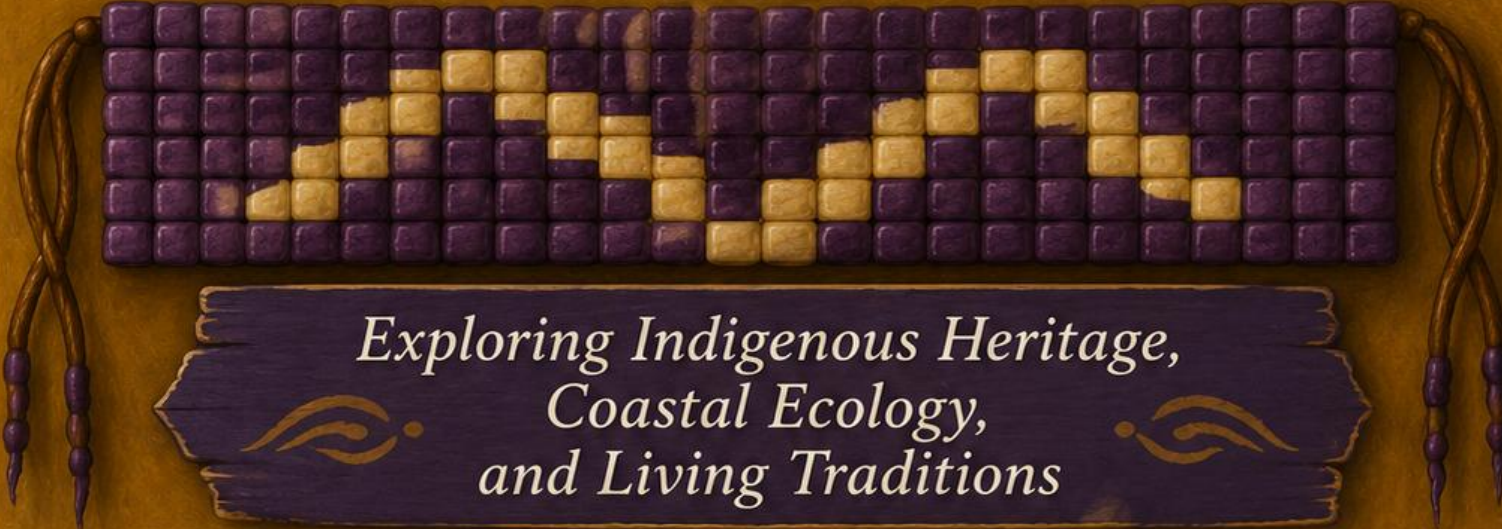


WAMPUM OF THE OUTER BANKS, NORTH CAROLINA



*Exploring Indigenous Heritage,
Coastal Ecology,
and Living Traditions*



Wampum of the Outer Banks, North Carolina: Exploring Indigenous Heritage, Coastal Ecology, and Living Traditions

