



THE GOSHUTES

AT A GLANCE: GOSHUTE INGENUITY IN A CHALLENGING DESERT ECOSYSTEM

One of the hallmarks of Goshute history is the tribe's adaptability to the natural world and, more recently, to the difficulties presented by encounters with other peoples, particularly white colonists. Kuttuhsippeh, the name Goshutes use for themselves, means "people of the dry earth." For centuries prior to white incursion, Kuttuhsippeh lived in a delicate balance with nature on the high arid desert and mountain lands south and west of what we now call the Great Salt Lake. The entire Great Basin, of which the Goshute homelands are only one part, has less abundant plant and animal life than other areas that were home to indigenous peoples. However, as Dennis R. Defa notes, due to a combination of extremely hot temperatures in summer and extreme cold in winter, poor soil composition for plant life, and a lack of water, the Goshute area of the Great Basin "is among the most forbidding in North America and offered the resident Indians few resources needed for survival." Goshute creation stories place them in this, the most challenging environment faced by any of Utah's native nations, from time immemorial. Goshutes relied on ingenuity and on a remarkable knowledge of the natural world, passed on from generation to generation, to survive in a place that others found inhospitable.

The Goshutes dealt with their homeland's temperature extremes and minimal vegetation by moving around the region to make the greatest use of its resources; as historian David Rich Lewis notes, they were "flexible by necessity given the dispersion and variability of resources from season to season and year to year." In spring,

summer, and fall, the Goshutes grouped together as extended families rather than as a single tribe. These families moved through valleys and canyons in response to the availability of water sources and to the growth patterns of the plants they gathered and ate. Their diet encompassed forty-seven different species of grass seed, eight different types of roots, twelve types of greens, and twelve different berry types. Perhaps the most important of these was the pinyon—or pine—nut. To supplement this plant-centered diet, Goshutes collected insects and insect larvae. The Goshutes also hunted animals for food, again according to a seasonal pattern, and relied on a deep reservoir of knowledge about desert wildlife passed on from generation to generation. Extended family groups hunted small mammals, birds, and reptiles. Most summers and falls, multiple extended families gathered for larger hunts, which focused on pronghorn antelope and, especially, jackrabbits. In the winter, Goshutes moved to more established camps in lower parts of valleys, including the Skull, Rush, Tooele, and Deep Creek. These sites held pre-positioned food caches and provided access to water throughout the winter. Although Goshute people moved around a great deal, these valleys were places of particular cultural, spiritual, and material importance. In spring, when stored food began to run short, the Goshutes would once again begin to move through the homeland in which they lived in such a balanced and symbiotic manner.

Because only the Goshutes seemed willing and able to adapt to this harsh landscape, they lived



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independently for a long time, although they did experience some encounters with other Indian groups and with Spanish colonial forces. Indeed, subsequent to the creation of a southwest Indian trade network and the establishment of the Old Spanish Trail, some Goshutes were captured as slaves by Ute and Mexican raiders. This devastating experience, Defa contended, encouraged the tribe to “avoi[d] contact with outside people whenever possible,” marking another Goshute adaptation to difficult circumstances. Still, while outsiders increasingly entered the Goshute homelands, until 1849 the region remained too challenging for non-Goshutes to attempt to settle.

At that point, however, white people began to arrive in and settle portions of the Goshute lands, generating a significant disruption of tribal ways. In 1849 the establishment of a United States Corps of Topographic Engineers facility in the Tooele Valley and of a nearby timber mill by Mormon Apostle Ezra T. Benson and other Latter-day Saints signaled a decisive change in the disruption of Goshute ways by outsiders. Between 1849 and 1860, Mormons occupied the prime lands in Skull, Rush, Cedar, and Deep Creek valleys. They took control of vital Goshute water resources, farmed in a way that harmed native vegetation and the soil, and overgrazed and overhunted the delicate ecosystem. Thousands of California gold rush participants also helped themselves to the limited resources available on Goshute land. Brigham Madsen concluded that “the herds of draft animals and cattle of the emigrant trains and the efficient farming operations of the Mormon farmers in Utah destroyed the grass seeds and roots the Shoshoni [and the Goshute] had counted on for survival.” The Pony

Express, along with twenty Overland Mail stations, drove the Goshutes from many of their remaining critical resource sites. By the end of the 1850s, whites in the area outnumbered Goshutes.

