ancient Lake Cahuilla at times has covered Imperial Valley, transforming an arid desert into a lush lake supporting abundant life. Native Americans have adapted seasonally between the mountains and the lake, setting up camps along its shore. As the water receded, the people shifted their activities. Archaeological sites have been found in Imperial County between 40 feet above and 203 feet below sea level.

For at least the last 27,000 years, and possibly millions of years longer than that, the Colorado River has periodically overflowed and changed course — emp-tying into the Imperial Valley.

The river filled the valley creating one of the largest freshwater lakes in North America. In the last thousand years alone, geologists believe that Lake Cahuilla has filled and drained up to four times — most recently 600 years ago. Many fish and waterfowl inhabited the lake, or they may have extended down into the shoreline at this elevation.

Habitat sites and camp sites began to be identified along the shores of Lake Cahuilla as Native Americans came to rely on the resources of the lake. As the lake filled, it became an accessible food source for many more have been identified, and logical sites indicate that Native Americans continued to rely on the lake for generations. One of the best sources of evidence of the reces-

sion of the lake are the archaeological features known as fish traps.

These stone structures vary in size from 38 feet below sea level to 140 feet below sea level.

The fish traps came into use during the last recession of the lake, and the traps were built on the lake’s shoreline, with the receding lake, or the water level, built up at the water’s edge. Over 400 fish traps have been identified, and many more have been found in the Imperial Valley.

In 1997, Jay von Werlhof completed detailed documentation of 67 fish traps in the north end of Imperial Valley. His work showed that only two species of fish were exploited in great numbers. Ninety-eight percent of fish bones found at archaeological sites are bonytail chub and razorback sucker.

Both of these fish thrived in the warm, productive, plankton-rich environment of Lake Cahuilla.

These two fish, the bonytail chub and the razorback sucker, were Colorado River fish that thrived in ancient Lake Cahuilla.

What were they fishing for? The Colorado River fish trapped in Lake Cahuilla, bonytail chub, and razorback sucker were Colorado River fish that thrived in ancient Lake Cahuilla.

Land of Extremes
FROM ARID DESERT INTO A LUSH LAKE

A study completed by Kenneth Galster deter-

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The traps may have held fish or, when the lake had receded far enough, the traps may have been used to funnel fish into a basket trap placed at the point.

Some traps are documented in archaeol-

ogical sites indicate that they had been caught during their spawning behavior.

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