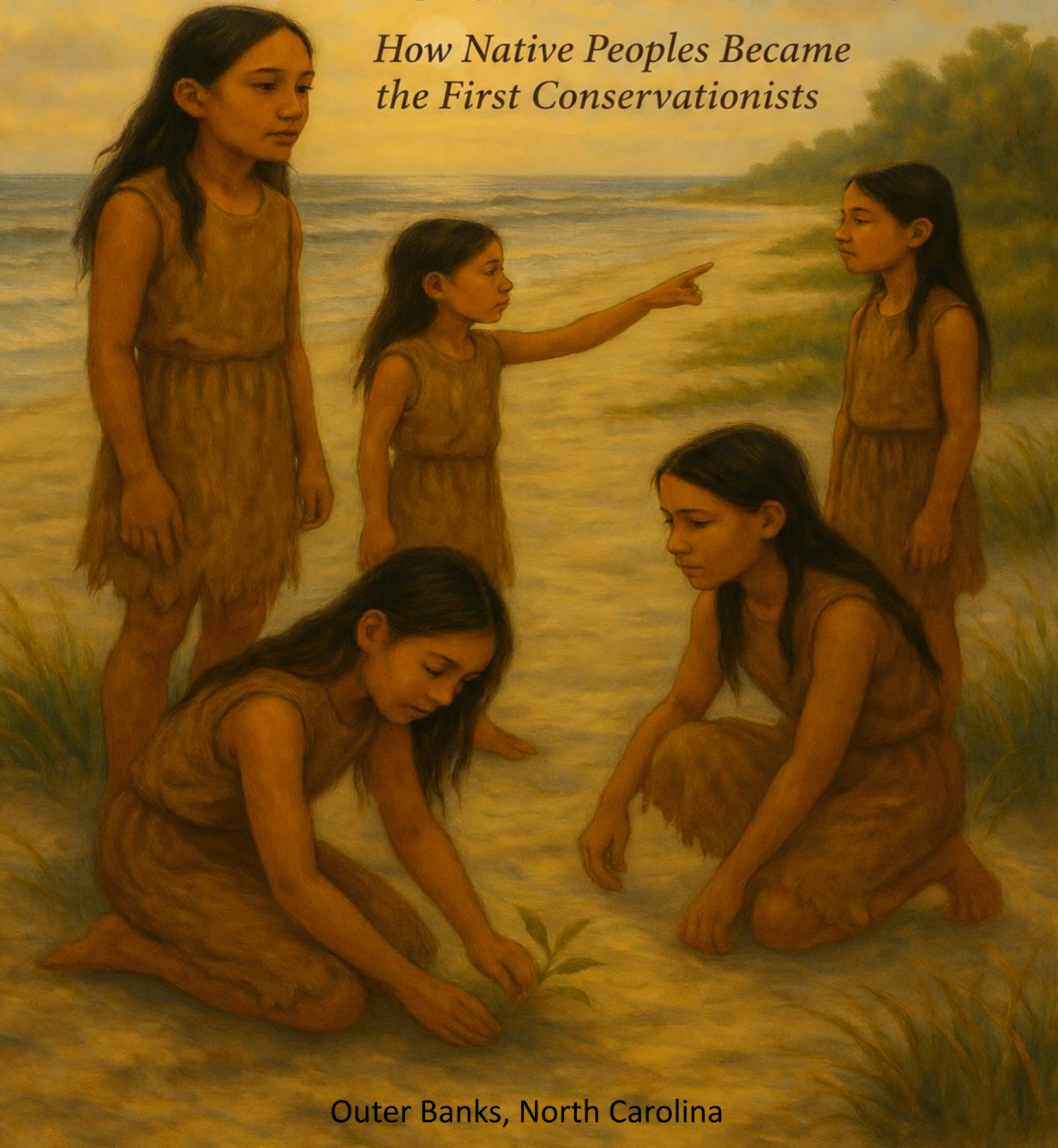


The First Protectors of the Outer Banks

*How Native Peoples Became
the First Conservationists*



Outer Banks, North Carolina

The First Protectors of the Outer Banks: How Native Peoples Became the First Conservationists

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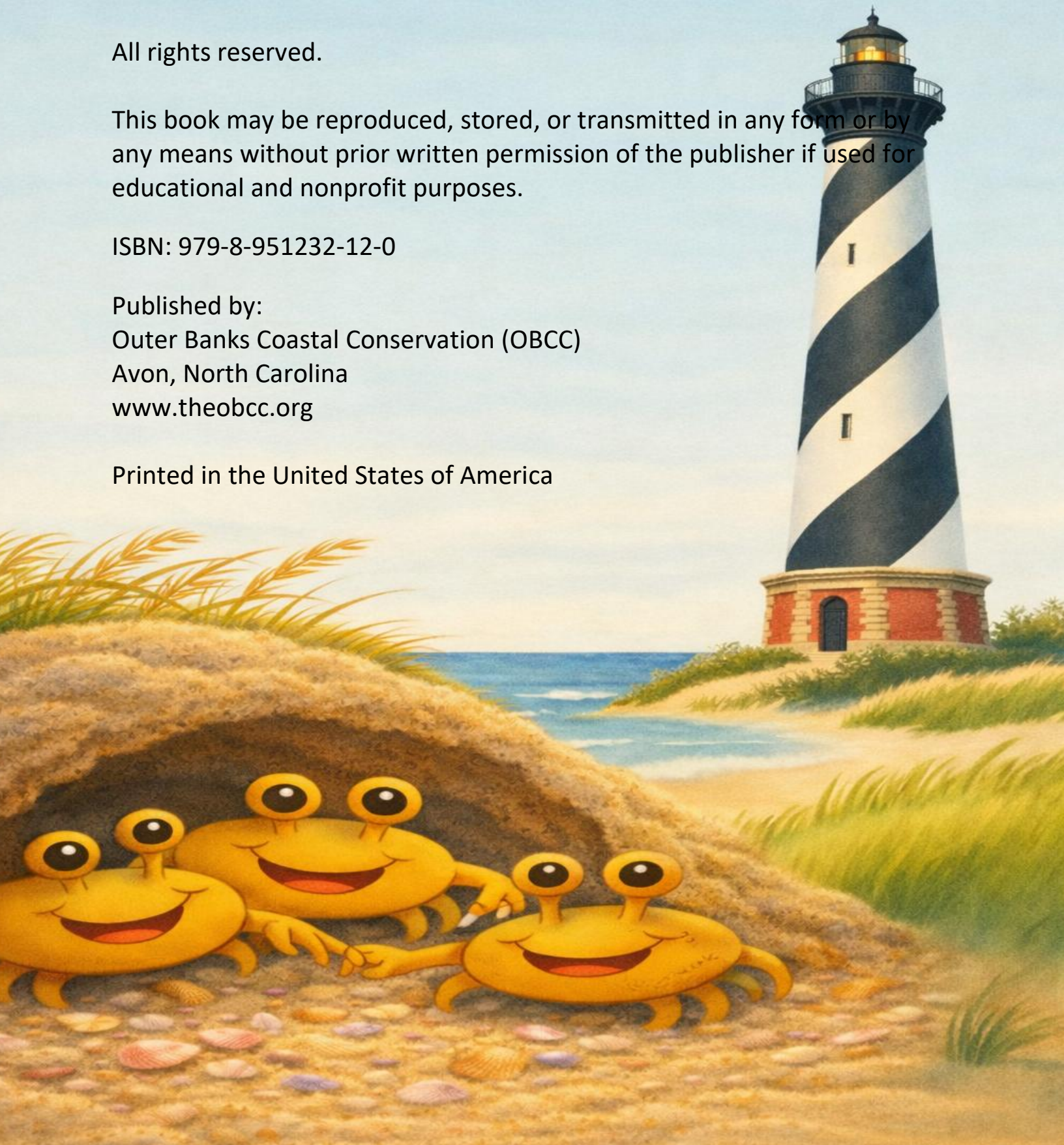
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ISBN: 979-8-951232-12-0