Driven by the interlocking motivation to stay on their homelands and to sustain themselves, the typically non-confrontational Goshutes responded to white encroachment by adopting the tactics of other indigenous groups under duress. As BYU professors James B. Allen and Ted J. Warner argued, “When food was scarce it seemed only reasonable to take the white man’s cattle or to raid mail stations and establishments where provisions could be found.” Such maneuvers opened up all Goshutes to harsh retribution: in one of the most horrific examples, Captain Samuel P. Smith and his detachment of California Volunteers exterminated fifty-three Goshutes in May 1863 as punishment for suspected raids on the overland route by other Goshute tribe members.

Not all whites supported such attitudes toward the Goshutes, and, once again showing adaptability, some Goshute people sought out alliances with white people who wanted to address the tribe’s loss of resources, including government agents and Mormon settlers who proposed western-style farming as a way to provide the Goshutes a livelihood and stop their raiding. With the support of federal agents, some Goshutes began raising crops on what would come to be known as Deep Creek Farm. But other Goshutes rejected farming as incongruent with Goshute values or ways of life; in compelling the Goshutes to stay in one location and accept white



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assistance, farming undercut traditions of mobility and familial independence.

Goshute members who did attempt to farm encountered difficulties. Within a few years, the government-sponsored farming experiment failed due to a lack of federal support and because as one local white official reminded the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1862, “much of the tillable portion of the desert-like country had been occupied by whites.” In 1863, in another effort to survive the invasion of their homeland, the Goshutes signed a treaty with the U.S. government that affirmed the tribe’s sovereign land rights. By 1870 a number of Goshutes had resumed farming operations at both Deep Creek and Skull Valley. Yet even with this success, the support of the new local Indian superintendent, and the 1863 treaty, the Goshutes found that white settlers were still encroaching on the few decent pieces of farmland remaining in tribal control.

The next decade saw the Goshutes fighting on another front. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs failed to appreciate the tribe’s effort to adapt to white ways and called for the removal of the Goshutes to the reservation the government was establishing in the Uintah Valley, over two hundred miles east of the Goshute homeland. Of all Utah’s tribal nations, the Goshutes appeared most resistant to displacement. William Lee, a Mormon farmer who served as both translator and frequent advocate for the Goshutes, reported that “They are willing to do anything on their own land, the land of their fathers . . . they are not willing to go to the land of the stranger.” That reasoning did not convince government representatives, who in 1872 and 1873 recommended moving the Goshutes to the

Uintah Reservation, Fort Hall, Idaho, or Indian Territory in Oklahoma. These efforts prompted yet another adaptive strategy on the part of the Goshutes. Skull Valley leaders attempted to shape federal policy by seeking the support of officials with leverage in Washington; in the end, they successfully avoided a variety of relocation efforts.

Through ingenuity and an unswerving dedication to the place they called home, the Goshutes made it into the twentieth century still in control of some of their homeland. However, their adaptive skills could not overcome all the challenges brought by the presence of so many outsiders. The Goshutes were unable to sustain their traditional mobile way of life, and, reflecting a trend initiated with the arrival of white settlers, the Goshute population continued to dwindle. But remaining tribal members kept fighting for their own and their tribe’s survival. Around World War I, the federal government finally reacted to persistent Goshute efforts by creating reservations at Skull Valley and Deep Creek, and the Goshutes subsequently negotiated with the government to increase these land holdings.

Goshute adaptability still is evident today. At the end of the twentieth century, the Skull Valley Goshutes asserted their sovereignty in a unique and ingenious way in order to persist as a people. To learn more about the Goshutes’ twentieth-century land right and sovereignty issues, see the “Skull Valley Goshute and the Nuclear Waste Storage Controversy” lesson plan and *We Shall Remain: The Goshute*.