



San Juan Southern Paiute



Paiute Tus Basket, circa 1890.
Lined with pine pitch for use as a water jug.

The San Juan Southern Paiutes have lived for the last several hundred years in territory east of the Grand Canyon, bound-
ed by the San Juan and Colorado Rivers, with the Navajo and Hopi Tribes as their neighbors. They share a common heri-
tage with the Southern Paiutes of northern Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California. They retain and maintain their native
language which is distinctly separate from their neighbors. Tribal members depend on raising livestock and subsistence
farming of a small number of crops. The tribe is also known for its hand-woven traditional baskets which utilize age-old
weaving techniques. The basket designs and materials have been passed down from generation to generation. Using the
age-old techniques, the younger generation is weaving more contemporary designs.

A Bit of History

San Juan Southern Paiute were in this general area by A.D. 1100.

The Southern Paiutes came in contact with the Span-
iards in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but
were little disturbed by them. The first attempt to de-
scribe them systematically seems to have been made by
Father Escalante, who traversed their territory in 1776.
In the mid 1850s, they settled in dispersed camps along
drainages in the Tsegi Canyon system (where Keet
Seel/Kawestima and Betatakin/Talastima are located),
as well as in Nitsin Canyon, location of Inscription
House/Tsu’ovi. Most likely the San Juan Southern
Paiute had settled there some time after the inhabitants
of the cliff dwellings had moved on to other villages.
This small band of San Juan Southern Paiute eventually
gave way to the ever-growing numbers and expansion
of the Navajo/Dine. The San Juan Southern Paiute
moved closer to Navajo Mountain (Paiute Canyon)
and Hidden Springs (near Tuba City), where they con-
tinued their strategy of hunting, gathering and limited
agriculture to gain food and materials for survival. The
San Juan Southern Paiute still feel a strong connection
to many places in this region such as Nitsin Canyon.

When they received federal recognition in 1990, the
San Juan Southern Paiute were unique in being the only Southern Paiute tribe with parents and children
still making everyday use of the language. Now, about 30 of the 300 tribal members are fluent speakers, but
only one child is learning it. Feeling this loss, the tribe has responded by setting up a language revitalization
program that includes immersion camps. Southern Paiute traditional narratives are culturally important as
they express Paiute world view and traditional lifeways. In addition, all kinds of everyday life stories are told,
becoming one of the primary ways that children are socialized to be proper members of the Paiute commu-
nity.



Paiute Women
1871-1872 Powell Expedition, Colorado Historical Society

After almost twenty years of effort, the San Juan Southern Paiutes finally have a home



Seal of the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe

belonged to the Navajos. The San Juan Southern Paiutes worked with the Navajo Nation to accomplish this. No Navajos were relocated; the only people living on these 5,400 acres are families who viewed themselves as Paiutes.

Leaders of the 300-member tribe signed a treaty with the much larger Navajo Nation on May 20, 2000, giving the Paiutes some 5,400 acres of land that had

Some 5,100 acres given to the San Juan Southern Paiutes by the Navajos are in Hidden Springs area, a small area about ten miles north of Tuba City. The other 300 acres are in the Utah portion of the Navajo Nation just south of Lake Powell on what is known as the Paiute Farms area, accessed through Monument Valley, Utah.

The San Juan Southern Paiute was recognized by the United States Congress in 1990 as a distinct group. The tribe is governed by Tribal leaders and Tribal Council Members (Shuupara’api), who meet regularly to decide issues of importance to tribal members. The San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe has a constitution in place.

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We are the San Juan Southern Paiute!

We are one of the bands of Paiute people who have homelands in northwestern Arizona. In the past we hunted, gathered, and farmed. We moved with the seasons to different areas of the Colorado Plateau. We farmed land in the Moencopi wash area near Tuba City on the Navajo Nation and near Navajo Mountain, which is also part of the Navajo Nation.

In the 1870s, Mormon and Navajo people began to move into our homelands. We had to begin to share our land and resources with these groups of people, and it soon became crowded. By 1890, most of our people had abandoned their farms near Tuba City and moved toward Navajo Mountain. But some of our people stayed in the area and continued to farm. We call this place Hidden Springs, and today it is our main community.

In 1907, our reservation was established, but we were considered a part of the Navajo Nation. Some of our reservation lands in southern Utah were returned to public domain, opening the land to mineral exploration. We lost much of our land, but continued to support ourselves through farming and sheep herding.

Basket weaving is an art form practiced by many of our community members. We create baskets using techniques, designs, and knowledge of materials passed down for generations. We trade baskets with the Navajo and Hopi people to supplement our economy.

--Evelyn James, Vice-president, San Juan Southern Paiute, 1999

Examples of San Juan Southern Paiute basketry