Published by:
Outer Banks Coastal Conservation (OBCC)
Avon, North Carolina
www.theobcc.org

Printed in the United States of America



About This Book

This storybook 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.

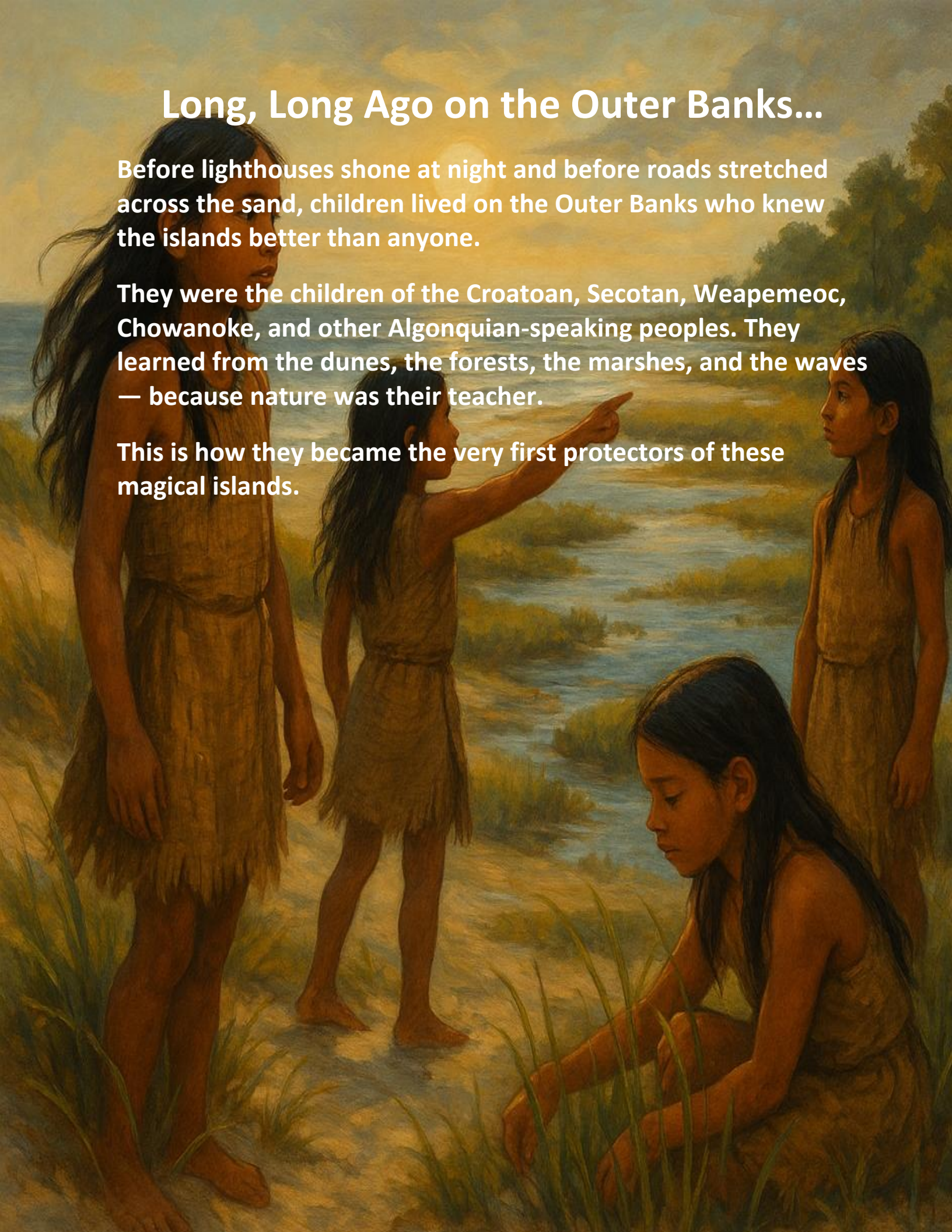


Long, Long Ago on the Outer Banks...

Before lighthouses shone at night and before roads stretched across the sand, children lived on the Outer Banks who knew the islands better than anyone.

They were the children of the Croatoan, Secotan, Weapemeoc, Chowanoke, and other Algonquian-speaking peoples. They learned from the dunes, the forests, the marshes, and the waves — because nature was their teacher.

This is how they became the very first protectors of these magical islands.



The Islands Were Alive

Every morning, Native children woke to the sound of the ocean breathing.

