

Bonfires *by the* Sea



How to Enjoy the Outer Banks
While Protecting Wildlife



OUTER BANKS, NORTH CAROLINA



Bonfires by the Sea: How to Enjoy the Outer Banks While Protecting Wildlife

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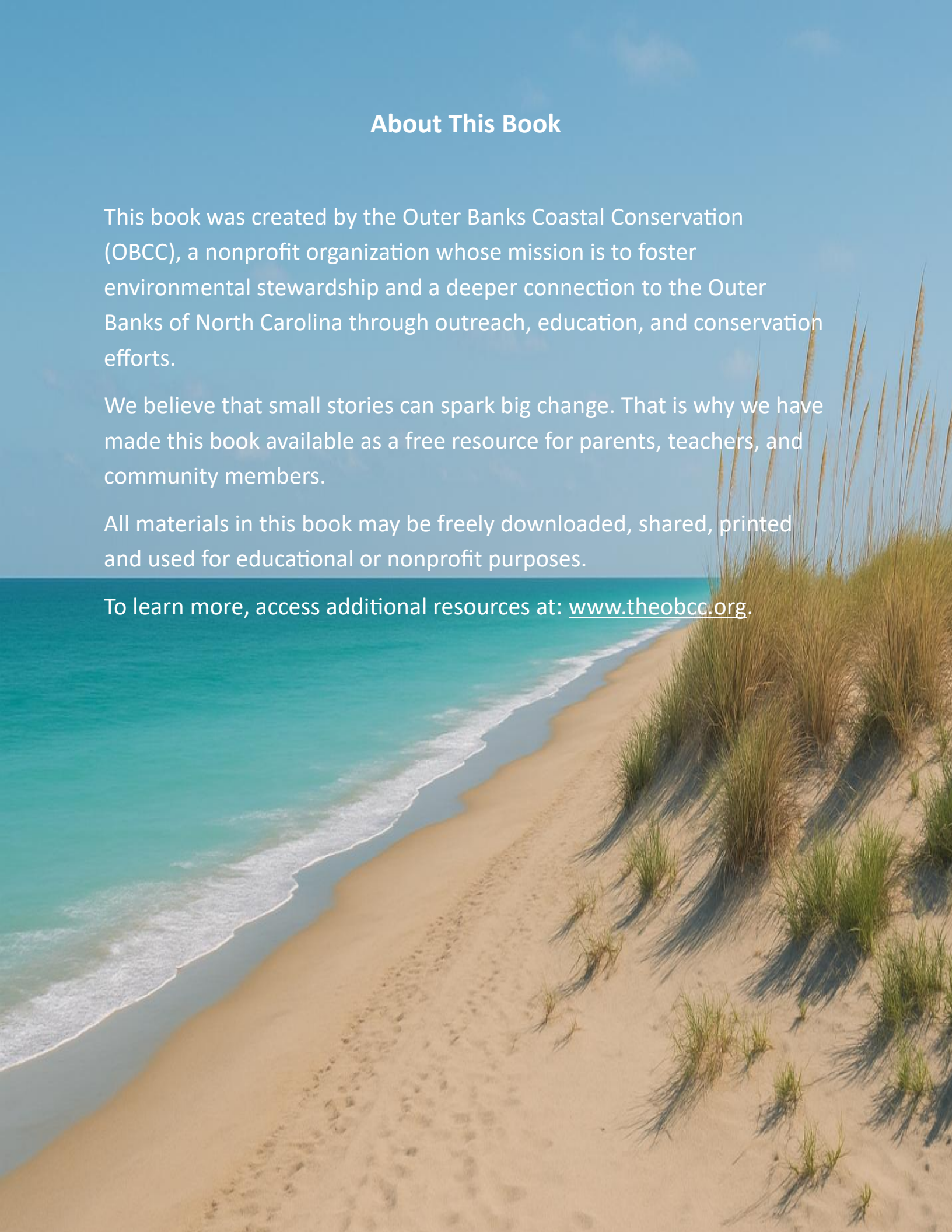
About This Book

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.



