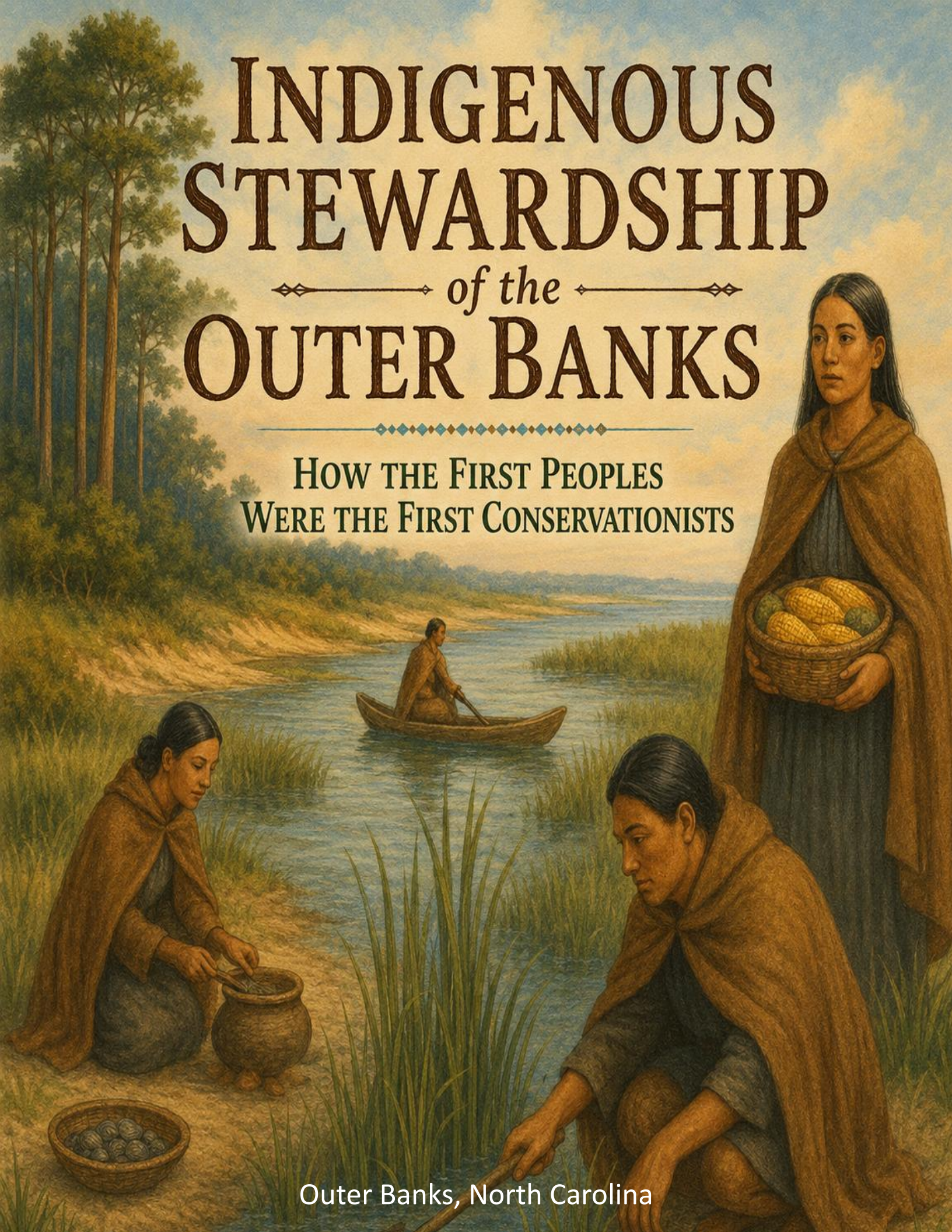




INDIGENOUS STEWARDSHIP of the OUTER BANKS

HOW THE FIRST PEOPLES
WERE THE FIRST CONSERVATIONISTS

Outer Banks, North Carolina

Indigenous Stewardship of the Outer Banks: How the First Peoples Were the First Conservationists

