

The Cahuilla and the Palm: A Harmonious Lineage

The Indian Canyons' enormous *Washingtonia filifera* oases showcase the Tribe's historic ties to this life-sustaining tree.

Photography by Tom Brewster
Illustration by Jamey Christoph

The history of the Cahuilla Indians is inextricably interwoven into that of western North America's only native palm tree, the desert fan palm. Fittingly, part of the tree's taxonomic name, *filifera*, means "thread-bearing," denoting the delicate fronds that line its fan-shaped leaves. (The *Washingtonia* part of *Washingtonia filifera* is a nod to the first president and thus the tree's American-ness). Two of the world's largest naturally occurring palm oases of the *Washingtonia filifera* are in Palm Canyon and Andreas Canyon within the Indian Canyons in Palm Springs. More than 150,000 people from around the world visit the canyons each year.

The desert palm is frequently planted as an ornamental in America's warm growth zones, but it truly is a child of the Southwestern desert, growing in alkaline soil around natural

springs and streams. The desert palm is a sign that signifies "water is here." It is recognizable not for extreme height — it's stouter and shorter than the Mexican palm — but for the puffy "cloak" of dried leaves hanging down its trunk. Like other palms, *filifera* is not actually a tree like a pine or maple that has bark and woody interior — it's instead a "monocot," putting it in the category of grasses, wheat, and aloe. Its nourishing moisture runs throughout its trunk, so it forms no annual rings and is rarely harmed by fire. Fire actually helps desert fan palm groves, driving out burrowing insects, stripping off the palms' cloaks, and letting sunlight reach the ground for hundreds of new palm seedlings to sprout.

And fire is just what the Cahuilla people provided for the palm groves that they called home in the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto ►►

Andreas Canyon in Palm Springs offers the second-largest reserve of *Washingtonia filifera* palms in the world.

Hooded oriole
Icterus cucullatus

Western yellow bat
Lasiurus xanthinus

Tree of Life

WASHINGTONIA FILIFERA palms support a variety of species, from insects to birds to large animals. Rodents nest in the shag, attracting rat snakes. Hooded orioles create nests from palm leaf fibers and also help distribute seeds. Gray fox, birds, coyotes, and rodents rely on palm fruit for sustenance. While giant palm-boring beetles can eventually chew through the palms' trunks, they play an integral part in the trees' life cycle by creating space for new palms to grow. Here's a snapshot of some of the creatures you'll find in and around the palms.

Desert bighorn sheep
Ovis canadensis nelsoni

White-footed mouse
Peromyscus leucopus

Common gray fox
Urocyon cinereoargenteus

Coachella Valley
fringe-toed lizard
Uma inornata

Giant palm-boring beetle
Dinapate wrightii

Gambel's quail
Callipepla gambelii

Coyote
Canis latrans

Rat snake
Elaphe rosalia



Palm Canyon boasts the world's largest naturally occurring oasis of *Washingtonia filifera* palms and welcomes more than 150,000 visitors each year. Historically, the Cahuilla used dried leaves of the palm to make huts, sandals, and cooking utensils, and harvested its succulent fruit for meals.

Mountains and the Coachella basin for thousands of years. According to Agua Caliente tribal leader and historian Francisco Patencio (1857–1947), Cahuilla medicine men would order fires to be set to the palm groves to clear out the palm-boring beetles and make way for the juiciest, most lush crops of fruit. In his book *Desert Palm Oasis* (Nature Trails Press, 2010), James W. Cornett theorizes that fire management would also be indispensable for human communities living among desert palms: “Co-researchers and I learned that 10 years after a fire, fallen flower stalks, fronds, and trunks pile up and make it difficult to walk through an oasis. Twenty years after a fire, the debris is so deep and unstable that walking through an oasis can be hazardous.”

The Cahuilla located permanent villages at large palm groves, where oasis waters

evaporate into the leaves, creating a moist, shady, cool microclimate that attracts game and fosters myriad useful plants (cottonwood, mesquite, and willow among them). The Cahuilla turned the dried leaves of the palm into huts, sandals, and cooking utensils. They also harvested the succulent fruit, treasuring its sweetness during season and drying it and grinding it, seeds and flesh, into meal for a nourishing mush off-season. Seeds were also used for gourd rattles. All of these materials were regularly traded with nearby Indian tribes. By transporting the fruit and seeds to other camps and settlements in the mountains and valleys, the Cahuilla were integral to the spread of the desert fan palm.

The Cahuilla have a creation myth that best illustrates the way they conceptualize their culture as interlinked with the desert

palm. In the myth, the first Cahuilla man, *Ma-ul*, was growing old. Faced with his own mortality, he wanted to leave his people with something of lasting value. When he realized there were no palm trees, he knew what to give his people. Legend has it that after finding a nice spring where water was coming out of the ground, he stood still and firm until slowly roots took hold and bark formed around his legs. Then, from his hair sprouted palm fronds. *Ma-ul* turned himself into the first palm tree in the desert.

Palm Canyon holds the world's largest reserve of *filifera*; Andreas Canyon has the second largest. The next time you hike or drive by an “ordinary” desert fan palm, consider how the Cahuilla nourished, and were nourished by, this great treasure: a useful plant of shelter and sustenance. — Kristina Sigler

A Day in the Indian Canyons

Visit the Indian Canyons at the southern end of Palm Springs to see the *Washingtonia filifera*. At 15 miles long, Palm Canyon boasts a moderately graded foot path and opportunities to picnic near a stream, hike, meditate, or horseback ride. The Trading Post offers maps, arts, books, jewelry, pottery, baskets, and refreshments. The tranquil and lush Andreas Canyon has more than 150 species of plants within a half-mile radius. Hike its scenic foot trail to spot birds, palms, centuries-old bedrock mortars and metates used for food preparation, rock formations, and Andreas Creek.

Ranger-led tours are available Friday, Saturday, and Sunday 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. but are subject to change. From Oct. 1 through July 6, the Indian Canyons are open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. From July 7 through Sept. 30, Tahquitz Canyon and the Indian Canyons are open to the public 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Visit www.indian-canyons.com or call 760-323-6018 for more information.