About Beach Bonfires

Bonfires are an Outer Banks tradition—but they come with responsibilities. The Outer Banks coastline is home to nesting sea turtles, shorebirds, ghost crabs, and other wildlife that rely on dark, undisturbed beaches. Understanding the rules and ecological impact helps protect both the experience and the environment.



Check Local Regulations Before Building a Bonfire

Bonfire regulations vary by location on the Outer Banks and may change due to weather conditions, wildfire risk, sea turtle or shorebird nesting, or local ordinances. Always check with the appropriate local authority before lighting a beach bonfire.

- Cape Hatteras National Seashore – Check with the National Park Service (NPS) for current regulations, permit requirements, seasonal restrictions, and fire safety rules.
- Nags Head, Kill Devil Hills, Kitty Hawk, Duck, Southern Shores, Corolla, and other towns – Contact the local town government or fire department to determine whether beach bonfires are permitted and whether a permit is required.
- Private beaches, rental properties, and homeowners' associations (HOAs) – Follow all property-specific rules and obtain approval from the property owner or HOA when applicable.

Before You Go:

- ✓ Verify that beach bonfires are permitted at your location.
- ✓ Obtain any required permits before your visit.
- ✓ Check for temporary fire bans or restrictions due to high winds, drought, or wildlife protection measures.
- ✓ Keep any required permits available for inspection by park rangers or local officials.

Environmental Impact

Wildlife Awareness: What's at Stake

The Outer Banks coastline supports one of the most diverse coastal ecosystems on the East Coast. Fires, light, and noise can disrupt this delicate balance.

Sea Turtles

- Nesting occurs May through November. Hatchlings rely on the moon and starlight to find the ocean.
- Bonfire light can disorient hatchlings, leading them inland toward danger.
- Fire pits dug into the sand can trap hatchlings or block their path to the sea.
- Nesting females may abandon nests if disturbed by human activity at night.