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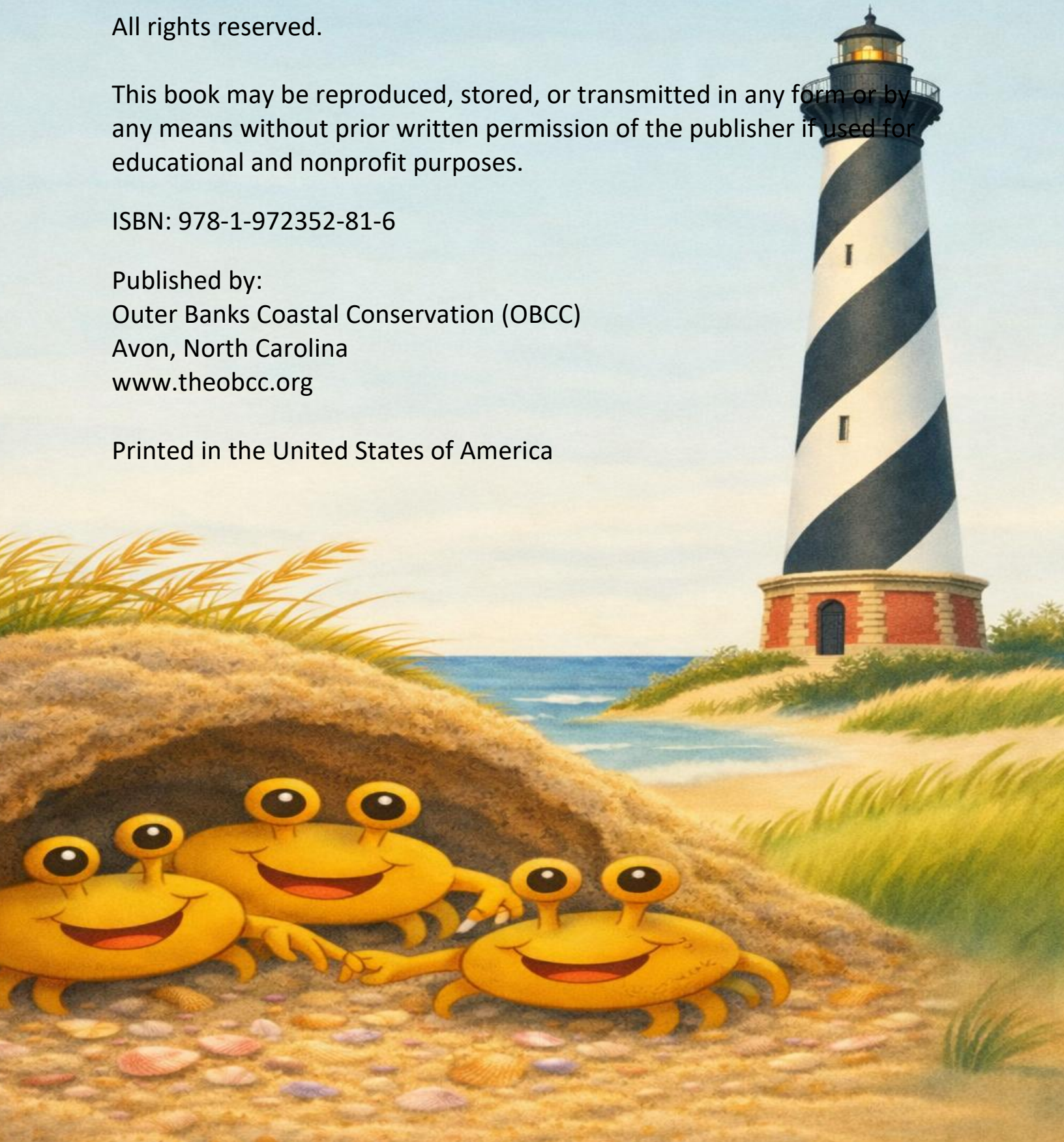