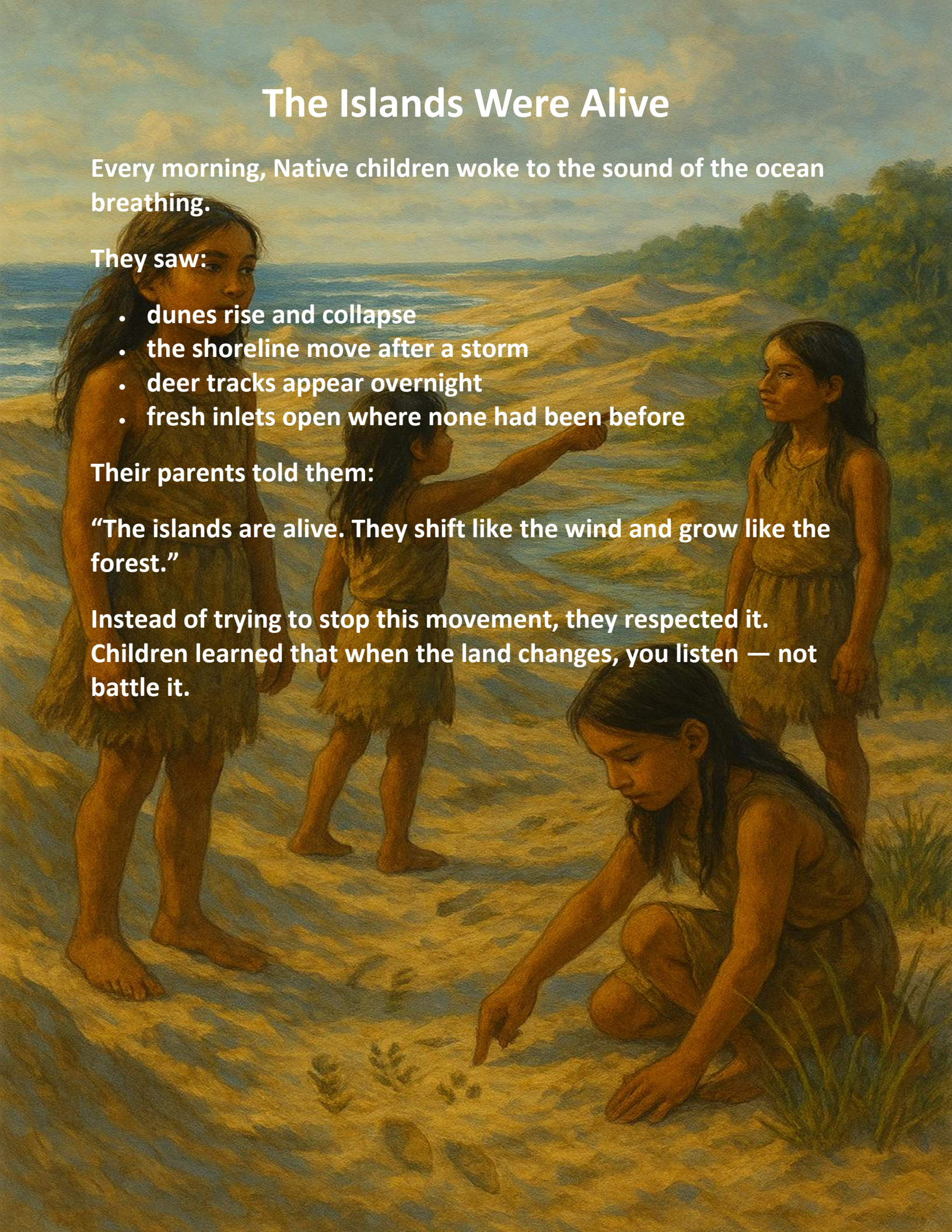
They saw:

- dunes rise and collapse
- the shoreline move after a storm
- deer tracks appear overnight
- fresh inlets open where none had been before

Their parents told them:

“The islands are alive. They shift like the wind and grow like the forest.”

Instead of trying to stop this movement, they respected it. Children learned that when the land changes, you listen — not battle it.



Gentle Fishers of the Sounds

Children helped gather dinner from the sea, but only in careful ways.

They learned:

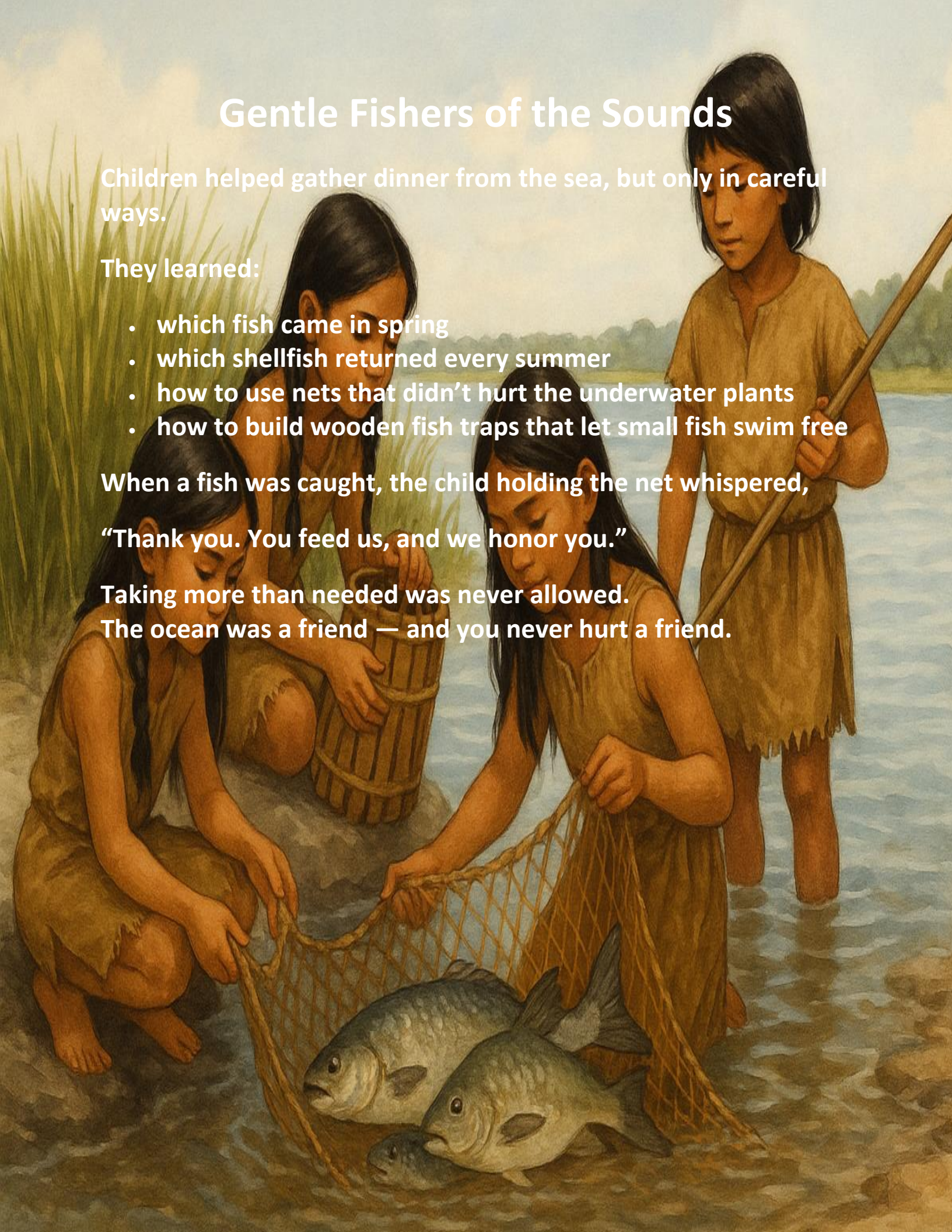
- which fish came in spring
- which shellfish returned every summer
- how to use nets that didn't hurt the underwater plants
- how to build wooden fish traps that let small fish swim free