Shorebirds and Dune Species

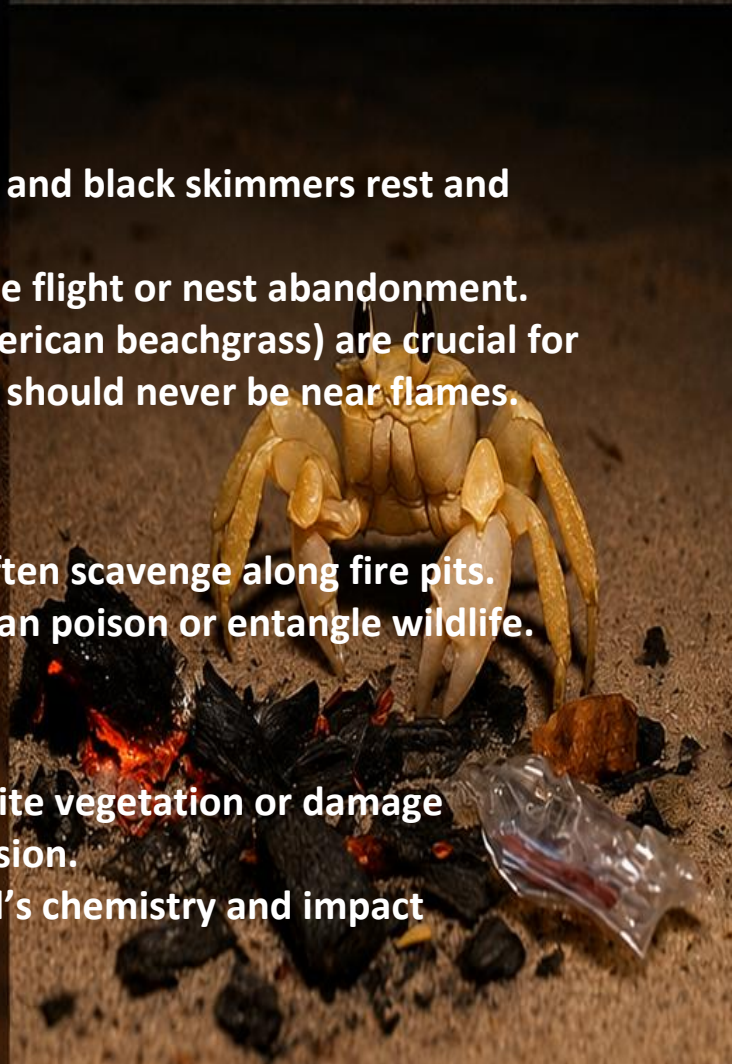
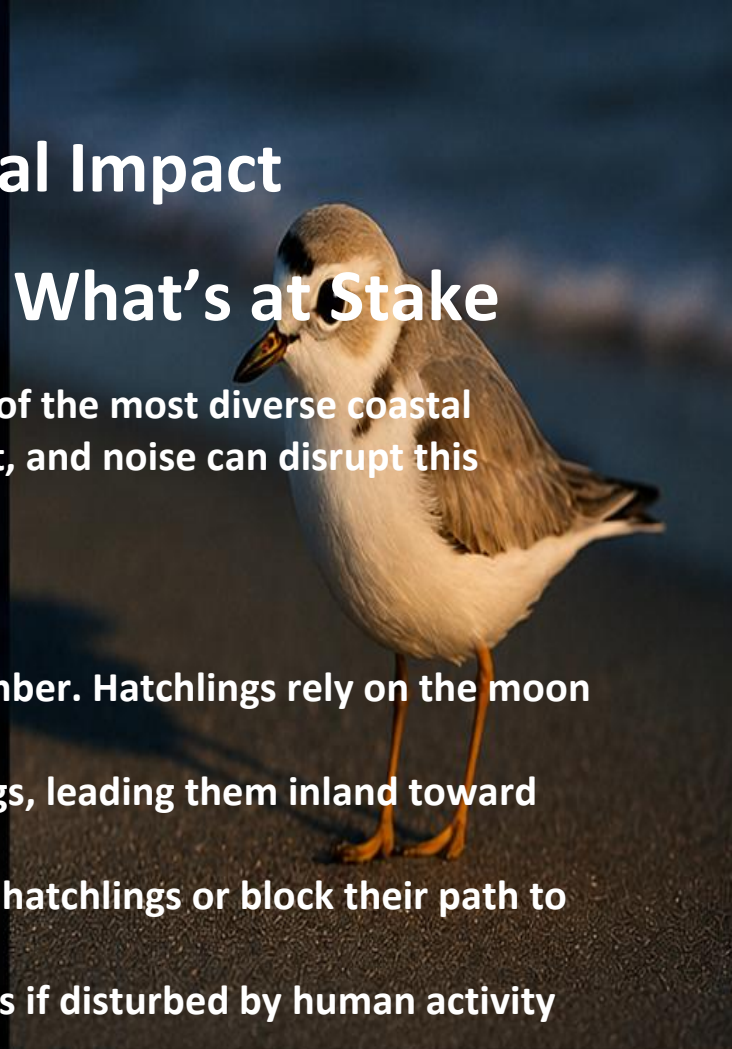
- Piping plovers, willets, sanderlings, and black skimmers rest and feed along the surf zone after dark.
- Fires and human presence can cause flight or nest abandonment.
- Dune grasses (like sea oats and American beachgrass) are crucial for erosion control but burn easily and should never be near flames.

Ghost Crabs and Nocturnal Animals

- Ghost crabs, raccoons, and foxes often scavenge along fire pits.
- Leftover charcoal, plastic, or food can poison or entangle wildlife.