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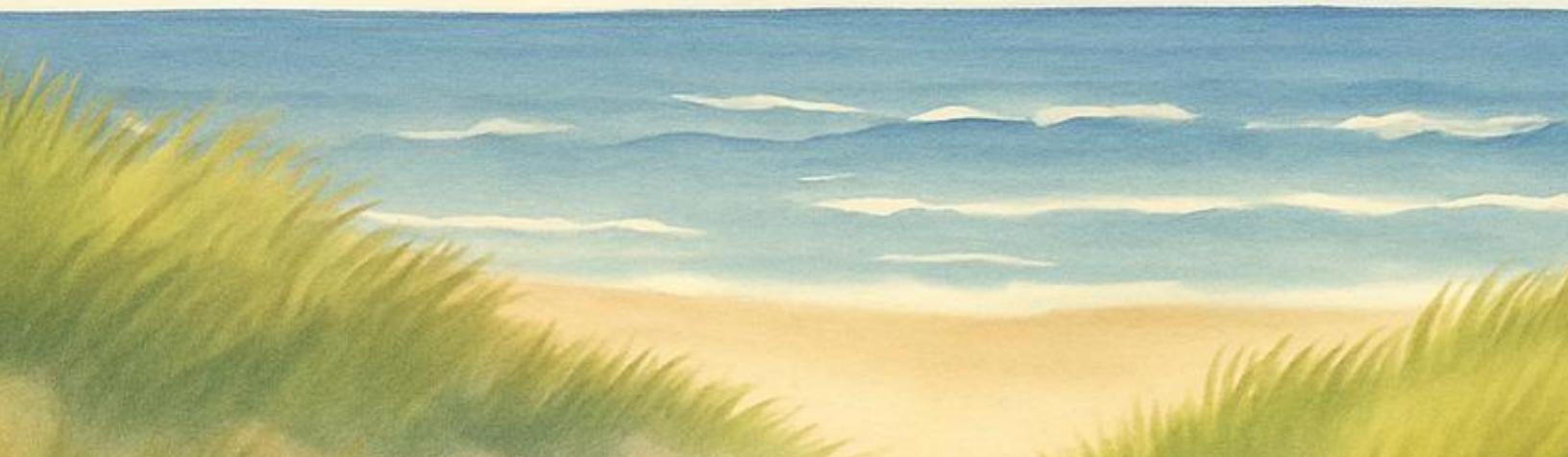
About This Book