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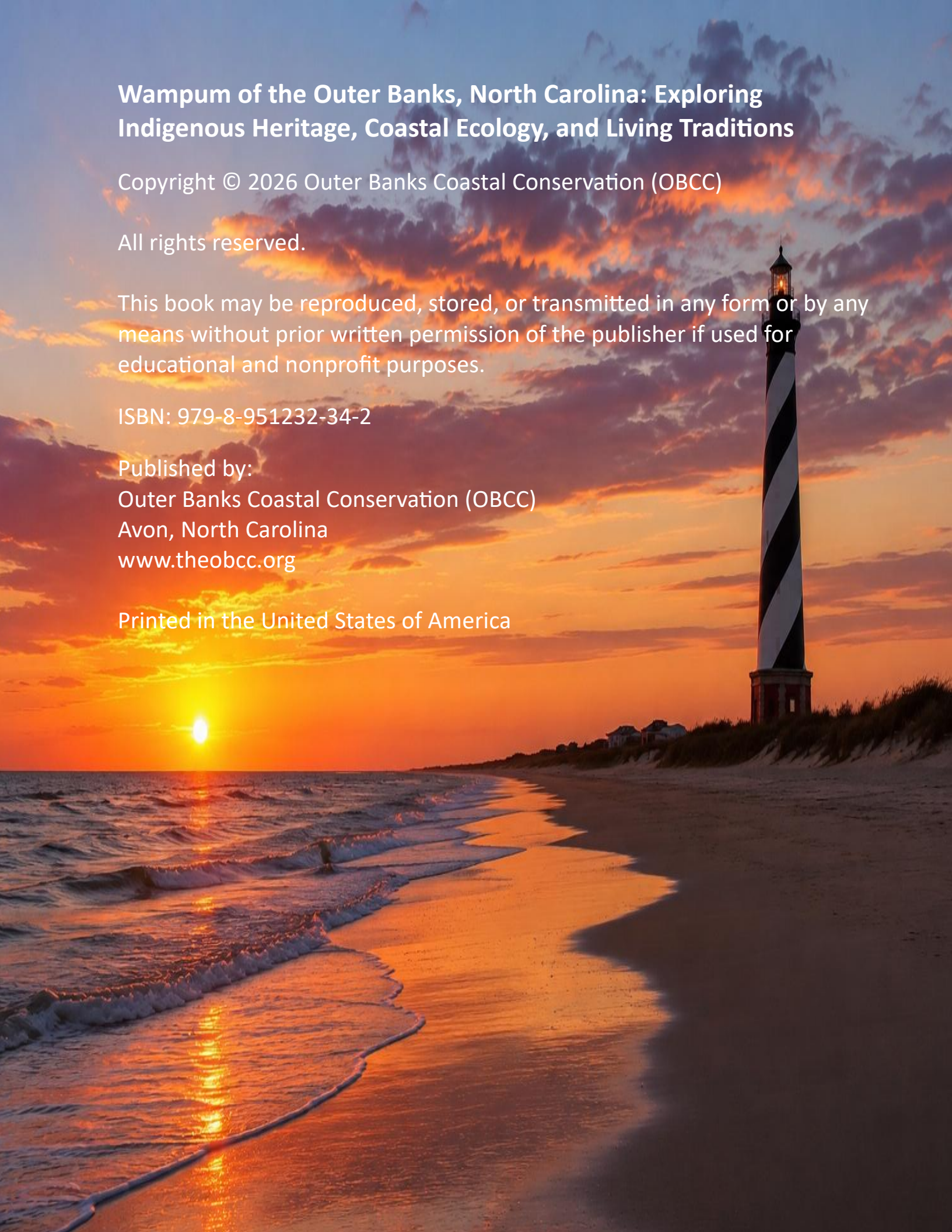
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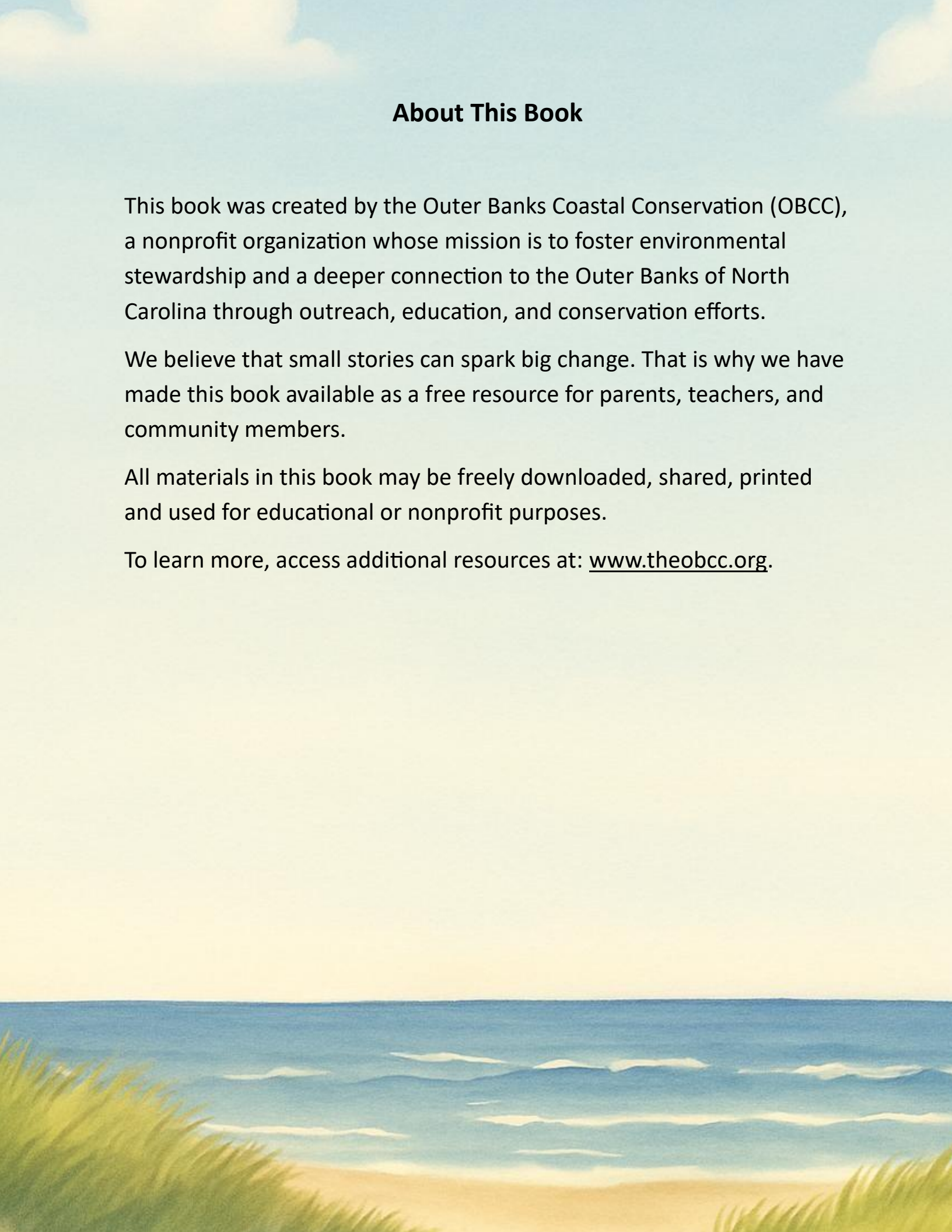
About This Book

This book was created by the Outer Banks Coastal Conservation (OBCC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to foster environmental stewardship and a deeper connection to the Outer Banks of North Carolina through outreach, education, and conservation efforts.