Habitat Damage

- Fires too close to the dunes can ignite vegetation or damage stabilizing grasses that prevent erosion.
- Ash and charcoal can alter the sand's chemistry and impact microfauna.



Building a Safe and Eco-Friendly Fire

Choose Your Spot Carefully

- Set up below the high tide line (where sand is dark and compact).
- Avoid dunes and vegetation.
- Keep at least 50 feet from turtle nest markers, dune fences, or beach accesses.

Use the Right Materials

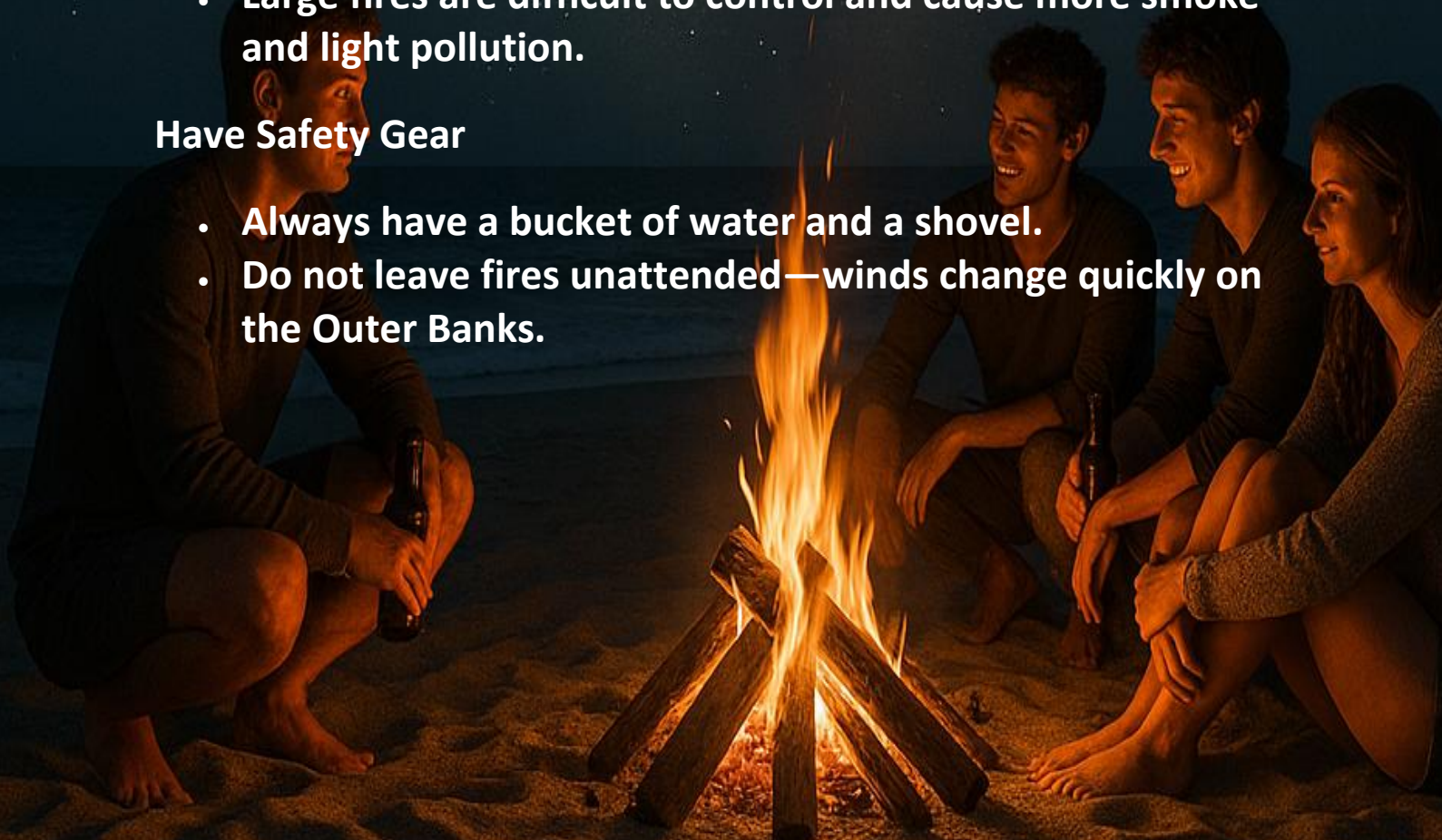
- Use clean, untreated wood only.
- No driftwood with nails, paint, or pressure treatment.
- Never burn trash, cans, glass, or pallets.