When a fish was caught, the child holding the net whispered,

“Thank you. You feed us, and we honor you.”

Taking more than needed was never allowed.

The ocean was a friend — and you never hurt a friend.



Life Beside the Marsh

Marshes were quiet worlds filled with surprises.

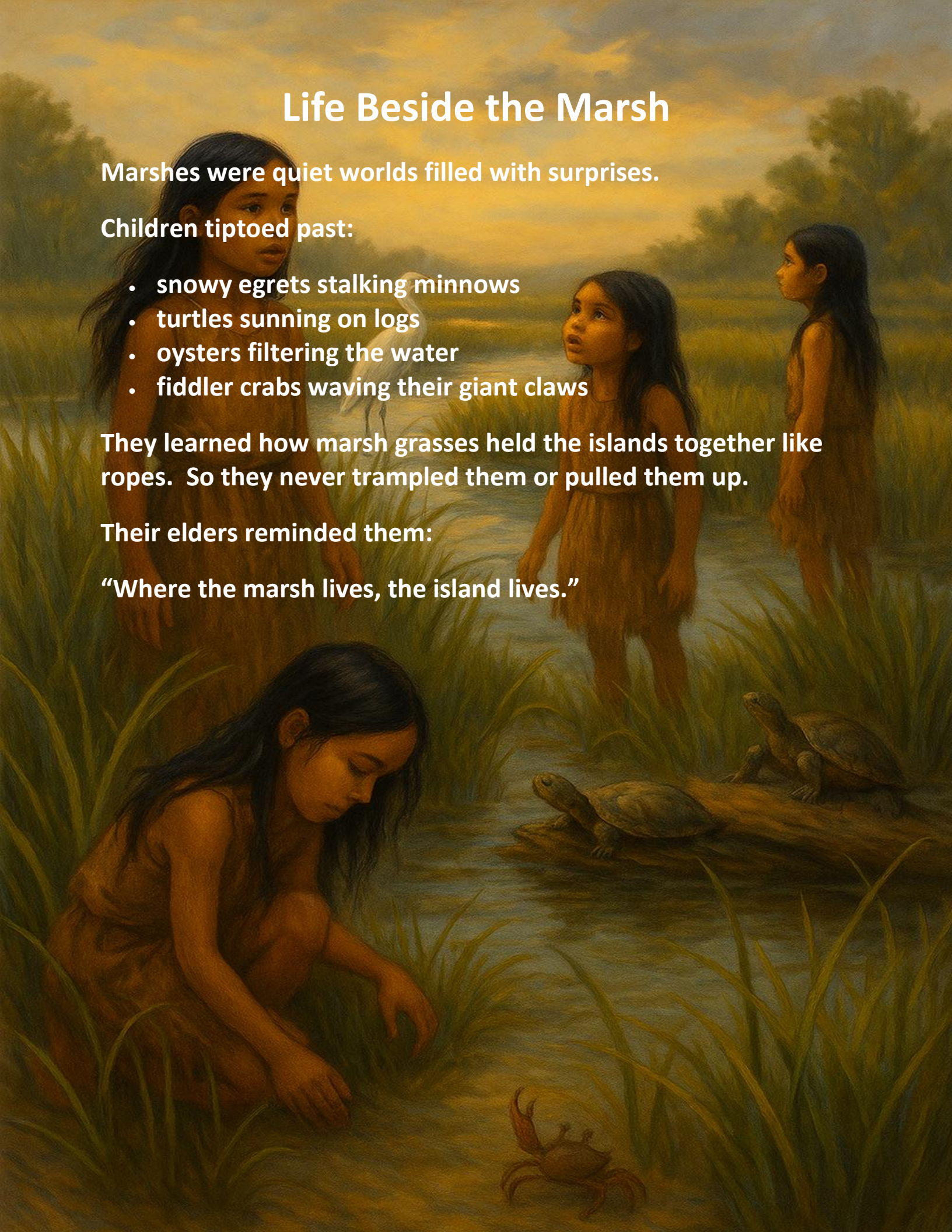
Children tiptoed past:

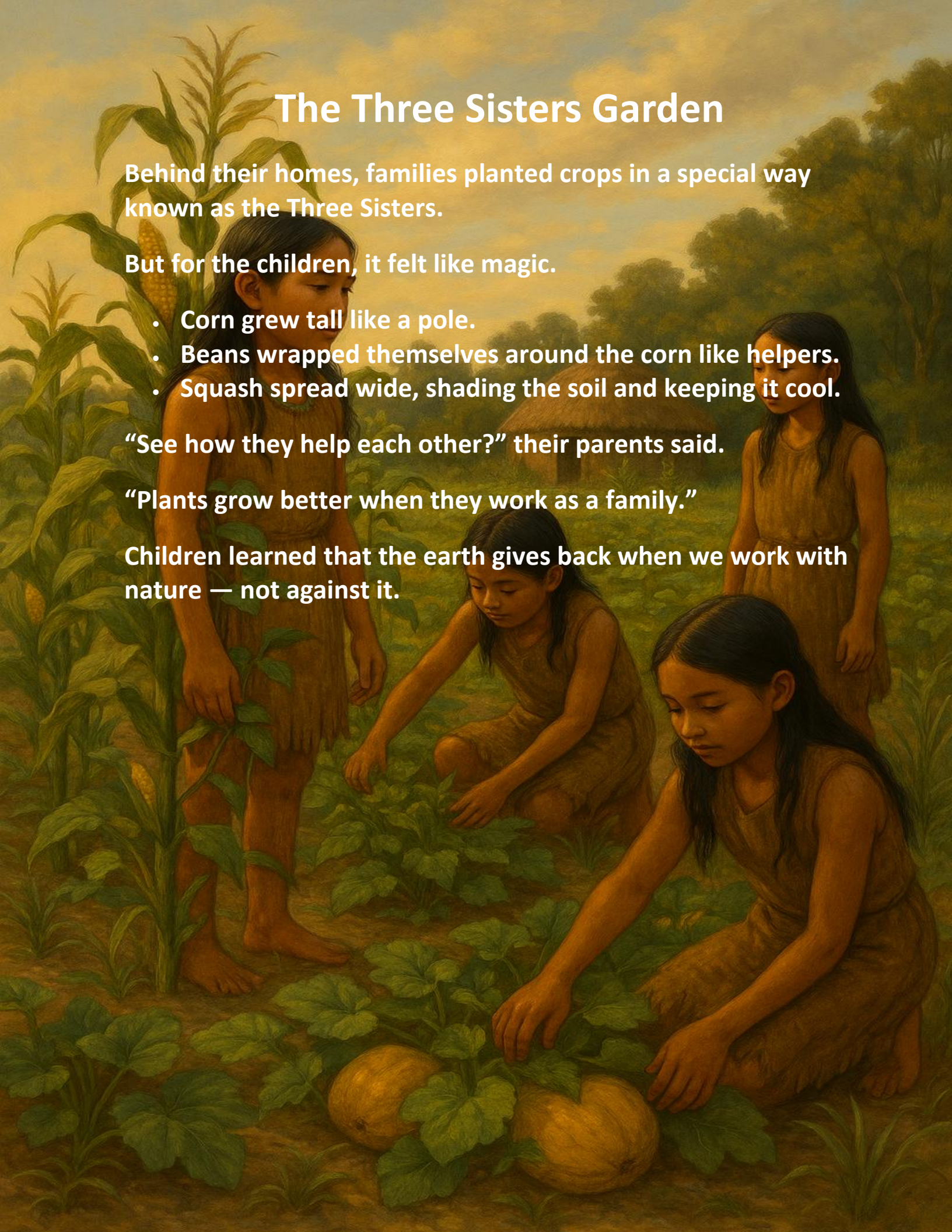
- snowy egrets stalking minnows
- turtles sunning on logs
- oysters filtering the water
- fiddler crabs waving their giant claws

They learned how marsh grasses held the islands together like ropes. So they never trampled them or pulled them up.

Their elders reminded them:

“Where the marsh lives, the island lives.”





The Three Sisters Garden

Behind their homes, families planted crops in a special way known as the Three Sisters.

But for the children, it felt like magic.

- Corn grew tall like a pole.
- Beans wrapped themselves around the corn like helpers.
- Squash spread wide, shading the soil and keeping it cool.

“See how they help each other?” their parents said.

“Plants grow better when they work as a family.”

Children learned that the earth gives back when we work with nature — not against it.

Fire as a Helper, Not an Enemy

Every so often, adults set small fires in the forest.
Children watched carefully from safe spots.

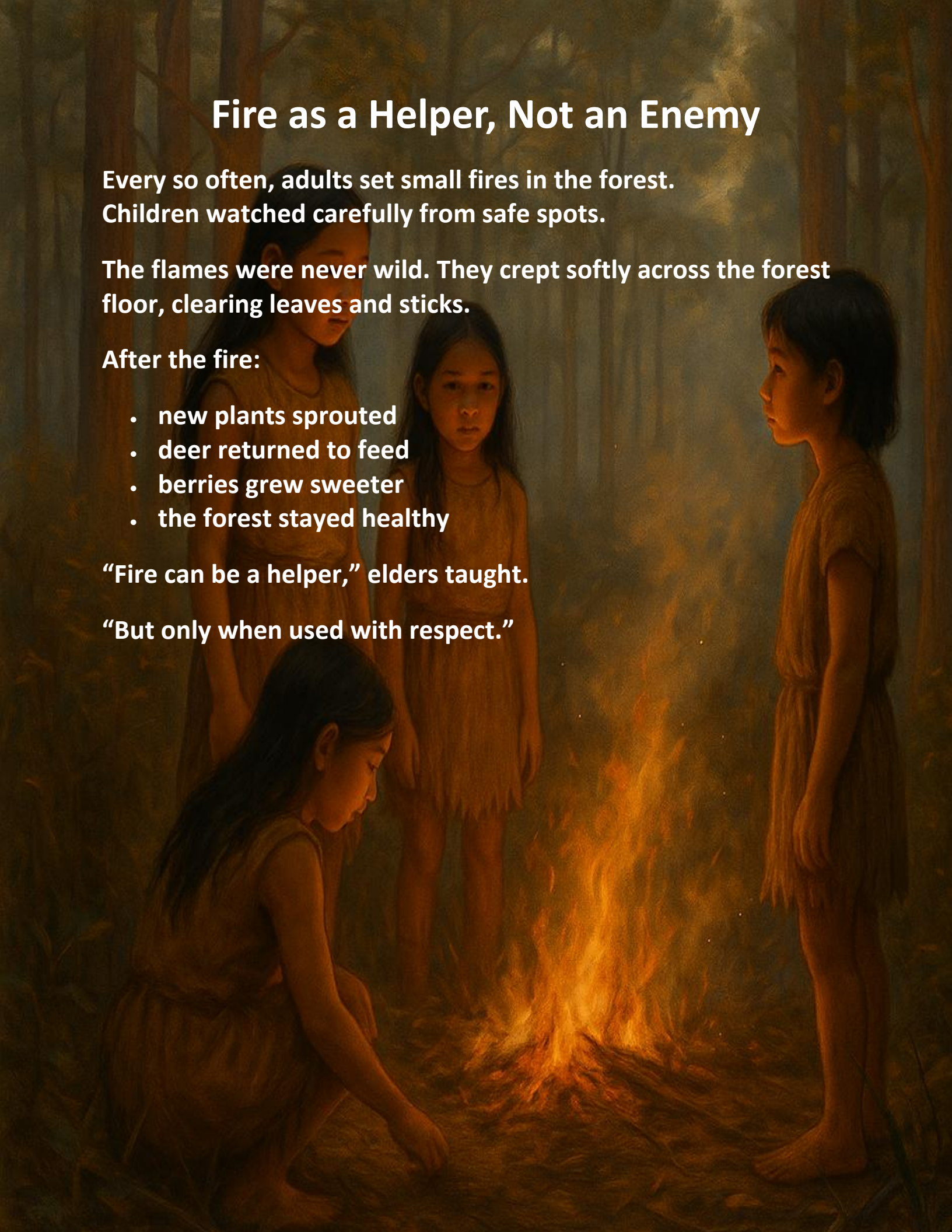
The flames were never wild. They crept softly across the forest floor, clearing leaves and sticks.

