An Overview of Sierra National Forest History

(Note: All illustrations taken from Justice, Noel D., 2002, *Stone Age Spear and Arrow Points of California and the Great Basin.* Indiana University Press, Bloomington)

The Native People: The Sierra National Forest has been home to Native American people for at least 13,500 years. This date is based on obsidian hydration analysis of a Clovis point that was discovered in the upper reaches of the King's River watershed a little above 8000 feet in elevation. "Clovis" refers to a projectile point type, as well as the culture that produced them, and they are generally believed to be the first identifiable culture in North America. These early inhabitants are commonly referred to as Paleoindian, a term which simply means "early Indian", and encompasses a period of time from 14,000 – 10,000 years ago. These little understood people are noted primarily for a nomadic life style that was characterized by a subsistence strategy that concentrated on the procurement of now extinct megafauna, an extensive trade network in lithic raw material resources, and a high degree of artistic achievement in the manufacture of stone hunting tools. Paleoindian period spear points are rare on the Sierra National Forest, with only one verifiable occurrence of a Clovis point.

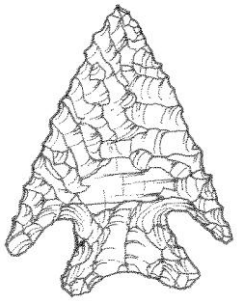
Following the Paleoindian period, the next major temporal phase is referred to as the Archaic period which covers the span of time from approximately 10,000 –1,500 years ago. This temporal phase has been further subdivided into three sub phases referred to as the Early 10,000 – 7,500, Middle 7,500 – 5,000, and Late 5,000 – 1,500. It is generally accepted that a shift in climatic conditions from a cooler and wetter to a warmer and dryer environment occurred at the middle to end of the Paleoindian period. This period of environmental change brought about a conversion of existing vegetation communities from conifer forests and grasslands to deciduous forests and an advance of brush species more suited to a xeric environment (such as chenopodium and amaranth). This shift in the climate had a marked affect on both plant and animal species, identifiable by the extinction of almost all of the larger mammalian species. Human adaptation to these changing conditions is recognizable in the archaeological record as a shift in weaponry from the larger lanceolate points associated with thrusting spears to the somewhat smaller dart points associated with the more technologically advanced atlatl. Another notable change in the archaeological record for this period is a dramatic increase in the number of ground stone tools, suggesting an increased dependence on plant resources. Archaic period dart points have been discovered on sites across the mountains. Typical projectile point styles include Humboldt, Pinto, and Elko.

Clovis

Humboldt

Pinto

Some researchers believe that another change in cultural adaptations occurred between 3,000 – 1,500 years ago, signifying a transitional period between the Archaic and Late Prehistoric periods. Similar phenomena have been identified at approximately the same time in other culture areas of North America and are referred to by various titles such as Intermediate period, and Woodland period. In California, the term Intermediate period is frequently used; although there are some disagreements over dates. The Intermediate period is characterized by a more focused subsistence strategy, increasingly complex social organization, and larger, more permanent settlements as compared to their Archaic period antecedents. Typical projectile points of this period include the Elko Corner-Notched, Rose Springs Corner Notched, and Eastgate Expanding Stem.

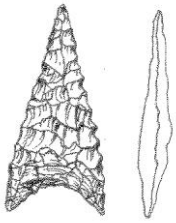


Elko Corner Notched

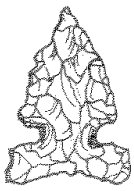
Rose Springs Corner Notched

Eastgate Expanding Stem

Around 1,500 years ago, another technological change occurred that is readily identifiable in the archaeological record. Diminutive projectile points associated with bow and arrow weaponry begin to appear in archaeological deposits. The arrival of this change in weaponry is generally accepted as the horizon marker for the advent of the next major temporal phase known as the Late Prehistoric period (1,500 – 200 years ago). Typical Late Prehistoric period arrowpoints in the Sierra National Forest are Cottonwood Triangular, Desert Side Notched, Sierra Side Notched, Delta Side Notched and Gunther Barbed. Serrated blade edges are a common morphological attribute of many of the arrowpoints regardless of type.



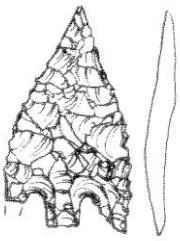
Cottonwood Triangular



Desert Side Notched

Sierra Side Notched

Delta Side Notched



Gunther Barbed

At the time of the first documented Euro-American contact, the Sierra National Forest was home to a thriving Native American population. These aboriginal inhabitants were divided into different ethnic groups comprised primarily of Mono, Miwok, Paiute, and Yokuts people. The mountains and foothills of the Sierra National Forest with its many lakes and rivers, as well as diverse plant and animal species provided the Native Americans with an abundant resource base. Due to the extreme changes in elevation and environment, it was necessary to travel frequently to exploit varied resources as they became available in diverse places at different times of the year. As a result of this constant movement, an extensive network of trails was developed. This transportation system was used to reach places for gathering, hunting, or fishing; for trans-Sierran trade and social

visits; as well as for movement among settlements and camps. Today, many of our current roads and trails had their origin in the aboriginal transportation system of the Native American people.

