sufficient water to irrigate their crops they might well force the settlers out of the valley. Superintendent George Dent informed Commissioner of Indian Affairs Nathaniel Taylor that if “crowded to the wall” the O’otham would “fight for their rights.”

Dent did nothing to alleviate the land and water challenges facing the Indians and was replaced in the summer of 1869 by George Andrews, who was ordered to increase the size of the reservation. Ruggles was then removed as Indian agent and replaced by army captain Frederick Grossman. The Army also sent assistant inspector general Roger Jones to the reservation to examine water conditions. Jones reported that the Akimel O’otham cultivated “extensively” and that they sold large quantities of corn and wheat to traders, who in turn distributed the goods throughout the territory. In a dry year, Jones noted, “their crops would be ruined for want of water.”

The long predicted crisis erupted that fall. After a flood destroyed three Akimel O’otham villages, the Sacaton and Casa Blanca trading posts and the Casa Blanca flour mill—and after a poor crop in 1869—400 Akimel O’otham left the reservation and gathered the corn and bean crops of settlers near Adamsville. Hundreds more began to farm east of then existing reservation. Inadequate rainfall left the crops of the Indian farmers in ruin the following year. Antonio Azul publicly admitted that he could no longer preserve order among his people. Grossman pleaded for “permanent dams” and “large irrigation canals, not ditches” to divert water to Akimel O’otham fields.

By 1871, the water situation was critical. Newly appointed Indian agent John Stout reported that “not a drop of water” had reached Indian lands that summer. “The time for preparing their lands is now at hand,” Stout complained in yet another letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, “but having no water they can do nothing.” Village captain Kihua Chinkum met with Stout and told the agent that, if necessary, he would drive the settlers out of the valley. Stout convinced Chinkum violence was foolish. Nonetheless, Chinkum informed Stout that if water did not arrive within the month he and his people would join a growing number of Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh families settling along the Salt River. Ku-vit-ke-chin, chief of Va Vak village, announced the following day that his people were also moving to the Salt River, where water was in good supply.

In August, Grossman informed the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Arizona Territory that the only way to resolve the “just complaints” of the Indians was to give them “a certainty of water privileges.” While the reservation was enlarged by 81,140 acres, in 1869, it was not enough. Upstream settlers planted a second crop that year but, lacking water, the Indian farmers grew nothing. The crisis was so great that Antonio Azul and Pee Posh Chief Juan Cheveria demanded the return of 5,200 square miles of farm, grazing and mesquite land along the Gila River, extending from the Pinal Mountains in the east to Gila Bend in the west.

Protecting Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh water was a priority for Azul and other leaders, especially after Jack Swilling opened the first non-Indian canal in the Salt River Valley and began irrigating 4,000 acres. By 1870, settlers had taken up most of the irrigated lands in the valley and the farm community of Phoenix rose from the desert floor. More settlers also moved into the Gila River Valley, settling above the reservation where they built large canals diverting the flow of the river—without returning to the river the surplus water, “thereby greatly diminishing its volume before it reached the reservation.”

As the crisis deepened, public opinion shifted against the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh. While once respected producers of food for much of the territory, they were no longer viewed as trusted allies. But, the Indians no longer viewed the settlers as they once had either. While they once “took pleasure in feeding and assisting” the newcomers, they now viewed them with distrust, fearing further loss of their land and water. By the 1870s, Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh rights to the use of the water were virtually ignored.

Teacher Plan for “Origins of the Water Crisis: The 1860s”

Terms to know and understand

- Public opinion
- Indian agent
- Speculation
- Hospitable
- Gadsden Purchase

Critical Thinking:

Suppose you lived in the 1860s.

- How would you respond to the diminishing flow of water?
- How might your way of life change as a result of water loss?
- What is the impact on an ecosystem when water is removed?
- The United States long ago promised to protect Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh water. Brainstorm some reasons why it may have failed to do so. Discuss your ideas as a class.

