

travel

Baskets and botany in Tecolote

San Diegans and Kumeyaay elders save a canyon

“Although our ancestors may not be here today, their spirits are with us.” So said Kumeyaay elder Jane Dumas last year at a dedication ceremony in Tecolote Canyon. Dumas and other tribal members from San Diego and northern Baja California were here because of a unique partnership between the canyon’s citizen advisory committee and Kumeyaay descendants. The canyon once supported Kumeyaay villages; its plants were harvested for food and shelter. Now it’s a San Diego city park, and plants are still very much at its heart.

Eloise Battle, chair of the advisory committee, lives on the edge of Tecolote Canyon. For three decades she’s been one of the principal advocates for this urban canyon park less than a mile from Interstate 5 and Mission Bay. Battle remembers one of her first walks with Dumas at Tecolote (which means *owl* in Kumeyaay).

“Jane is a magical person,” says Battle. “She pointed out dozens of plants and their traditional uses, and at one point put her hand on a common coastal sage scrub and looked up at me. ‘If you take a tip of this branch and make tea, it will help you with your respiratory problems,’ she said. I had told her nothing about my asthma.”

A handout at the Tecolote Nature Center lists 27 plants in the canyon that were used by the Kumeyaay tribe. Sometimes the application was practical. Need laundry soap? Try wild gourd. Aches and pains from flu or arthritis? Black sage might help.

Kumeyaay elders still have extensive knowledge of native plants, their prop-



STEPHEN SIMPSON

Tribal elder Celia Silva demonstrates basketmaking to a new generation.

agation, and their usage (although elders and park officials alike discourage canyon visitors from ingesting any plants). Kumeyaay willow baskets are particularly fascinating. Made of unstripped branches, leaves and all, they function as granaries for acorns, piñons, and other seeds. The leaves act as an insect repellent.

The elders are also a vital link to the restoration of the canyon’s coastal sage scrub and riparian plant environments. Volunteers at the park are regularly enlisted to eradicate non-native plants like pampas grass. The latest alien invasion is actually a by-product of the 1996 election: the word “Perot” cut by vandals one night into a previously undisturbed hillside of coastal sage scrub. “This is California’s most endangered habitat, and they scraped it clean,” ranger Tracey Walker laments. “When

will people get the message?”

Elder Jane Dumas would likely ask the same question. She finished her dedication: “For my life, I may be here tomorrow, or I may not. But if we have sensitive, caring people to hold onto this place, all will be well.”

TECOLOTE CANYON

Where: From Interstate 5 near Mission Bay, take the Tecolote exit east to the new nature center at 5180 Tecolote Rd.
When: Dawn to dusk daily.

FYI: At the nature center, ask for directions to the trail leading up the tributary canyon between Tecolote Canyon Golf Course and Genesee Ave. Here you’ll experience the greatest contrast between the altered canyon (the golf course) and its original state (the folded hillsides to the east).

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by PETER JENSEN