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.

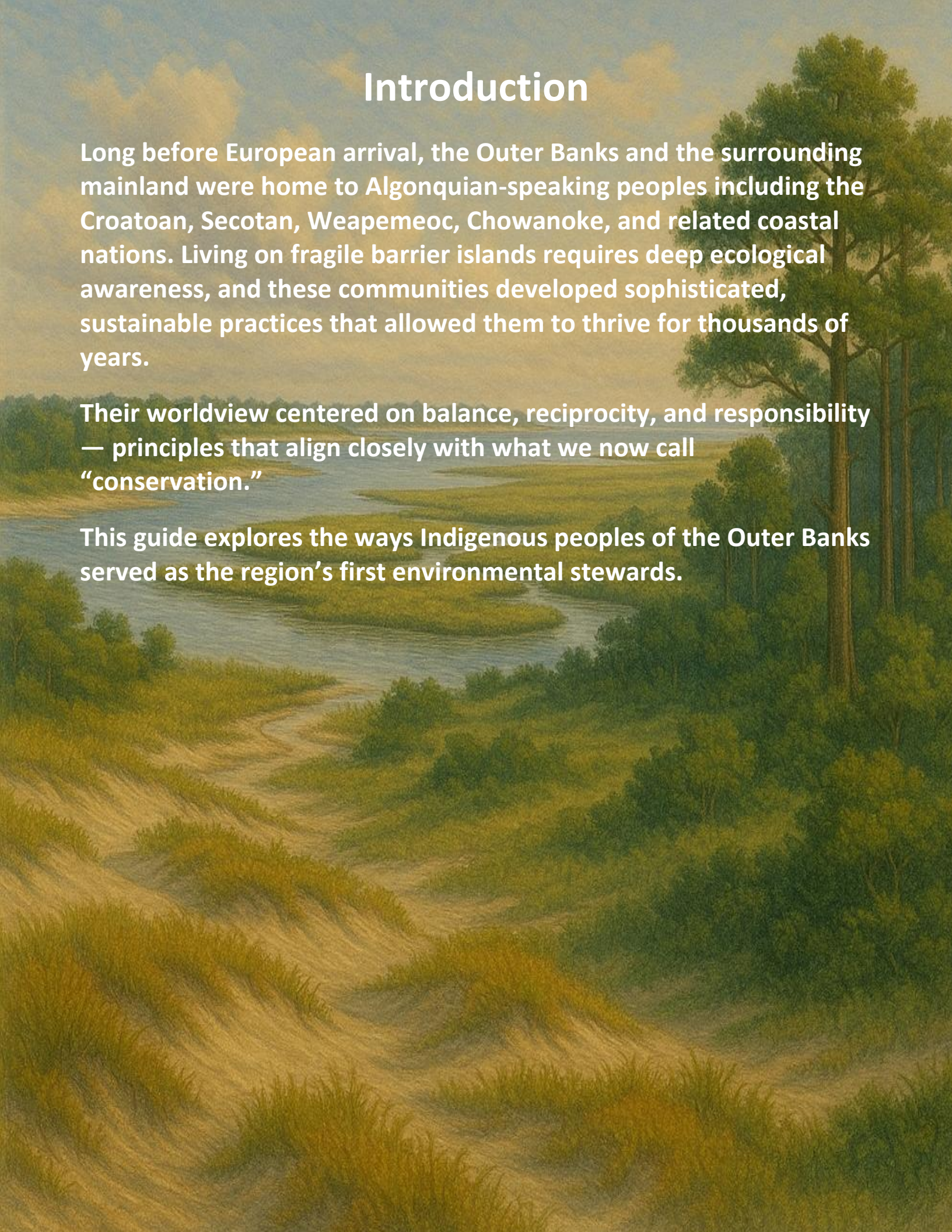


Introduction

Long before European arrival, the Outer Banks and the surrounding mainland were home to Algonquian-speaking peoples including the Croatoan, Secotan, Weapemeoc, Chowanoke, and related coastal nations. Living on fragile barrier islands requires deep ecological awareness, and these communities developed sophisticated, sustainable practices that allowed them to thrive for thousands of years.

Their worldview centered on balance, reciprocity, and responsibility — principles that align closely with what we now call “conservation.”

This guide explores the ways Indigenous peoples of the Outer Banks served as the region’s first environmental stewards.



A Landscape Understood Through Relationship

Barrier Islands as Living Beings

Indigenous peoples saw the coast not as a resource to be exploited, but as a living system made of:

- shifting dunes
- tidal marshes
- estuaries and sounds
- maritime forests

Rather than fight the movement of sand and water, they worked with it.