Keep It Small

- Limit fires to 3 feet in diameter and height.
- Large fires are difficult to control and cause more smoke and light pollution.

Have Safety Gear

- Always have a bucket of water and a shovel.
- Do not leave fires unattended—winds change quickly on the Outer Banks.



When the Fire's Out: Leave No Trace

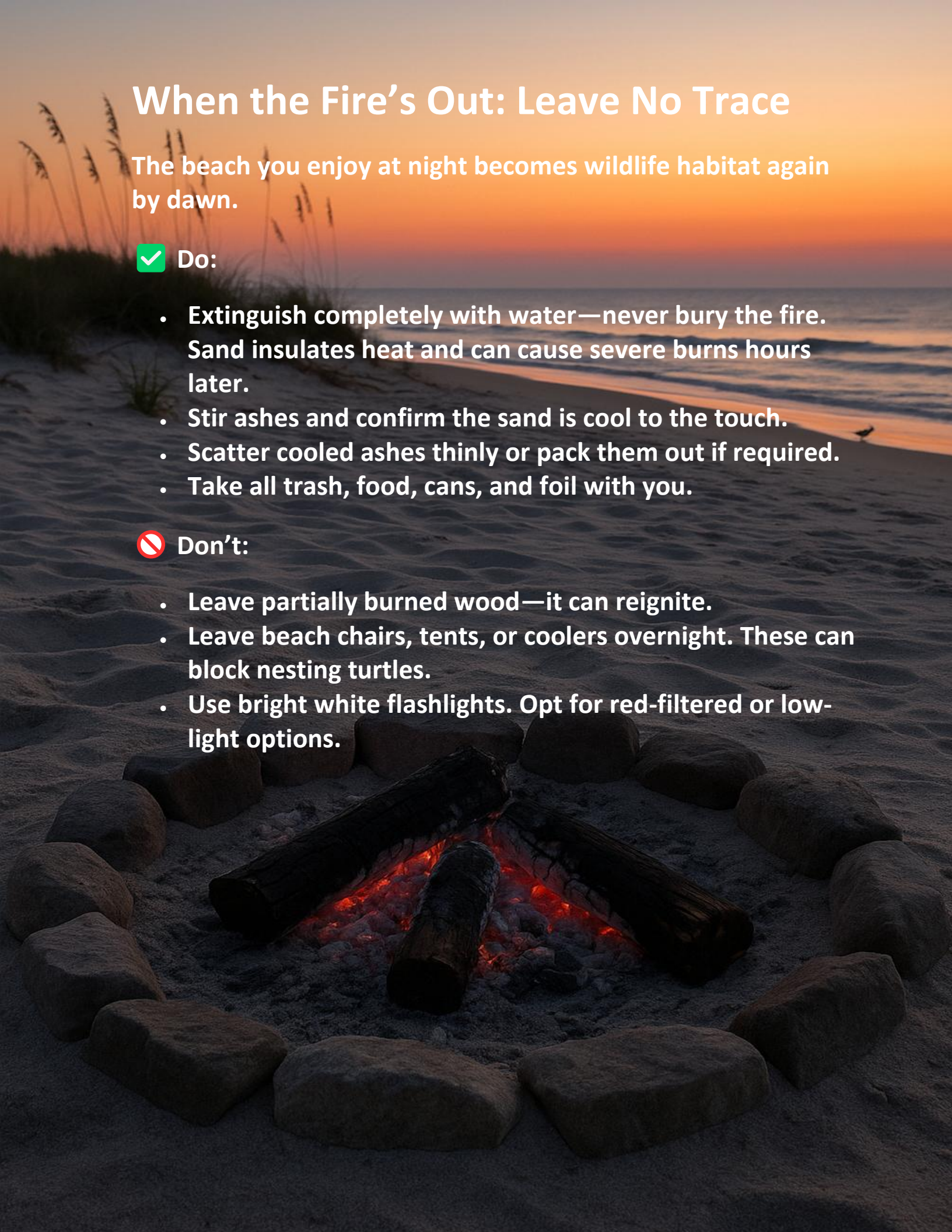
The beach you enjoy at night becomes wildlife habitat again by dawn.

