

Native Americans of the West: Different Environments, Different Lives

Different environments led to different ways of life for Native American cultures of the western United States. In comparing two tribes from different western regions, the Chinook and the Navajo, these differences become more apparent.

A Northwest culture: the Chinook

Fish

Caught and ate many kinds of fish, as well as other seafood. Salmon was a particularly important food source. During salmon runs, one family could catch hundreds of pounds of fish.

Region of settlement: modern-day Oregon & Washington

Climate: cool & dry summers, wet mild winters

Way of life: little competition for resources

Food was plentiful

Shelter

Crafts

Fished & gathered

An abundance of wild plants and animals exist in the region, so there was no need to raise food by farming.

Sedentary

Tribes could settle in one place without having to look far for food.

Wood plentiful

Canoes

A Southwest culture: the Navajo

Peaceful

The Chinook did not develop a warrior culture. They preferred to solve their differences by staging challenges of skill. Villages of were comprised of mostly relatives, which also made peace more desirable.

Wild plants

Cultures of the Northwest had plenty of plant foods to harvest from the wild.

Wood houses

Some houses were more than 100 feet long.

Region of settlement: modern-day Arizona & New Mexico

Climate: hot summers, arid & cold winters

Way of life: more competition for resources

Food more scarce

Crafts

Shelter

Armed conflict

There was great competition for hunting, herding, and farming ground, especially as populations grew. This brought the Navajo into armed conflict with neighbors, such as the Ute and the local Spanish settlers.

Earlier, raided settlements for subsistence

The Navajo migrated to the Southwest in the 1400s or 1500s. Before fully adapting to their new lands, the Navajo roamed, raiding to survive. They raided neighbors (including Pueblo towns) for food.

Later, dry-farmed & herded sheep

After adopting farming and herding, many Navajo could sustain their existence without raiding. Some groups of Navajo continued to raid.

Mud hogans

These were round houses made of wood poles and mud.

Topography: coasts, rivers, & forests

Topography: mountains, plateaus, prairie, & desert

Traded extra food

The Chinook were renowned traders.

Intricate carvings

Raiding

The Navajo raided, even after they settled, during periods of need. Likewise, they were vulnerable to raids from neighboring tribes and Spanish settlers.

Sand painting

Silver & turquoise jewelry

Carved shells