Place-Based Knowledge

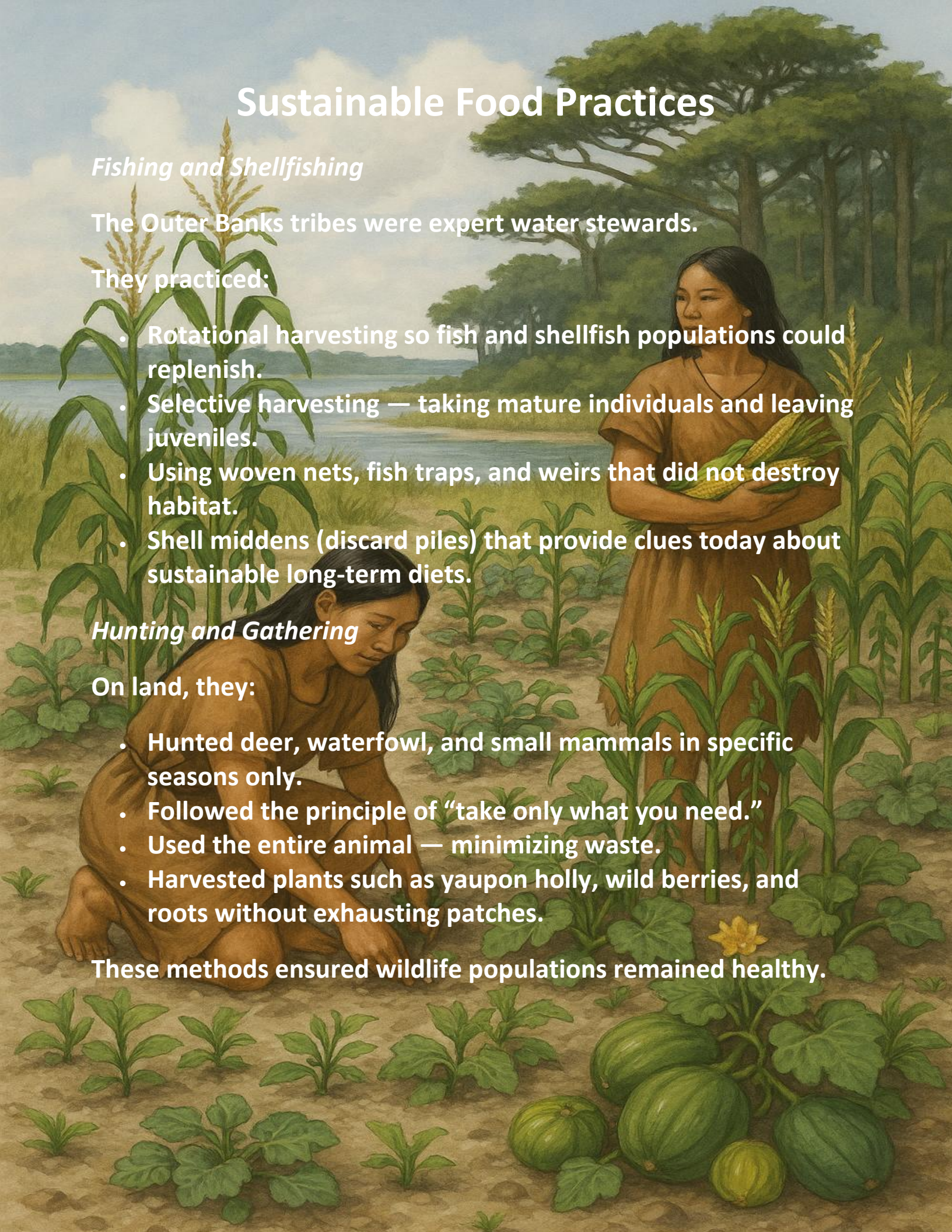
Generations observed:

- seasonal winds
- storm patterns
- inlet openings and closures
- fish migrations
- dune formation

This knowledge guided where to build, plant, travel, and harvest — minimizing environmental damage.



Sustainable Food Practices



Fishing and Shellfishing

The Outer Banks tribes were expert water stewards.

They practiced:

- Rotational harvesting so fish and shellfish populations could replenish.
- Selective harvesting — taking mature individuals and leaving juveniles.
- Using woven nets, fish traps, and weirs that did not destroy habitat.
- Shell middens (discard piles) that provide clues today about sustainable long-term diets.