After the fire:

- new plants sprouted
- deer returned to feed
- berries grew sweeter
- the forest stayed healthy

“Fire can be a helper,” elders taught.

“But only when used with respect.”



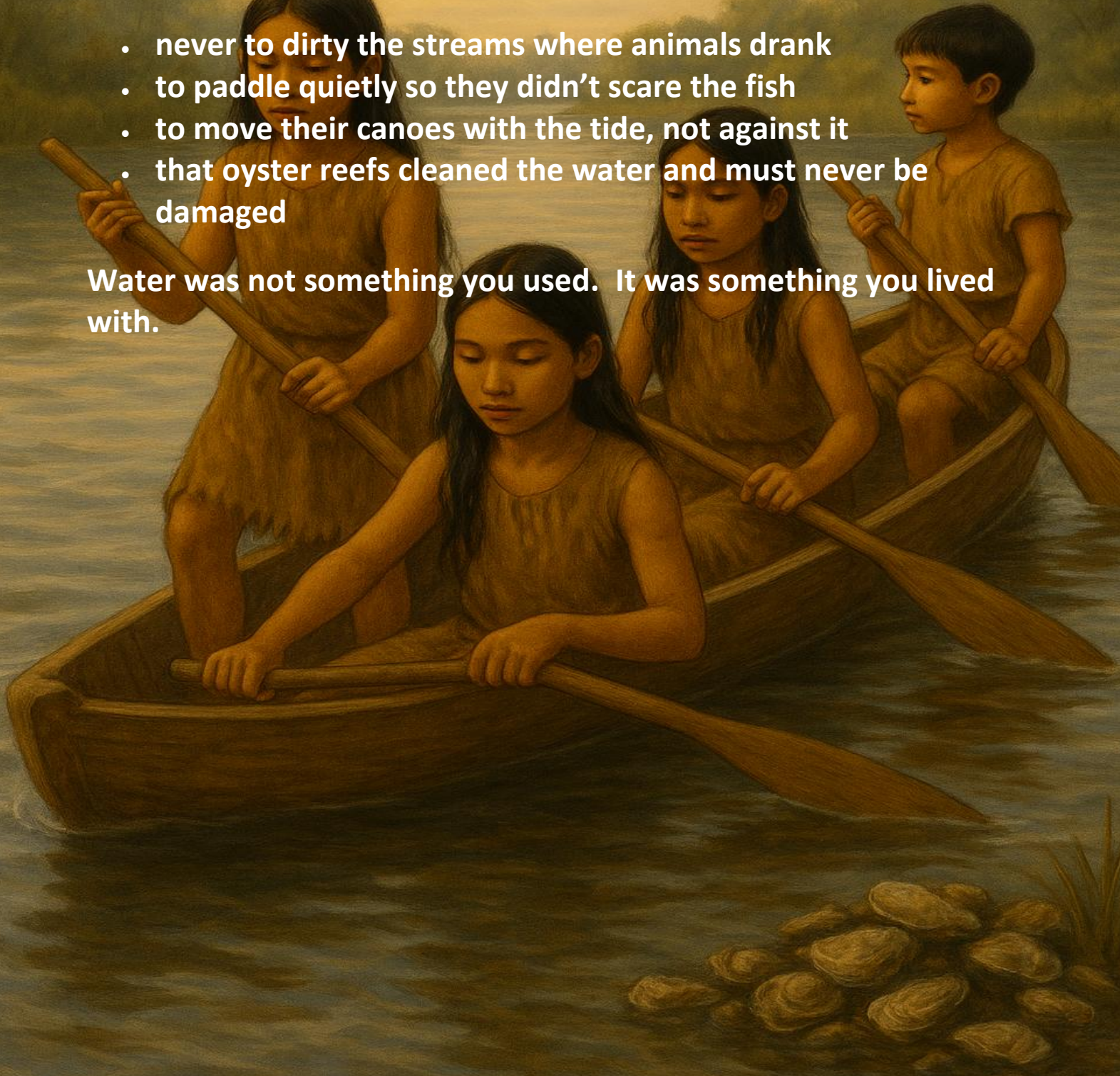
Caring for the Waters

The sounds and rivers were like huge supermarkets and highways.

Children were taught:

- never to dirty the streams where animals drank
- to paddle quietly so they didn't scare the fish
- to move their canoes with the tide, not against it
- that oyster reefs cleaned the water and must never be damaged

Water was not something you used. It was something you lived with.