Contact between the Native Americans and the Euro-American colonists had a devastating impact on the indigenous people. To varying degrees, all ethnic groups suffered. The indigenous people living nearer the gold fields were severely impacted by their contact with mining settlements. They were decimated by disease, sometimes killed, and largely forced out of their traditional resource areas.

As gold diggings in the San Joaquin River watershed had begun to give out by the mid-1850s, miners moved away or became farmers in the San Joaquin Valley. A few moved into the foothills and lower mountain slopes and established subsistence farms. A number of these intermarried with local Native Americans and became integrated into a native way of life. As a result, native peoples were able to maintain a semi-traditional way of life into the early twentieth century. Hunting, gathering, and subsistence farming were sometimes supplemented by men's wage work as sheepherders, loggers, sawyers, and ranch hands.

The indigenous people of the Sierra National Forest were never entirely removed from their traditional homeland. Although they were forced to move to the rancherias and allotments that were established by the US government, most of these relocated settlements are still within the aboriginal lands of their ancestors. Today, the descendants of the early inhabitants continue to live, work, and perform traditional cultural and religious practices within their aboriginal lands. There are Native American communities in or near the small towns of Mariposa, Auberry, Friant, North Fork, Prather, Tollhouse, and Dunlap. These communities represent a testimonial to a continuous indigenous presence that stretches back for almost 14,000 years, and demonstrates the remarkably adaptive character of these proud people who have witnessed unprecedented climatic, political, and cultural change.

Euro-American Use of the Sierra National Forest: One of the earliest commercial enterprises in the Sierra was that of sheep raising, which grew exponentially in California from the 1870s through the 1890s. As herds increased, the foothill ranges became too small and overused. A severe drought in 1877 forced the herds into the green high Sierran mountain meadows. Herdsmen first drove their flocks up existing Native American trails; many of these, as well as new trails, were enlarged into wagon roads over time.

By the early 1880s, a crude road system through the Sierras connected settlements and allowed delivery of supplies and postal service. Stockmen built bridges over larger streams and small cabins for short-term use. By the 1890s the western slope of the Sierra was divided into informal ranges recognized by stock companies.

As stock raising was established, so the timber industry was also entering the Sierra. Before the 1880s, small operations set up small mills, and the milled lumber was hauled to mining camps and local communities. By the 1880s, larger companies began to set up permanent steam-driven saw mills. Logs were still hauled by wagon, but the milled lumber was taken all the way down to Fresno. Charles B. Shaver, a timber man from Michigan, determined to modernize the timber industry in the Sierras. He constructed a dam over Stevenson Creek creating Shaver Lake. He built a forty-mile flume that carried milled lumber into the central valley, and took over many of the smaller local mills. By 1887 his mill ran day and night.

The Forest Service: Although the U.S. government began to directly regulate the use of the

Sierra in the 1860s, neither the logging nor the sheep industry had developed with any real planning and the effects on the watershed were ruinous. Too many sheep overgrazed and trampled mountain meadows. Soil erosion developed in dirt roads, sheep paths and areas of timber harvest. Fires fueled by discarded logging slash burned ground cover. Runoff became unmanageable, filling the irrigation ditches of San Joaquin Valley farmers. In 1889, distressed farmers and others with an interest in the expanding Fresno County agricultural industry petitioned Congress to act in protection of the upper San Joaquin watershed.

These concerns received official recognition in the Forest Reserves Act of 1891. This Act authorized the president to establish forest reservations with the goal of conserving the nation's timber and water resources. Following passage of this Act, in 1891-1892 President Benjamin Harrison created the first six forest reservations that encompassed more than three million acres. On February 14, 1893, the Sierra Forest Reserve was created.

From 1891 to 1905 responsibility for administering Forest Reserves resided with the Department of the Interior. Initially there were no formal provisions for the administration of these reserves and, as a result, they fared little better than unprotected areas. On February 1, 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt approved the formal transfer of the responsibility for the forest reserves to the Department of Agriculture. Six months later, Gifford Pinchot was appointed to head the newly christened United States Forest Service. The Sierra National Forest was the second National Forest created in California and the largest at the time. It covered over six million acres of the Sierra Nevada and was about four times the average area of typical California National Forests. Originally it embraced parts of eight counties.

Pinchot emerged as an energetic promoter of conservation and of using national forests as models for the scientific management of natural resources for their rational, efficient, and sustainable use. Pinchot's stewardship and management of forest reserves were guided by three principles: 1) the development rather than husbanding of resources; 2) the prevention of waste; and 3) the development and preservation of natural resources for the common good. Pinchot's approach was the wise use and scientific management for the nation's long-lived material prosperity, not preservation for aesthetic considerations or wildlife habitats.

With the establishment of the Forest Service in 1905, the federal government hired personnel to begin work in the Forests, establishing a physical presence. Rangers and assistant rangers began constructing trails, buildings, bridges, camps, and other structures. Because of the size of the Sierra Reserve and the constraints of transportation of personnel and supplies to remote areas, ranger stations and camps were established throughout the Sierra. Fire management was an important aspect of the management of the early National Forest.