Hunting and Gathering

On land, they:

- Hunted deer, waterfowl, and small mammals in specific seasons only.
- Followed the principle of “take only what you need.”
- Used the entire animal — minimizing waste.
- Harvested plants such as yaupon holly, wild berries, and roots without exhausting patches.

These methods ensured wildlife populations remained healthy.

A painting of a coastal landscape. In the foreground, a river flows from the bottom left towards the center. The banks are covered in tall grass and some trees. On the right bank, there is a large, conical pile of sand or earth. In the background, a line of trees is visible on the right, and a distant shoreline is visible across the water. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The overall color palette is warm, with greens, browns, and yellows.

Agriculture Adapted to Coastal Ecology

Though sandy soils can be difficult, Indigenous communities cultivated:

- Corn (maize)
- Beans
- Squash
- Sunflowers

They practiced:

The Three Sisters System

Corn, beans, and squash planted together create:

- nutrient cycling
- moisture retention
- natural pest management

No chemical inputs. No soil depletion. Entirely regenerative.

Wind-Resilient Planting

Fields were often located:

- behind maritime forest windbreaks
- on higher ground protected from overwash
- near estuaries where soils were richer

This displayed deep understanding of barrier-island ecology.

Respect for Water: The Foundation of Life

The soundside waters — Pamlico, Croatan, Albemarle — were central to survival.

Indigenous practices included:

- Avoiding pollution of freshwater sources
- Keeping canoe routes unobstructed
- Using fire to clear brush in ways that reduced erosion
- Shaping small earthen features to guide water, not block it

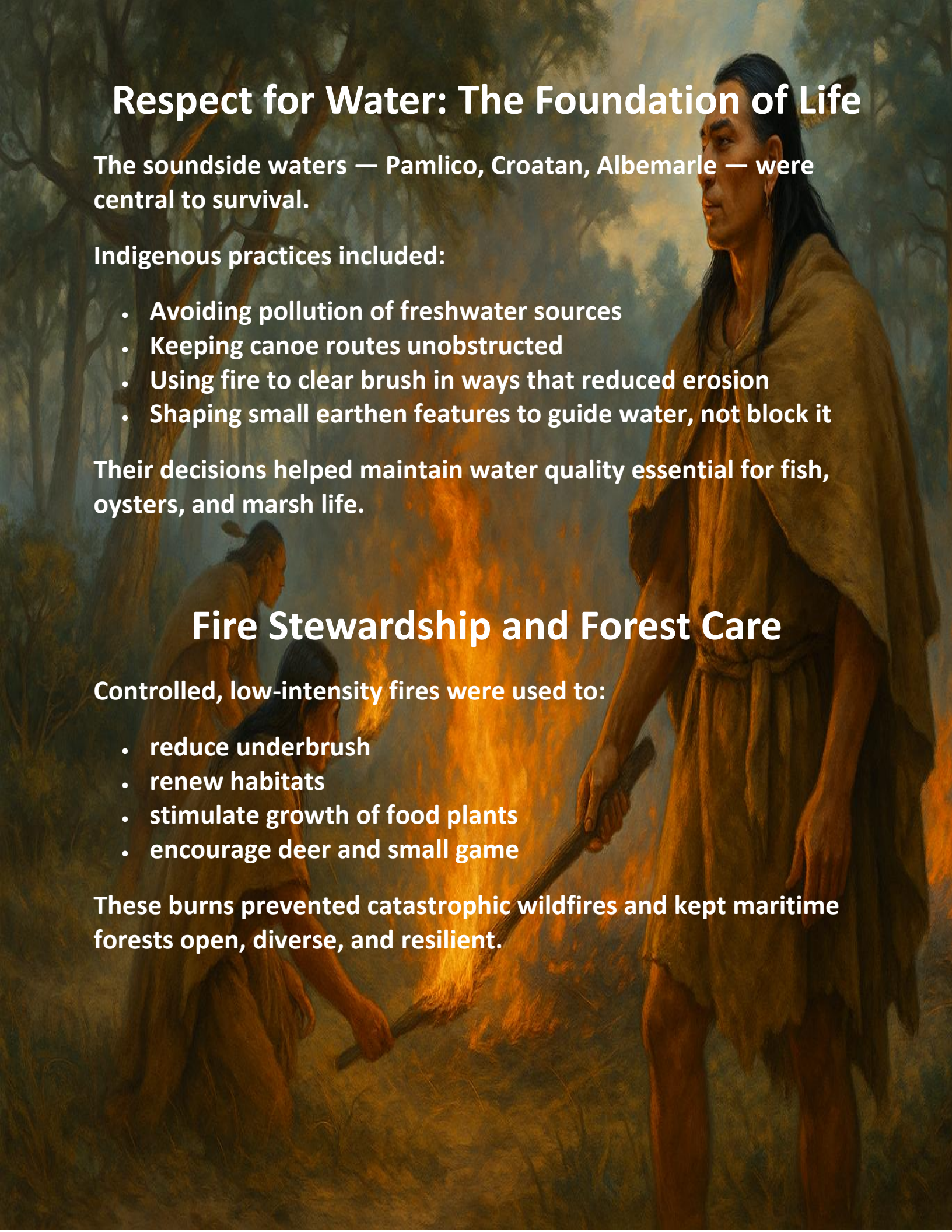
Their decisions helped maintain water quality essential for fish, oysters, and marsh life.

