

# NERR or Far:

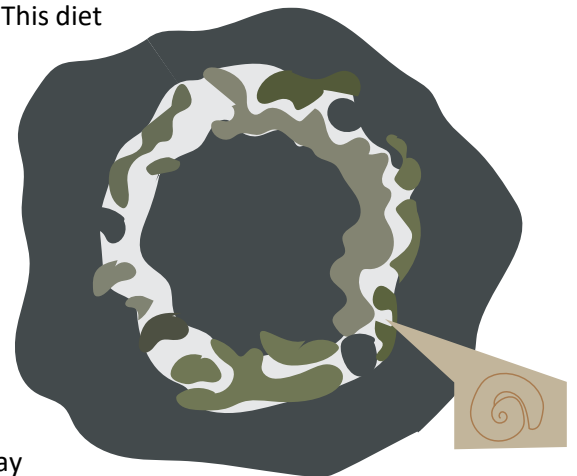
## The Reserves Are Where You Are

### Episode 4: Protecting Cultural Resources

People have been living along our coastlines and in estuaries for a very, very long time. Estuaries have always provided their inhabitants with protection and valuable resources that create ideal conditions for settlement. Because of this, **the National Estuarine Research Reserves, or the NERRs**, have an important role in protecting archaeological sites and other **cultural resources** on their lands. The Rookery Bay NERR in Naples, Florida, is one site in particular that has a lot of history to help protect.

People have been part of the story of Rookery Bay going back over 4000 years, going back to the Late Archaic period. People have lived with the environment in this area for a long time, and you can see evidence of this through the numerous **shell mounds** that dot the landscape. The mounds are a little more hidden now than they once were, covered with tropical **hardwood hammocks** and other plant species that researchers have confidence would not exist anywhere else except for these shell mounds. This creates a unique environment for study. One of the reasons that these sites exist is because the **Calusa** Native Americans (a tribe that unfortunately no longer exists) ate a diet that was very high in protein and left evidence of this where they once lived and worked. This diet included things like clams, **gastropods** and various species of fish, all species with **calcareous** shells or hard, bony structures, which preserve well. Their diet was actually so good that the average Calusa male in the 16-1700s, at the time of contact with Europeans, was about six feet tall. Unfortunately, European diets back then weren't as good, and so the Spanish when they came over described the Calusa as being tall, towering giants.

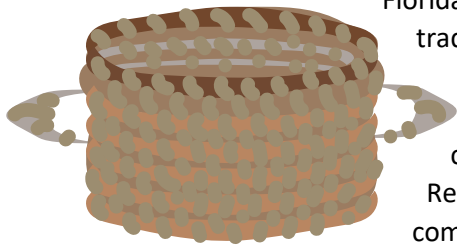
It was because of the bountifulness and richness of the estuary that the Calusa were able to exist- not only exist, but do successfully. They were actually one of the few non-agricultural Native American tribes in America, and they were able to live this way because they had enough from fishing and **aquaculture** that they didn't need to farm on land as a supplemental food source. There's also a lot of other history at the reserve, including that of the first people who settled Rookery Bay after the Calusa were gone, the veterans of the Civil War period. These people came out into the estuaries in the 1800s and settled onto Rookery Bay and surrounding areas for the same reason that the Calusas existed so successfully for so long: the bountifulness of the estuary.



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We can travel nearly 500 miles from the Rookery Bay NERR to the ACE Basin NERR in the Charleston, South Carolina area, and we will still find Native American shell mounds and rings in the estuaries. One thing that these sites across the southeast have in common is that they're currently threatened by storms and sea level rise. The ACE Basin NERR has done a lot of work with state archaeologists to better understand their Native American sites. Working as quickly as they can, they have been trying to learn about and document the shell rings and other types of evidence of human settlements at the reserve that are severely eroding due to threats tied to our changing climate. Through studying these sites, researchers at the reserve have learned a lot about the abundance of oyster populations 4000 years ago and the variety of species that were used by estuary inhabitants for food. They can also tell how people moved around based on the availability of different resources, how they really lived in connection with the environment, used it to their advantage, and were resilient in the face of the different environmental threats that we face on our coasts even today. Native American archaeological sites give us a glimpse into the history of estuaries and coastal communities in the southeast. Sadly, as our planet warms, sea level rises, and storms become a greater issue, scientists and archaeologists are in a race against time to study and gather all that they can from these incredible cultural resources.