We believe that small stories can spark big change. That is why we have made this book available as a free resource for parents, teachers, and community members.

All materials in this book may be freely downloaded, shared, printed and used for educational or nonprofit purposes.

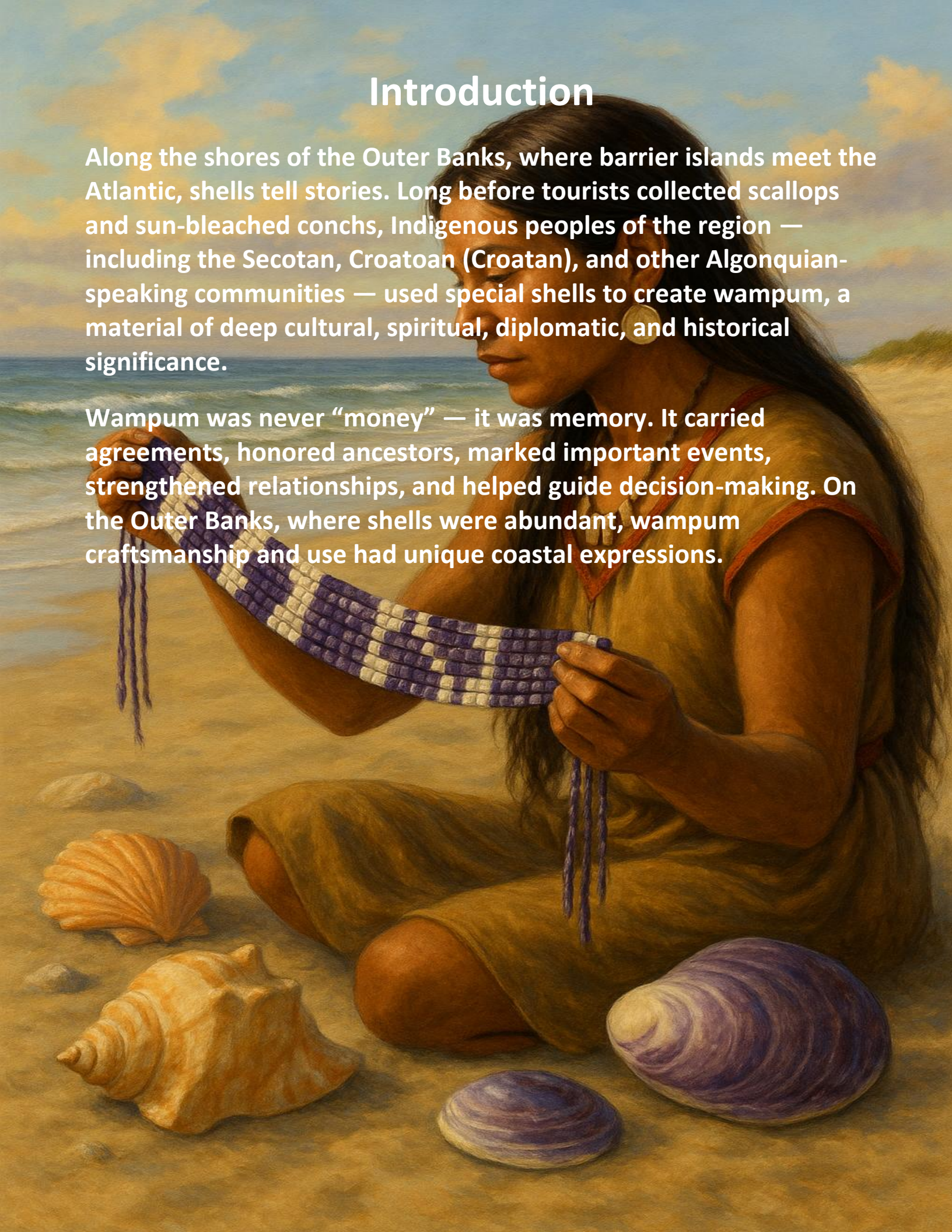
To learn more, access additional resources at: www.theobcc.org.



Introduction

Along the shores of the Outer Banks, where barrier islands meet the Atlantic, shells tell stories. Long before tourists collected scallops and sun-bleached conchs, Indigenous peoples of the region — including the Secotan, Croatoan (Croatan), and other Algonquian-speaking communities — used special shells to create wampum, a material of deep cultural, spiritual, diplomatic, and historical significance.