Fire Stewardship and Forest Care

Controlled, low-intensity fires were used to:

- reduce underbrush
- renew habitats
- stimulate growth of food plants
- encourage deer and small game

These burns prevented catastrophic wildfires and kept maritime forests open, diverse, and resilient.



Homes and Villages Designed for the Environment

Indigenous structures were built to work with — not against — coastal forces:

- Lightweight, movable houses (longhouses, wigwams)
- Villages placed on higher ground safe from overwash
- Natural materials that could return to the earth without harm
- Minimal permanent footprint

This avoided the long-term erosion issues created by modern hard structures.



A Worldview of Stewardship



Perhaps most important were the values guiding daily life:

Reciprocity

You give back to the land that sustains you.

Kinship

Animals, plants, water, wind, and soil were relatives, not resources.

Responsibility

Humans were caretakers — a role requiring humility and respect.

Seasonal Ceremonies

Many rituals aligned with:

- harvest cycles
- fisheries runs
- changes in the winds
- shifts in the tide

These practices reinforced a sustainable relationship with nature.

Lessons for Today

Modern conservation in the Outer Banks echoes Indigenous principles:

- Let the islands move.
- Protect dunes, marshes, and forests as living systems.
- Harvest sustainably.
- Restore oyster reefs and fish habitats.
- Reduce pollution and respect water flow.

Indigenous stewardship reminds us that healthy coastal communities depend on respecting the natural rhythms of the land and sea.

Even now, the Outer Banks face big challenges:

- strong storms
- rising seas
- disappearing dunes
- stressed wildlife

The first peoples of the Outer Banks showed us a better way:

- *Respect the Earth.*
- *Take only what you need.*
- *Let the islands move.*
- *Protect the water and wildlife.*
- *Be a good relative to the land.*

Just like they were.

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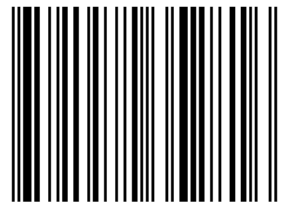
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explains how the Indigenous peoples of the Outer Banks lived in harmony with nature for thousands of years. They used sustainable fishing, hunting, farming, and forestry practices while protecting water, wildlife, and coastal habitats. Guided by values of respect, responsibility, and balance, they treated the land and sea as living relatives rather than resources to be exploited. The book shows how their wisdom can help us protect the Outer Banks and its wildlife today.

About the Publisher

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