Activities

- Tell students they will be reading an article about the time (1860s) when the waters of the Gila River were diverted to non-Indian farmers. Explain to the students that the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh had been promised protection of their rights to the water, but that the United States did not follow through on its promise.
- Ask students what they know about water uses and rights. Discuss with students that the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh (and the Huhugam before them) farmed with irrigation waters since time immemorial. Discuss the importance of water to the economy and way of life of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh. Remind students to consider this as they read the article.
- Discuss with students how the diminished flow of a river affects the environment. Specifically, discuss how a reduced river flow affects the grasslands, marshlands, and farmlands. How might wildlife be impacted by the reduced flow? How would this impact the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh way of life?

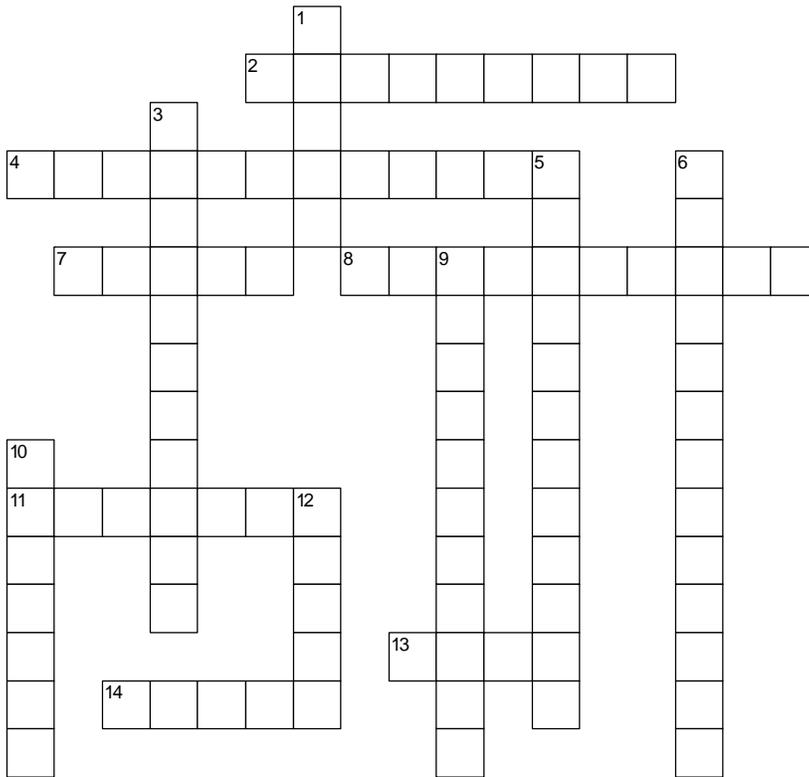
About P-MIP

The Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project is authorized by the Gila River Indian Community to construct all irrigation systems for the Community. When fully completed, P-MIP will provide irrigation for 146,330 acres of farmland. P-MIP is dedicated to three long-range goals:

- Restoring water to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh.
- Putting Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh rights to the use of water to beneficial use.
- Demonstrating and exercising sound management to ensure continuity of the Community’s traditional economy of agriculture.

<p>Student will be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discuss the origins of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh water crisis. 2. Evaluate Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh responses to the pending crisis and explain how they might have responded if they had lived during that time. 	<p>Objectives</p>
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ACROSS

- 2 Many Akimel O'otham and Pee Posh moved to this valley in the 1870s.
- 4 Pee Posh Chief.
- 7 It destroyed several villages and trading posts in 1869.
- 8 To care for others and provide for their needs.
- 11 The people of this Territory were fed by Akimel O'otham and Pee Posh agriculture until 1870.
- 13 This reservation was established by an Act of Congress on February 28, 1859.
- 14 The Akimel O'otham and Pee Posh grew more than a million pounds of this by 1862.

DOWN

- 1 Akimel O'otham and Pee Posh rights to this resource were ignored by the 1870s.
- 3 Head Chief of the Akimel O'otham.
- 5 Europeans called them Pima.
- 6 The real or imagined thoughts of the public towards someone or something.
- 9 To buy land with the intent of selling it later for a profit.
- 10 Treaty purchase with Mexico in 1854.
- 12 An ambassador to Indian Country and a representative of the United States.