Wampum was never “money” — it was memory. It carried agreements, honored ancestors, marked important events, strengthened relationships, and helped guide decision-making. On the Outer Banks, where shells were abundant, wampum craftsmanship and use had unique coastal expressions.



What Is Wampum?

Wampum refers to tiny, polished beads made primarily from:

- Quahog clam shells (*Venus mercenaria*) – producing deep purple and white beads
- Whelk shells (*Busycon* species) – producing white beads
- Occasionally other sturdy coastal shells

Beads were shaped into:

- Strings
- Belts
- Necklaces
- Ceremonial and diplomatic pieces

Each bead held meaning, and when woven into patterns, wampum conveyed messages much like written text.



Outer Banks Shells Used in Traditional Wampum

a. Quahog Clam (Commonly found in NC waters)

- Purple layer = highly valued
- Symbolized commitment, leadership, and solemn responsibilities
- Used in storytelling, agreements, and spiritual practices

b. Lightning Whelk & Knobbed Whelk

- Provided durable white shell
- Represented clarity, peace, and open intentions
- Used for balance in designs

c. Busycon Sinistrum (Left-handed whelk)

- Especially meaningful in some communities due to its rare left coil
- Associated with cycles, water, time, and balance

These shells still wash up on Outer Banks beaches today, connecting visitors to ancient coastal traditions.

How Coastal Indigenous Communities Used Wampum

a. Diplomacy & Agreements

Wampum belts served as:

- Records of peace treaties
- Affirmations of alliances between tribes
- Markers of responsibility or obligation

The patterns on a belt documented the agreement and reminded future generations of its meaning.

b. Ceremonial Traditions

Wampum was present at:

- Naming ceremonies
- Seasonal gatherings
- Leadership transitions
- Healing rituals

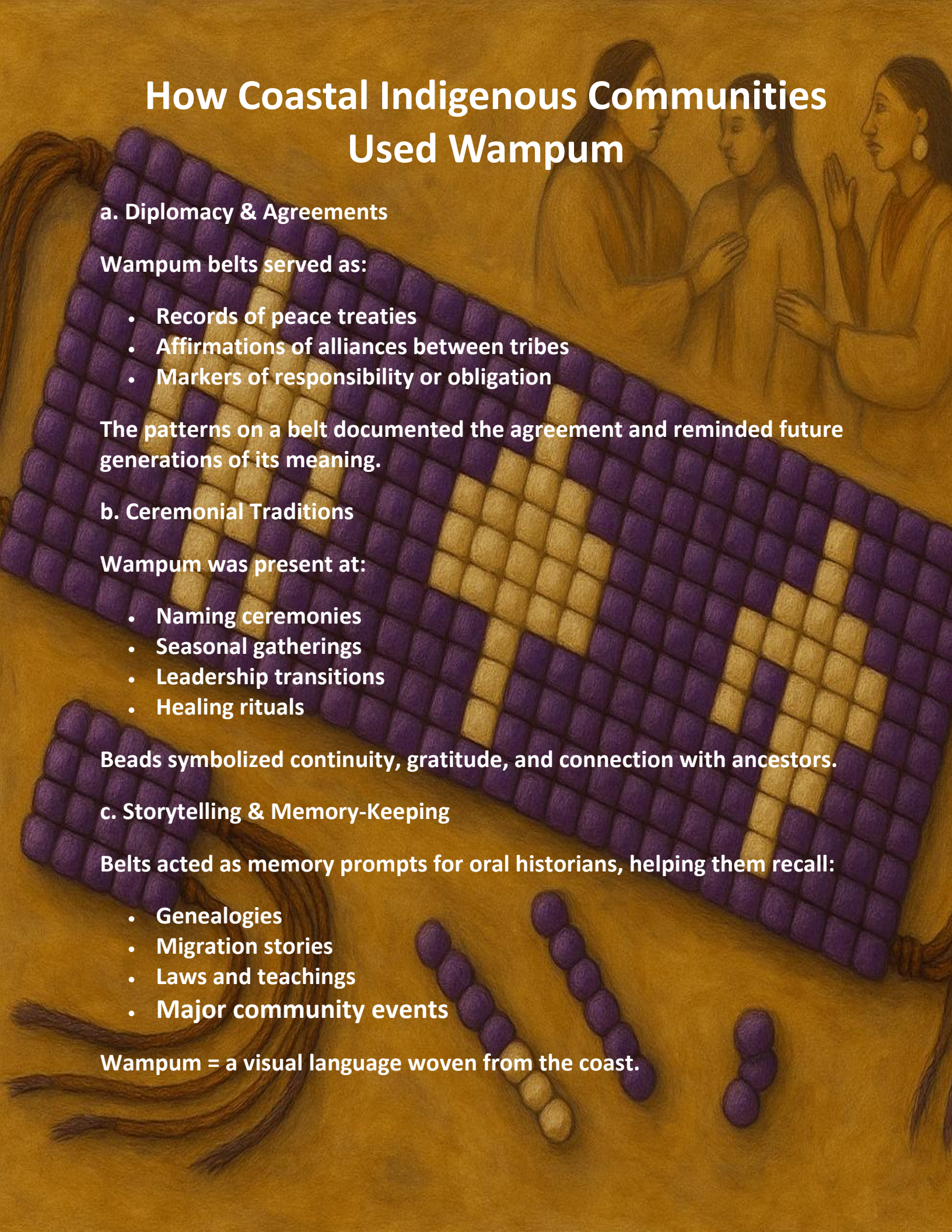
Beads symbolized continuity, gratitude, and connection with ancestors.