Two priority issues that the NERRs of the southeast are working to address are a changing climate and determining the impacts of coastal development. Another community that has had a big role in the history of our southeastern estuaries and a community that is dealing with the impacts of coastal development is the **Gullah-Geechee** community. The Gullah-Geechee are descendants of enslaved West African people who worked on coastal plantations from North Carolina to northern Florida. The Geechee people still maintain many unique West African traditions and elements of their language and culture. Some historians believe that the historic **Hog Hammock** community on Sapelo Island in Georgia is one of the last intact island-based Geechee communities in America. According to the island's Cultural and Revitalization Society, about 96% of the island surrounding the community is owned by the state of Georgia and cannot be purchased for development. This, in tandem with the fact that the island can only be accessed by ferry or private boat, creates an environment that makes those who have called Sapelo home for generations subject to stress and fracturing from land loss, speculative developers, a lack of job opportunities and racism.



According to Adam Mackinnon, the Sapelo Island NERR's Education Coordinator, there's not many people that can speak Geechee or Gullah fluently anymore, but the culture is still alive. The reserve puts on an event each year with the local Geechee community on the island where they showcase the culture through storytelling, art, dances and food to try and keep traditions alive on Sapelo. An important art form associated with this community is the sweetgrass basket. These baskets have been in the Gullah community for generations, and were originally meant to be a method of food storage and a rice production tool. As neighbors, the reserve and Hog Hammock try to partner whenever they can, providing employment and internship opportunities, supporting each other with renovations and post-flood assistance, etc. Sadly, as Sapelo slowly transforms into a popular vacation and weekend location, many community members are being persuaded to sell their private property. As a result of pressure from developers, Mackinnon says that Sapelo's Geechee community can now be

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viewed through a similar lens to endangered species. Where there used to be around 700 members in the 1910s, there's now closer to 30.

More cultural resources and reminders of the history of our southeastern estuaries are the horses at the Rachel Carson and Currituck sites of the North Carolina NERR. Long ago in the 1920s and 30s around Beaufort, NC, the body of water that separates town proper and what is now known as the Rachel Carson reserve was really shallow. Because of this, people from the town would bring their animals over there to take advantage of the opportunity for free grazing. One gentleman who brought his horses over there to graze ended up passing away, and without an owner they became feral. When the state of North Carolina eventually took over the management of the reserve, they decided to leave the horses on the reserve's land because they viewed the horses as a cultural resource to the community and reminder of the region's history.



The creation of many of the NERRs in the southeast was made possible by a number of conservation organizations and government agencies. But in the case of the North Inlet-Winyah Bay Reserve in South Carolina, there was an important environmental steward who paved the way: Belle W Baruch. Belle was the daughter of Bernard Baruch, a wealthy New York City financier who bought the now reserve property shortly after the Civil War and the collapse of the rice plantations. He bought it as a hunting property and enjoyed it as a winter retreat. When Belle came down to visit, however, she realized what an amazing and unique piece of property it was. Seeing how the other plantations along the SC coastline in the late 60s were being developed, she realized she needed to help leave this property intact. She set up a **trust** that would make this property available for research and education, an act that is very much in line with the current mission of the reserve, which is “protecting and wise coastal stewardship of the estuaries through research and education”. Belle unfortunately died young of cancer and never got to see the creation of the reserve, but her generosity had an incredible impact on conservation and estuarine science in the southeast.

The National Estuarine Research Reserve System doesn't just study and protect our natural resources on the coast, they also play a role in protecting cultural resources and keeping the rich history of southeastern coastal communities alive. Whether it's an archaeological site, herds of feral horses, a community teeming with important culture and tradition, or hunting land turned living laboratory, reserves are committed to lending a hand and learning more. There's a lot that we can learn from these people and these sites. Storms, sea level rise, coastal development, and a number of other threats have created a race against time for those studying at the reserves, but hopefully we can learn more about the history of our estuaries before it's too late.

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# QUESTION TIME

1. How did living on the estuary impact the lifestyle of the Calusa Native Americans?
2. What types of information can we gather about the past from shell rings and mounds today?
3. What challenges are archaeologists currently facing related to these sites?
4. What is unique about the Hog Hammock community on Sapelo Island? Name a challenge that this group is currently facing.
5. What is the story of the horses at the NCNERR? Why leave them on reserve land?
6. Who was Belle W. Baruch and how is she tied to the NERRS?