Houses That Worked With the Weather

Homes on the Outer Banks were built from:

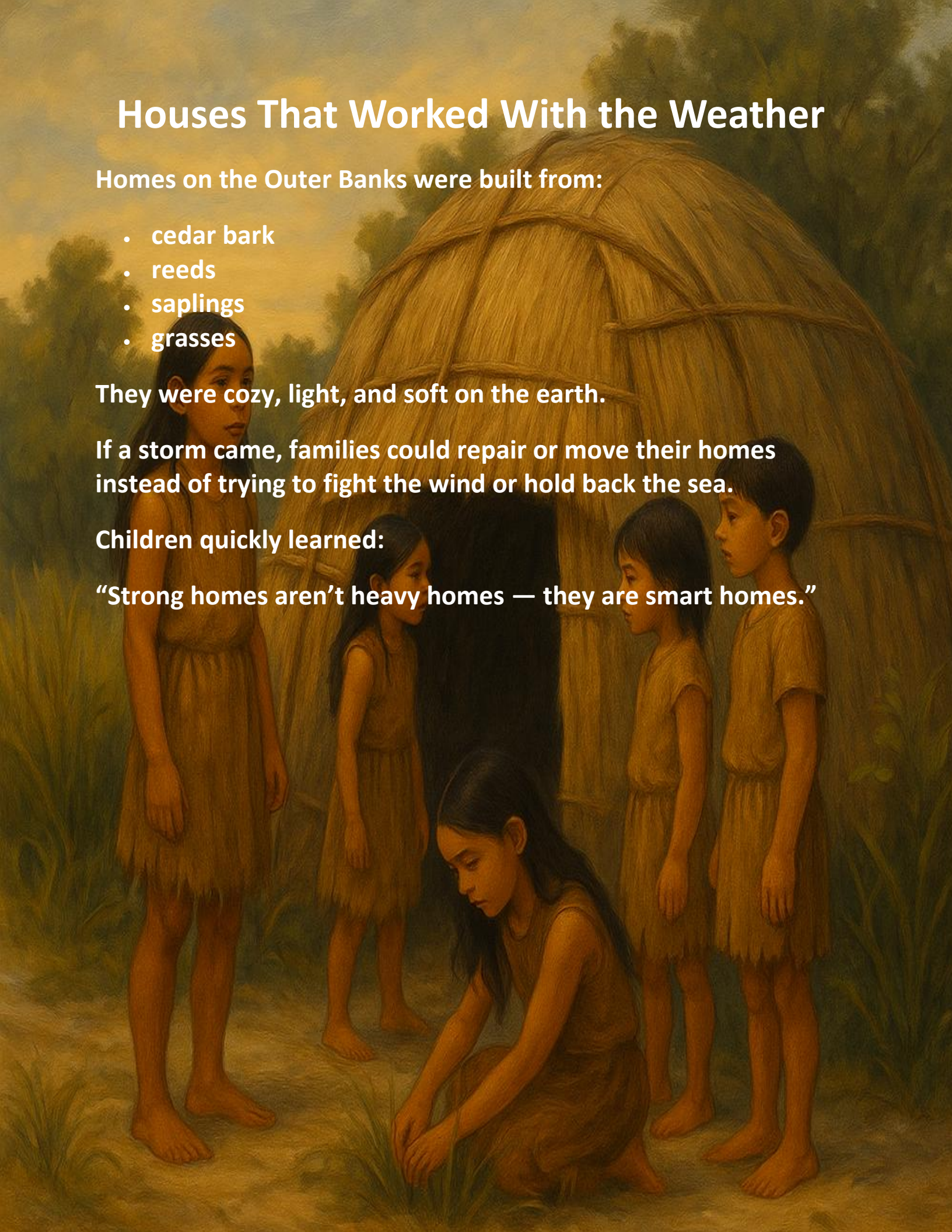
- cedar bark
- reeds
- saplings
- grasses

They were cozy, light, and soft on the earth.

If a storm came, families could repair or move their homes instead of trying to fight the wind or hold back the sea.

Children quickly learned:

“Strong homes aren’t heavy homes — they are smart homes.”



The World Was One Big Family

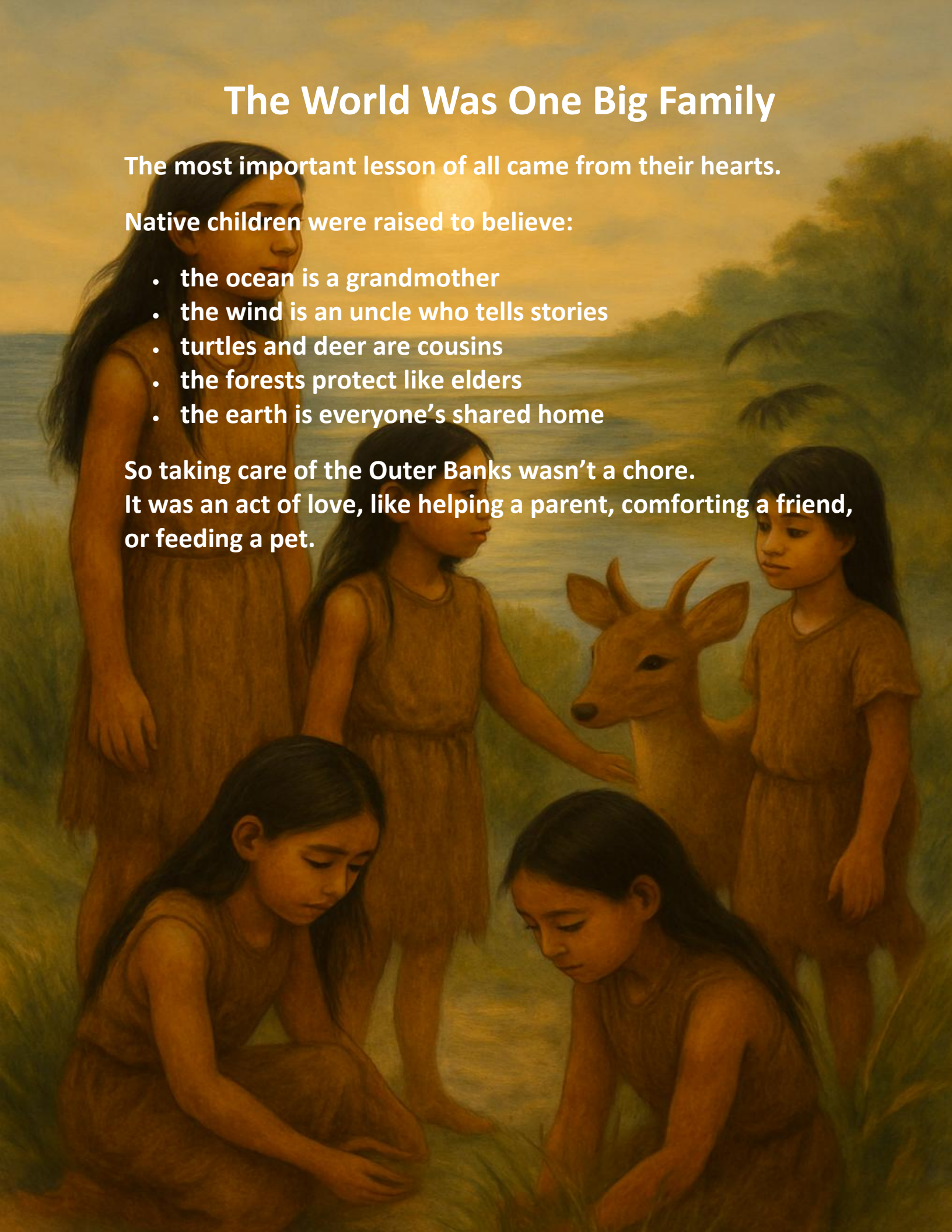
The most important lesson of all came from their hearts.