c. Storytelling & Memory-Keeping

Belts acted as memory prompts for oral historians, helping them recall:

- Genealogies
- Migration stories
- Laws and teachings
- Major community events

Wampum = a visual language woven from the coast.



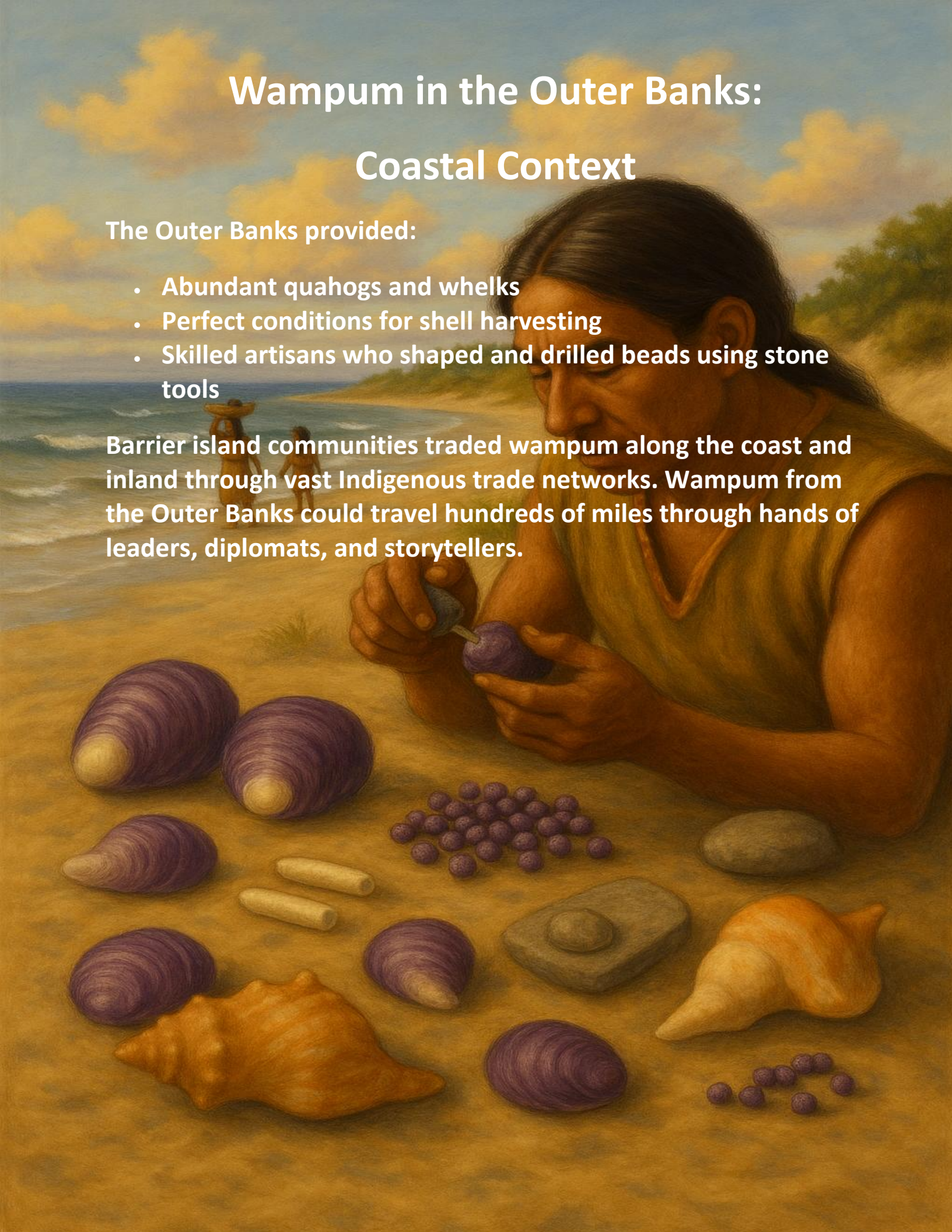
Wampum in the Outer Banks:

Coastal Context

The Outer Banks provided:

- Abundant quahogs and whelks
- Perfect conditions for shell harvesting
- Skilled artisans who shaped and drilled beads using stone tools

Barrier island communities traded wampum along the coast and inland through vast Indigenous trade networks. Wampum from the Outer Banks could travel hundreds of miles through hands of leaders, diplomats, and storytellers.