✓ Do:

- Extinguish completely with water—never bury the fire. Sand insulates heat and can cause severe burns hours later.
- Stir ashes and confirm the sand is cool to the touch.
- Scatter cooled ashes thinly or pack them out if required.
- Take all trash, food, cans, and foil with you.

⊘ Don't:

- Leave partially burned wood—it can reignite.
- Leave beach chairs, tents, or coolers overnight. These can block nesting turtles.
- Use bright white flashlights. Opt for red-filtered or low-light options.



Coexisting with Wildlife

- Respect marked nesting zones and avoid disturbing dunes.
- Keep pets leashed after dark; dogs can dig up nests or chase wildlife.
- If you spot a marked turtle nest, do not approach or shine lights on it. Stay behind the marker posts and alert others nearby to give space.

Respecting the Dunes

Dunes are living, shifting barriers that protect coastal towns from storms.

- Never dig into or climb dune faces.
- Fires too close to dune vegetation can ignite and destroy stabilizing grasses.
- Each burned section can take years to recover, leaving gaps where erosion can begin.



Lights, Noise, and Nightlife

While bonfires create a wonderful glow, excessive light and noise can disorient wildlife and disturb nearby campers.

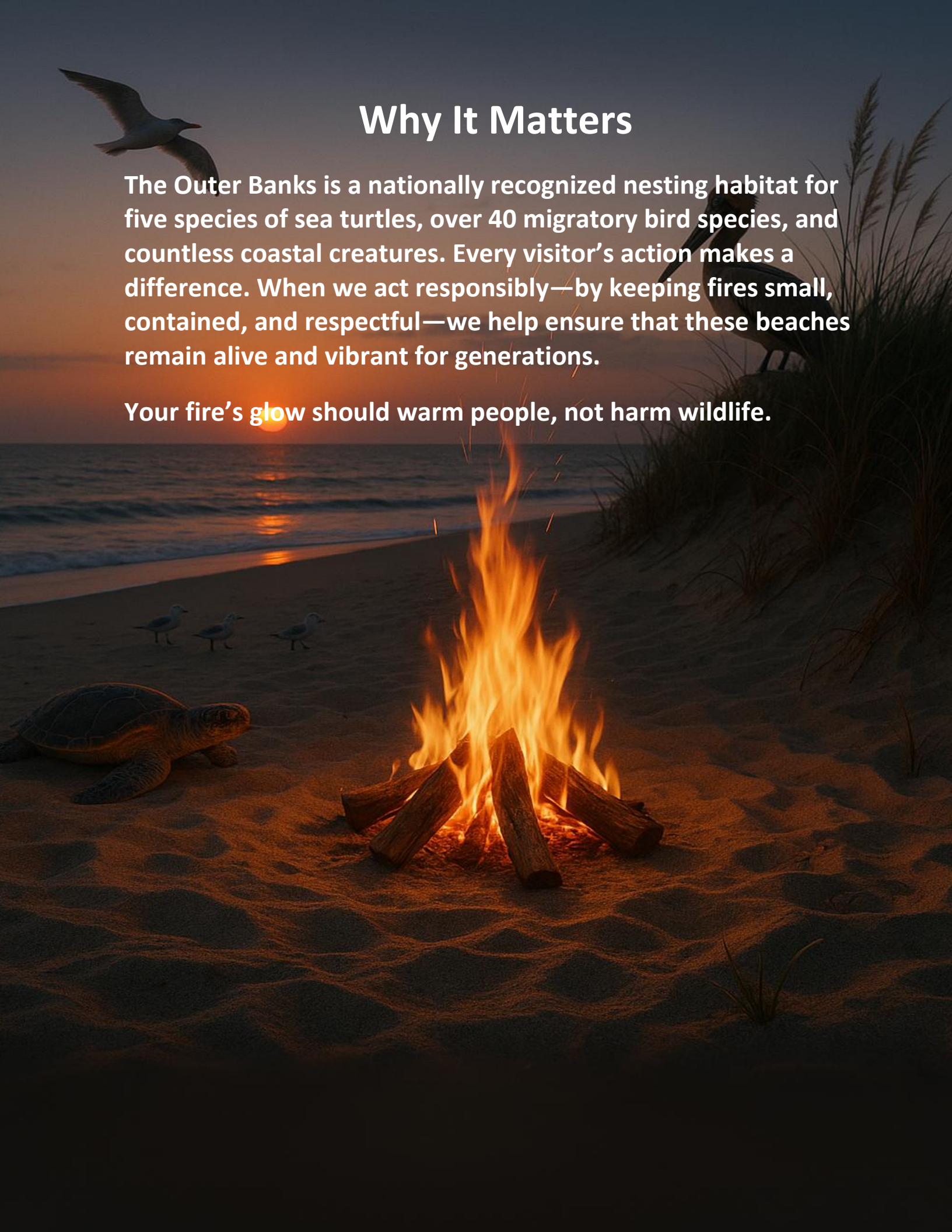
- Use red or amber filters on flashlights.
- Avoid music speakers—sound travels far on the open beach.
- Keep conversations low after dark to preserve the natural nighttime soundscape.
- If you photograph the fire, turn off flash and avoid lighting up dunes.



Why It Matters