Native children were raised to believe:

- the ocean is a grandmother
- the wind is an uncle who tells stories
- turtles and deer are cousins
- the forests protect like elders
- the earth is everyone's shared home

So taking care of the Outer Banks wasn't a chore.

It was an act of love, like helping a parent, comforting a friend, or feeding a pet.



What Their Wisdom Teaches Us Today

The Outer Banks still moves.

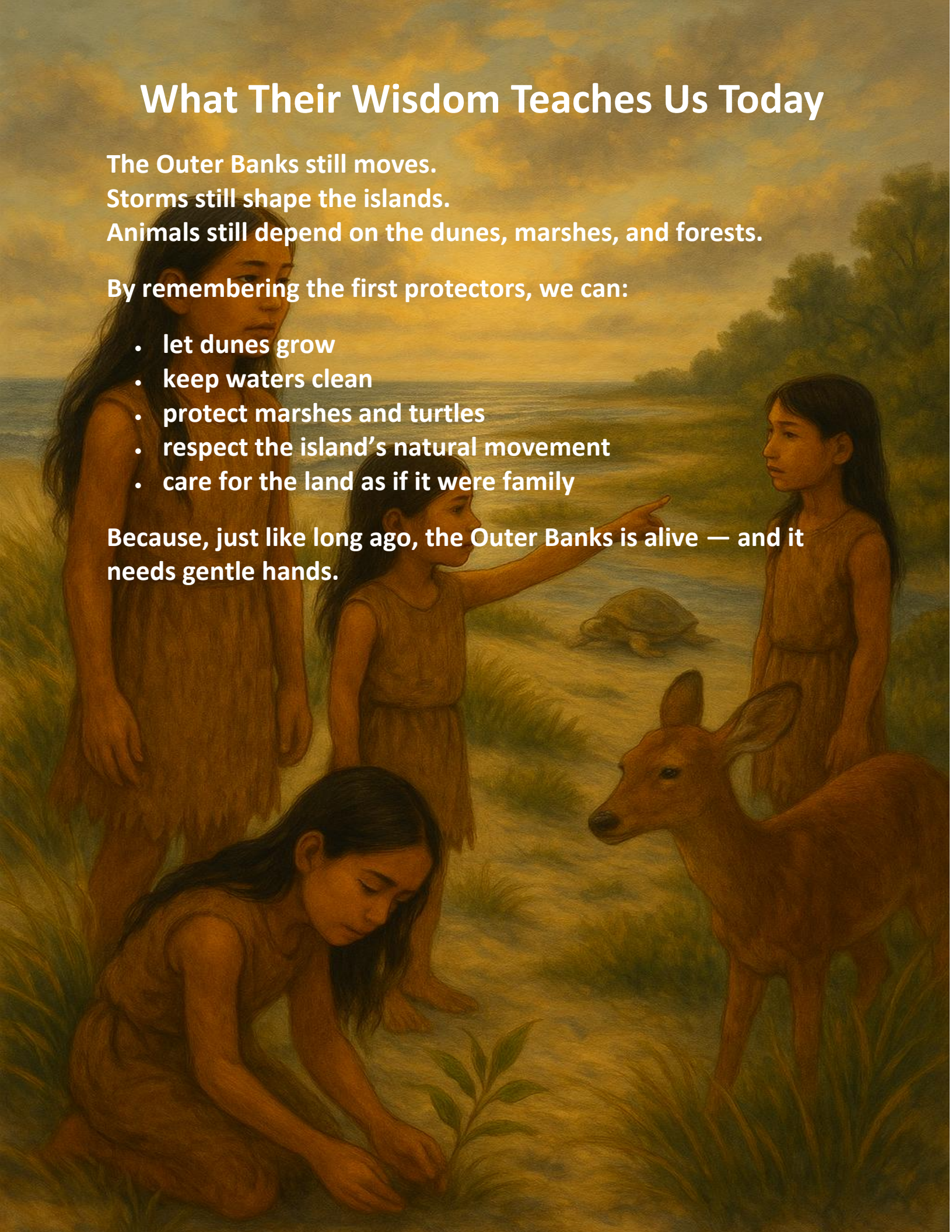
Storms still shape the islands.

Animals still depend on the dunes, marshes, and forests.

By remembering the first protectors, we can:

- let dunes grow
- keep waters clean
- protect marshes and turtles
- respect the island's natural movement
- care for the land as if it were family

Because, just like long ago, the Outer Banks is alive — and it needs gentle hands.



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The First Protectors of the Outer Banks: How Native Peoples Became the First Conservationists

Native peoples of the Outer Banks — including the Croatoan, Secotan, Weapemeoc, and Chowanoke — were the region's first conservationists, teaching their children to live with the dynamic islands rather than fight them. They practiced sustainable fishing, protected marshes, honored water sources, and planted cooperative crops like the Three Sisters. They used controlled fire to renew forests, built lightweight homes that worked with storms, and treated the land as part of their family — with the ocean as a grandmother and wildlife as relatives. Their deep respect for nature offers modern lessons: let dunes grow, keep waters clean, protect marshes and turtles, and care for the shifting islands with gentle, informed stewardship.

About the Publisher

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Learn more and download free educational resources at:
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