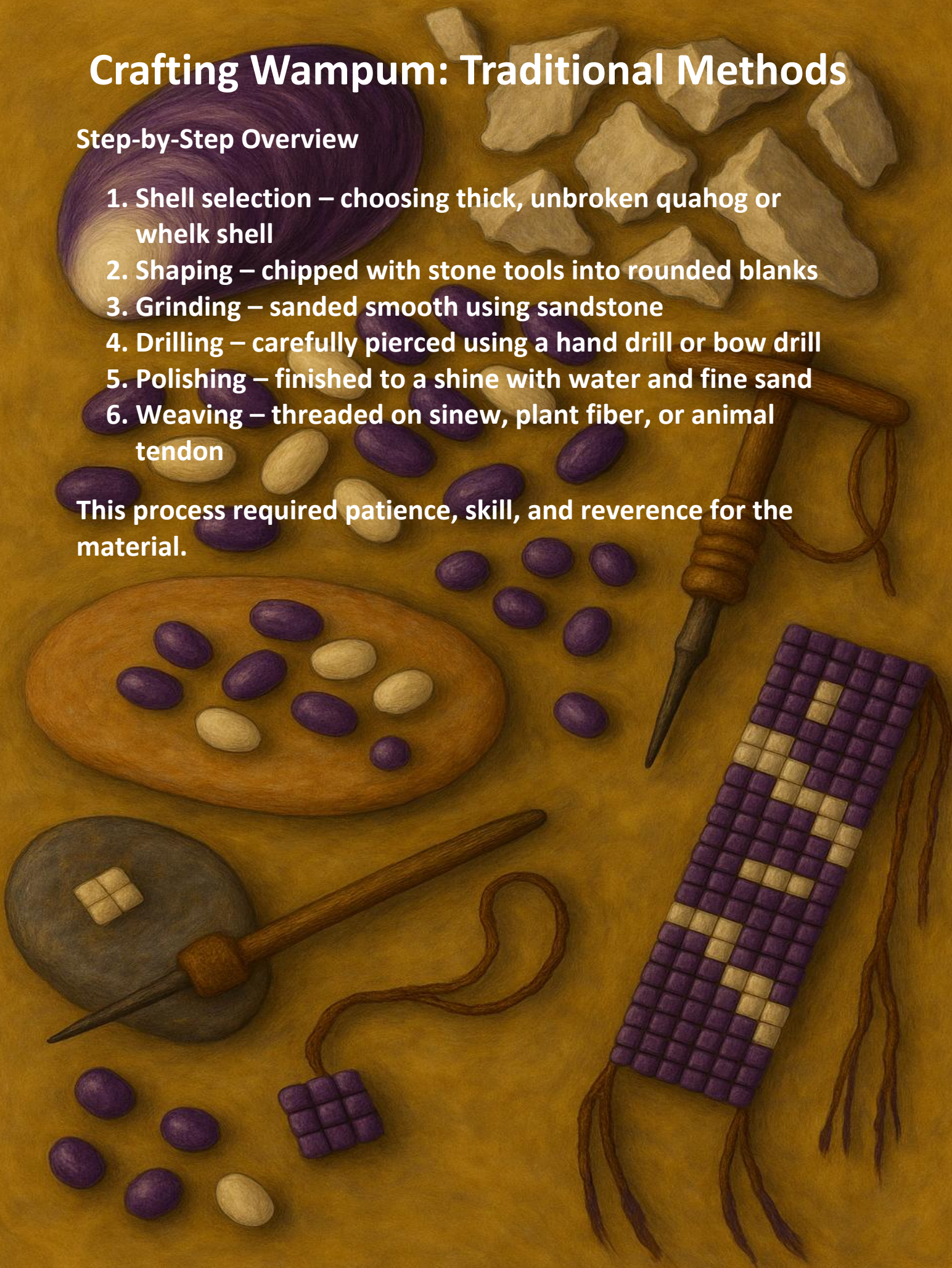


Crafting Wampum: Traditional Methods

Step-by-Step Overview

1. Shell selection – choosing thick, unbroken quahog or whelk shell
2. Shaping – chipped with stone tools into rounded blanks
3. Grinding – sanded smooth using sandstone
4. Drilling – carefully pierced using a hand drill or bow drill
5. Polishing – finished to a shine with water and fine sand
6. Weaving – threaded on sinew, plant fiber, or animal tendon

This process required patience, skill, and reverence for the material.