Hydroelectric Systems: The river systems of the Sierra National Forest were first recognized as having great hydroelectric potential in the 1890s. By the early 1900s, financial syndicates and power companies had been established to harness this resource, and to provide energy to the growing need of the American public. By 1911, a massive construction effort took place, with the building some of the world's most powerful hydroelectric generating plants, reservoirs, railroads, and huge industrialization of the San Joaquin River and Kings River watersheds. This great expansion continued into the 1960s, and can be seen in the reservoirs at Bass Lake, Mammoth Pool, Huntington Lake, Florence Lake, Lake Edison, Courtright Lake, and Wishon Reservoir.

Forest Recreation: By the late 19th century, tourists and adventurers were coming to the Sierra National Forest to fish at in the lakes, relax at tourist ranches, and hike and camp in the beautiful

Sierra mountains. The area was gaining popularity from the explorations of the Sierra Club and the writings of philosopher-naturalists, such as John Muir. Interest in conserving the nation's natural resources, and particularly its timber resources, mushroomed in the last quarter of the 19th century.

Part of Gifford Pinchot's forest management philosophy included allowing for expanded public use of forest reserve lands. In 1905, Forest Service recreation policy consisted of little more than fish and game regulations, trail marking, and road building to enhance access for a public. Pinchot realized that expanding the opportunities for public use of Forest Service lands would not only contribute to the common good, it would also be a way of generating additional revenue. One of the ways in which Pinchot hoped to generate this revenue was through the issuance of use permits.

The founding piece of legislation concerning the private use of public forest reserve lands was the Organic Administration Act of 1897. This Act established permits as the means by which forest resources were to be allocated and used by private parties. In return for an annual fee the Forest Reserve officers would issue permits to prospective users, be they recreationists, hoteliers, or resort builders. In 1905, Pinchot issued The Use Book, as it came to be known, which was small enough to fit in a ranger's pocket and addressed the issues of summer homes on forest reserve lands. Regulation 42 permitted hotels, stores, mills, summer residences and similar establishments on reserve lands wherever the demand was in the best interests of the reserve.

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson created the National Park Service within the Department of the Interior. The Chief of the new agency, Stephen T. Mather, attracted attention to national parks as recreational areas for the American public who were newly motorized. These actions saw an increase in public interest in wilderness preservation and outdoor recreation, and a resulting increase in public use of the National Forests for recreation.

The Great Depression and WWII: A hallmark of the Depression era in California was use of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) labor on the National Forests. Because of the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt's philosophy of government, his embrace of conservation, the Forest Service's pivotal 1933 Copeland Report argued that forestry could be a solution to the raft of national social problems, particularly massive unemployment. On the heels of this report, the CCC was established by executive order in April 1933 and quickly became one of the most popular and effective of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs. The CCC was a public works program that put over three million young men and adults to work during the Great Depression of the 1930's and 1940's in the United States, and the Forest Service found itself with a labor force. California had about 100 CCC camps, serving over 160,000 men; roughly half of these were on the National Forests. In 1941, a newspaper from the town of North Fork (the headquarters of the SNF at the time) reported on CCC accomplishments:

> Since the establishment of the [CCC] camps in 1933, many improvements have been made in the Sierra National Forest in the development of its natural resources. In eight years, more than a million man days have been worked by the enrollees in the many CCC camps throughout the forest. Sixteen bridges have been constructed; 240 miles of roads made; 20 miles of new trail; 90 miles of fire line added; 62 buildings and lookout towers finished; 145 miles of telephone lines strung; and improvements made on 70 different campgrounds.

The SNF retains many administrative buildings that were built by Civilian Conservation Corps crews during the Depression years. Many of the Forest's roads, trails, and campgrounds were

built during this era. Their other principal tasks included stringing telephone lines, building roads and bridges, preventing and suppressing fires, planting trees, and eradicating forest pests and diseases. By the time the CCC program ended in 1942, they had transformed the image of the entire region, including the Sierra National Forest.

The Modern Era: Although foot travel into the high Sierra as a pastime began with the earliest explorers and tourists in the nineteenth century, it was at this time in the mid-twentieth century that this form of recreation exploded in popularity. The thousands of WWII soldiers who had bivouacked in tents and gained mountaineering experience in the war theaters found equipment available as war surplus for recreational packing. So did many others in the American economic boom that followed the war. The hiking traditions of Europeans found their way into American markets. The slow stream of backpackers in the Sierra Nevada after the war and throughout the 1950s became a popular sport in the 1960s when lightweight equipment such as nylon tents, down sleeping bags, and external backpack frames of light aluminum became available. Backpacking increased in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s.

At the same time as interest in the high Sierra grew for its recreational opportunities, national recognition of the undeveloped character of the high Sierra grew, and the 1964 Wilderness Act was enacted. It stated the purpose of the designated wilderness areas was for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such a manner as to preserve their wilderness character. In 1964, the Ansel Adams and John Muir Wildernesses were established on the Sierra National Forest.

Today the Sierra National Forest is recognized for over a century of providing for the public needs of wood, water, electricity, and recreation.