The Outer Banks is a nationally recognized nesting habitat for five species of sea turtles, over 40 migratory bird species, and countless coastal creatures. Every visitor's action makes a difference. When we act responsibly—by keeping fires small, contained, and respectful—we help ensure that these beaches remain alive and vibrant for generations.

Your fire's glow should warm people, not harm wildlife.



Quick Checklist: Responsible Bonfire Essentials



Bring

Permit (digital or printed)

Bucket of water

Shovel

Clean firewood

Awareness of tides



Avoid

Glass bottles

Trash or foil

Bright lights

Loud music

Pallets or painted wood



Did You Know?

- A sea turtle hatchling is smaller than your palm and can crawl hundreds of feet to reach the sea—light from a bonfire can make it go the wrong way.
- The ashes from one bonfire can raise sand temperature, affecting how turtle embryos develop.
- Charred wood and litter attract scavengers like raccoons and gulls, which then prey on turtle nests.
- A single dune grass plant can trap and hold over one cubic foot of sand, slowly rebuilding dunes after storms.



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Bonfires by the Sea: How to Enjoy the Outer Banks While Protecting Wildlife

This guide explains how to enjoy traditional beach bonfires responsibly while protecting the fragile Outer Banks ecosystem. The guide details how bonfire light, heat, and debris can harm sea turtles, shorebirds, dune vegetation, and nocturnal species like ghost crabs. It promotes “Leave No Trace” practices—fully extinguishing fires, removing all waste, and avoiding bright lights or loud sounds—to minimize ecological disturbance.

About the Publisher

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