

Cocopahs to Celebrate Heritage of Tribe, Neighbors

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October 17, 2007 - 11:20PM

A huge public feast followed by traditional dancing and singing will mark the 11th Annual Cocopah Cultural Celebration, a time when the tribe shares its own culture and celebrates the cultures of neighbors and friends. The event runs from 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday at Cocopah Reservation West, located northwest of Somerton.



The Cocopah Indian Tribe began holding its annual celebration in 1996, when the tribe was then celebrating the opening of its museum, which will be open for tours Saturday.

"The Cocopah Museum and the Elders Cultural Council members established this day to recognize, respect and enjoy the tribe's cultural identity and history," said Liz Pratt, spokeswoman for the tribe. "This celebration is an opportunity for the tribe to share its culture through music and dance, celebrating with surrounding, neighboring communities."

But the tribe doesn't stop at celebrating Cocopah culture. The tribe also invites artists and performers from other cultures to participate in the event. **This year the lineup of entertainment will include performers from other tribes, as well as a Hawaiian dance group called the Hui 'O Hawai'i of Yuma.**

"The tribe sees this day as a chance to recognize and respect all cultures," Pratt said.

In addition to various events, the tribe's cultural staff also plans to unveil two major projects on Saturday. One project is a two-piece mural made from thousands of locally-taken photographs that have been digitally combined to create a larger photographic image. Elders have also led younger men in building an example of a traditional summer home, which will be available for event-goers to tour and enjoy.

The celebration's free feast will be served from noon to 1:30 p.m., offering a variety of food dishes ranging from fajitas and chicken to beans and homemade tortillas. Organizers say the feast, which is being prepared by Cocopah Casino, is expected to attract around 600 people.

Commercial vendors will also have booths selling everything from baked goods to fry bread.

There will be continuous raffles for different prizes and free entertainment will begin following the meal. Local performers will include the Southwest Kwapa Bird Singers and Dancers, a Cocopah group. Cocopah Headstart's prince and princess will also give their welcome addresses.

Children will be treated to a "kids' zone," where they will be offered everything from snow cones to games.

The photo mural has been installed inside the museum just for this event. Viewers at first see a large image of two gourds or an agave, but close inspection shows that the images are actually made from thousands of smaller pictures.

"It was quite an ordeal to find a company able to do this," said Joe Rodriguez, a member of the museum staff.

The images were printed onto vinyl, a process that required the use of special printers owned by the Bureau of Land Management.

Outside the museum stands the example of the traditional Cocopah summer home, where guests to the celebration will be invited to explore or simply sit down on a bench and find some shade.

Museum Director Lisa Wanstall explained that the home shows how a tribal family might have lived while on the move during the summer. Wanstall said that more permanent shelters would be made of mud or be set down into the earth. The shelter recently built is made of numerous wooden poles that support thick layers of arrowweed, a plant which holds an honored place in Cocopah culture and history.

Since arrowweed is now scarce on the reservation, museum staff members were forced to gather the plant in other areas along the Colorado River. The collection process relied on use of machetes and filled two pickup trucks and two trailers. Some of the arrowweed will also be used for decorating purposes during the weekend celebration.

Wanstall said the collecting process truly brought modern workers in touch with ancient ways, simply in the practice of a form of gathering, which has been cherished by the Cocopah for thousands of years.

"When you are out there by the river, where you really don't hear and see the traffic, it does take you back," the museum director said.