

Nevada Physiography

Nevada is located within the Great Basin physiographic region, between the Sierra Nevada range of mountains to the west and Snake and Deep Creek Mountains to the east on the Utah border. The area is characterized by north/south trending mountains and intervening, broad, arid valleys creating tremendous elevational relief (Fowler and Fowler 2008).

Drainages characteristic of the Great Basin flow into the valley floors containing ancient dry playas that are remnants of Pleistocene lakes. Humboldt River flows from the east across much of a Nevada to disappear into the Carson Sink. Carson River and the Truckee River flow from the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the west, with the Truckee River ending at Pyramid Lake and the Carson River flowing into the Stillwater Marsh and the Carson Sink. Northeastern Nevada is similar to the Snake River Plain with drainages flowing into the Owyhee and Snake Rivers. The southern portion of Nevada is similar to the Colorado Plateau with the Virgin River, Meadow Valley Wash and the White River all flowing south into the Colorado River.

Nevada Prehistory

A long time span of human occupation in Nevada is well documented from Clovis period archaeological sites (most recently from White Pine County) (Jones and Beck 2009) and stemmed shouldered projectile points (around Pleistocene lake shore margins) through to the historic period representing Euro-American contact with Great Basin American Indians. Initial human occupation focused upon the Pleistocene lakes throughout Nevada (Paleo-Indian 12,000 BP-9,000 BP) and large game procurement. As the lakes began to dry during the Altithermal Period (Early Archaic 9,000-6,000 BP) subsistence practices shifted and diversified with a wider range of resources being utilized. Large Side-Notched and Corner Notched projectile points appear during this period indicating the first appearance of the atlatl. During the Middle Archaic (6,000 BP-2000 BP) a cooler and wetter period intervened. Cultural and resource diversification continued and increases in population are indicated during this period. During the Late Archaic Period (2000 BP to 500 BP) a dryer period occurred with increases in seasonal transhumance and reliance on seed resources. Numic linguistic expansion into the Great Basin begins about 1,000 BP. The bow and arrow is introduced into the Great Basin during the Late Archaic. The Fremont agricultural based Culture appears in the far eastern portion of Nevada about 1500 BP and disappears by 650 BP and the Western Anasazi Southwestern Pueblo Culture appears about 1450 BP and disappears by 750 BP in the southern portion of Nevada along the drainages of the Colorado River. Shoshonean groups from the Plains and the Snake River Plains expand into eastern Nevada after 750 BP.

American Indian Groups

There are currently 28 federally recognized Indian tribes residing in Nevada. Linguistically the Numic languages of Nevada consist of the Northern Paiute in the Western part of the state, the Shoshone in the eastern portion of the state and the Ute (Southern Paiute) occupying the southern portion of Nevada. The Washoe represent a distinct linguistic group that occupied the Sierra Mountain and Washoe Valley area.

Historic Era

The historic era begins with the first contact between American Indian groups and Euro-Americans. The first contact occurs between early fur trappers and explorers such as Peter Skene Ogden and John Fremont around the 1820's. With the discovery of gold in California in the 1850's Nevada became a travel route to California and the Sierra Mountain Comstock gold areas of Nevada such as Virginia City. First travel routes west were along the Humboldt River and later across the central portion of the state along a route first surveyed by Colonel Simpson. This central route became the route for the short lived Pony Express

and the Overland Stage line as well as the first transcontinental telegraph. Early historic settlements in Nevada were by Mormon missionaries as Nevada was a portion of the Mormon's Deseret. Early settlements occurred in Genoa and later Caliente and Panaca. As Euro-American settlement increased a transcontinental railroad was completed along the Humboldt River which put an end to the Overland Stage route and the Pony Express as well as the telegraph line which was moved adjacent to the railroad. Increased settlement also led to conflicts with American Indian groups prompting the United States government to construct approximately 33 forts or camps for settlement protection.

Nevada is rich in mineral resources and mining has played a large role in the historical development of the state. The wide open spaces are suitable for ranching and the historic development of irrigation systems has been important to the development of farming activities. South central Nevada was the site of the Atomic Energy Commission's Nevada Proving Grounds and the site of nuclear bomb testing in the mid to late 1940's through the 1960's. In recent years population growth has occurred in the Las Vegas and Reno areas.