Symbolism in Colors & Patterns

- Purple (quahog)

Meaning: strength, mourning, promises, sacred commitments

- White (whelk)

Meaning: peace, purity, goodwill, truthful intentions

Patterns could represent:

- Rivers
- Paths
- Unity between communities
- Shared responsibility
- Seasonal transitions
- Cosmological stories
- Significant historical events



The Difference Between “Wampum” and “Currency”

Although European colonists later used wampum as money, this was not its original purpose. For Indigenous peoples:

- Wampum was sacred, not transactional
- Belts recorded history, they did not circulate like coins
- Misinterpretation came from colonial misunderstanding

Today, Indigenous communities continue to correct that misconception.

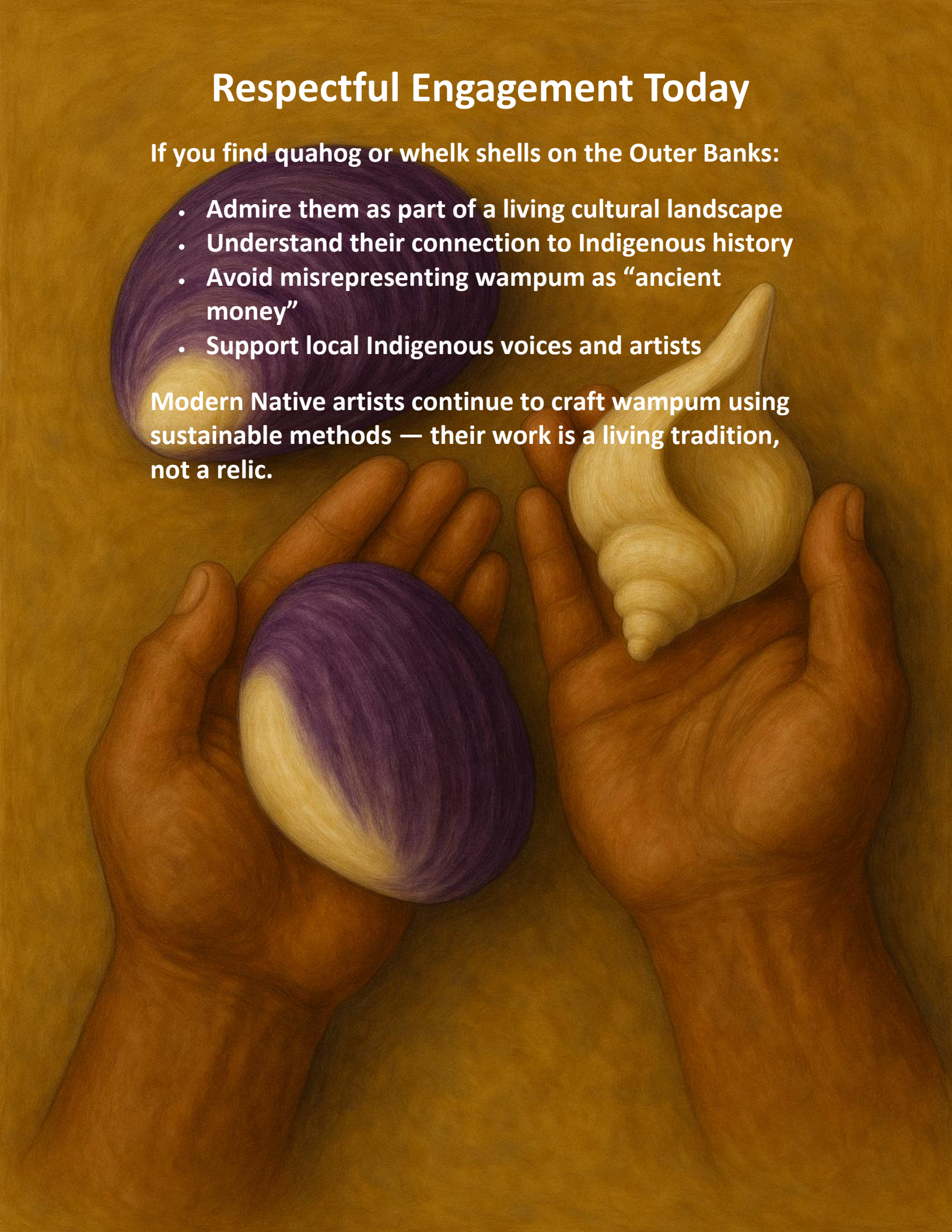


Respectful Engagement Today

If you find quahog or whelk shells on the Outer Banks:

