

# Joshua Tree National Park

Deserts are often thought of as dry, desolate, and deadly. Here in the southern region of California, two desert ecosystems converge to form a distinctly unique National Park. In this area, animals, plants, birds, and pioneers have lived, died, thrived and struggled. Imagine yourself a Native American in the 1850s. As you look at the harsh terrain, contemplate what you would have available for dinner. Archeological data indicate that early inhabitants of this area actually consumed a wide variety of foods including seeds, nuts, and berries. Over 120 plants were used by the tribes located here. Some were edible, some were medicinal, and some were used as raw materials. In addition to gathering plants, Native Americans also hunted local mammals such as deer, wild sheep, and rabbits. Life is no less harsh for the wildlife of the region. A variety of birds, mammals, and reptiles call the area home. All of them are in competition for 3 familiar needs: food, water, and shelter. Many of the resident creatures make their homes deep in the soil for protection from the high surface temperatures. To live comfortably, owls, rodents, rabbits, snakes, spiders, and insects dig subterranean homes. Some reptiles like snakes are opportunistic and use abandoned burrows or natural crevices in the rock. For the most part, residents of this ecosystem are nocturnal by necessity. Wild creatures don't like being out under a blistering sun in triple digit heat any more than we do.

Food for the desert wildlife means the difference between life and death. For most, sustenance comes from the vegetation that has struggled to gain a foothold in the hot rocky soils. Surprisingly there are 813 species of plants in the region of Joshua Tree National Park. In the rains of spring time, flowering plants can put on a beautiful show of color on the sepia toned landscape. The most famous plant is the tall yucca species for which the park was named. The

Joshua Tree gets its name thanks to its distinctive upward reaching branches. Early Mormon settlers saw these trees, some of them 40 feet tall, and were reminded of the prophet Joshua with arms outstretched. Life in the desert is hard. Survival is possible only by interdependence among all things. The Indians relied on the plants and animals, the wildlife relies on the plants for food and shelter, and the plants need the animals to spread their seeds. In Joshua Tree National Park, every tree, animal, and person faces an immense struggle to survive.

## Source(s):

<http://www.joshua.tree.national-park.com/info.htm#wild>

<http://www.nps.gov/jotr/> The National Parks: American's Best Idea (Ken Burns film, 2009)

## Author(s):

Written by Chris Oswalt, Undergraduate Student in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2009.