The Sonoran Desert

Home of the Hohokam
Sonoran Desert Region

The Sonoran Desert Region consists of the Sonoran Desert itself plus the surrounding biological communities, including the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California) and its islands.
Sonoran Desert

- Wetter than Chihuahuan Desert to east
- Wetter than Mojave Desert to west
- Supports distinctive vegetation
  - Saguaro
  - Cholla
  - Mesquite, ironwood, paloverde trees
Chihuahuan Desert
Mojave Desert
Regional Vegetation Zones

- Tundra (San Francisco Peaks)
- Coniferous forest (Sierra system)
- Deciduous forest (Mogollon Rim)
- Desert Grassland (Eastern Sonora)
- Chaparral (Mogollon Rim)
- Sonoran Desert Scrubland (Phoenix Basin southward)
Diverse physical geography
Riparian zones

- Isolated ribbons of deciduous forests
  - In river valleys and canyon bottoms

- Perennial streams = rivers (e.g., Gila)

- Arroyos = dry canyons
  - May fill with water once or twice per year

- Rivers = critical to prehistoric cultures
Important Rivers

Salt River

Upper

Lower

www.bluechameleon.org
Important Rivers

Gila River

Upper Middle Fork
Lower Gila & Salt

- Basically desert floodplains
- Fertile land
- Low precipitation
- Irrigation key to farming
Jumping Cholla Cactus
Sahuaro Cactus
Prickly Pear Cactus

Prickly pear cactus with fruit ready to pick.
Traditional uses of cactus fruits

• **Food**
  – Fruit must be carefully peeled (today used in jelly)
  – Or it can be roasted
  – Paddles can be used as nopalitos

• **Medicinal uses**
  – Full of alkaloids
  – Helps with diarrhea, diabetes, stomach aches
Agave

- Large succulent
- Many parts edible
- Raw material for textiles
  - Brushes, weaving
Small seed plants

- Saltbush
- Pigweed
- Goosefoot
Mesquite trees

www.texasbeyondhistory.net

betterhardwoods.com
Uses of mesquite

• Wood is hard, rot resistant

• Food
  – Beans ground and used in breads
  – High in protein (lysine)
  – High calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron & zinc
Ironwood Trees
These are three of the many desert plants used by the Hohokam. At the top is a cholla cactus, the buds and fruits of which are boiled. In the center is a yucca, a plant of many uses. Indians sometimes made the leaves into thread by baring and twisting the plant’s long fibers. The pointed end of each leaf was left at the end of the fiber to serve as a needle. Beans of the mesquite tree (bottom drawing) were an important part of the Hohokam diet. Ground with a mortar and pestle, mesquite bean flour could be used in broths, stews and breads.
Game animals

• Small game – nearby
  – Jackrabbits, desert cottontails

• Large game – distant
  – Mule deer, desert bighorn sheep
Crops

- Maize
- Cotton
- Beans
- Squash
Summary

- A fertile canvas for Hohokam culture
- Just add water
- That’s what they did...

- Hohokam culture was centered in the Gila and Salt River basins
Hohokam culture

• Probably not one culture
• There was a cultural cline across the region
  – All areas have something in common, but differ a bit across space too
• Culture is diverse today in the region
  – Stems from Hohokam?
Outline

• Trace Hohokam through time
• Discuss Hohokam adaptations to Sonaran Desert
• Highlight potential reasons for Hohokam decline