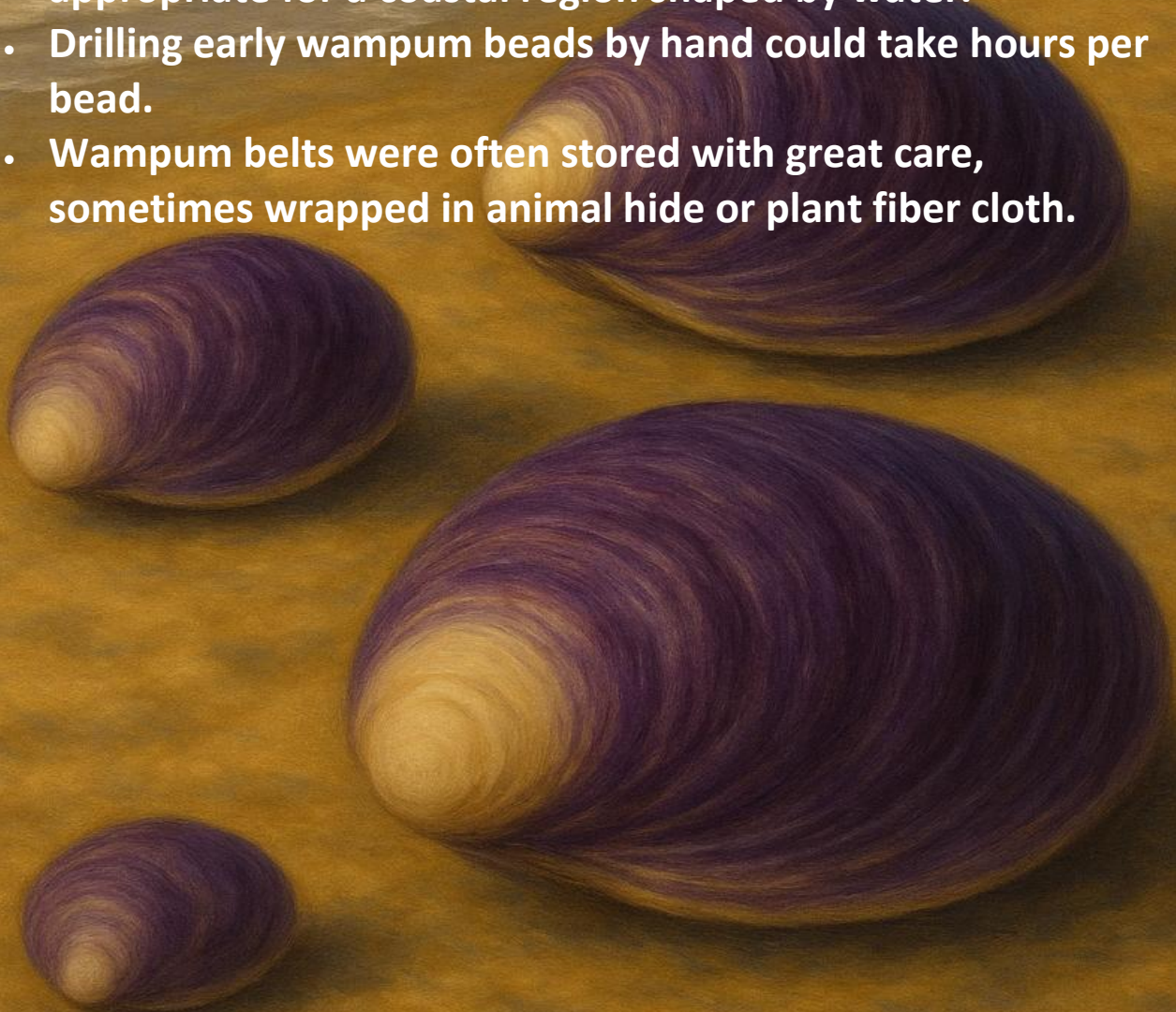
- Admire them as part of a living cultural landscape
- Understand their connection to Indigenous history
- Avoid misrepresenting wampum as “ancient money”
- Support local Indigenous voices and artists

Modern Native artists continue to craft wampum using sustainable methods — their work is a living tradition, not a relic.



Did You Know?

- The color purple was not just “pretty”—it symbolized deep responsibility.
- A single belt could encode the equivalent of an entire treaty.
- Many Indigenous communities along the East Coast still use wampum in cultural and political life today.
- The shells used in wampum are still found naturally on Outer Banks beaches.
- Some patterns on ancient belts symbolize waterways — appropriate for a coastal region shaped by water.
- Drilling early wampum beads by hand could take hours per bead.
- Wampum belts were often stored with great care, sometimes wrapped in animal hide or plant fiber cloth.



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Wampum of the Outer Banks, North Carolina: Exploring Indigenous Heritage, Coastal Ecology, and Living Traditions

This book explains how Indigenous peoples—including the Secotan, Croatoan, and other Algonquian-speaking communities—used quahog and whelk shells to craft meaningful beads and belts that served as tools for diplomacy, memory-keeping, ceremony, and cultural continuity, rather than as currency. The book describes the crafting process, the symbolism of purple and white shell colors, and the role of wampum in recording treaties, genealogies, and stories, while also highlighting the Outer Banks' rich coastal context where artisans shaped beads from abundant shells. It encourages modern visitors to respect the cultural significance of wampum, avoid misrepresenting it as money, and support Indigenous artists who continue this living tradition today.

About the Publisher

Outer Banks Coastal Conservation (OBCC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering environmental stewardship and a deeper connection to the Outer Banks of North Carolina through education, outreach, and conservation initiatives.

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