

Big Cypress

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Big Cypress
National Preserve



Precolumbian People of Big Cypress

Humans have made the Big Cypress Swamp their home for almost 3,000 years. Teeming with life, the unique ecosystem of the Big Cypress Swamp provided a bountiful source of sustenance for the first peoples to call it home. Evidence of seasonal and even permanent settlement, albeit limited, has been found deep within its large expanse. Ongoing research may yet yield even more fascinating clues.

Who were the “Glades People?” Within the wetland region of South Florida these were peoples living on the margins of the Big Cypress Swamp who supplemented their economy with food and other products from the swamp and coastal waters. Among these diverse tribes were the fierce Calusa of Southwest Florida and the Tequesta, a people inhabiting what is now Miami. Although the region was rich in nutritional and material resources, heavy rainfall and seasonal flooding prevented permanent settlement in most places. The earliest inhabitants, about 4,500 years ago, created middens, or piles of refuse, that provide clues to their diet and way of life. Shell tools and weapons, along with simple and sometimes decorated pottery have been found on many of the naturally elevated “islands” in the swamp. There is no evidence, however, of agriculture. What archaeologists termed the “Glades culture” was almost entirely based on hunting and gathering, with extremely limited use of farming. Throughout the Prehistoric period (500 BCE to ACE 1513), settlements in the Big Cypress were largely transient, with camps being used mostly for hunting, fishing, and food-processing.

A Wetland Cornucopia

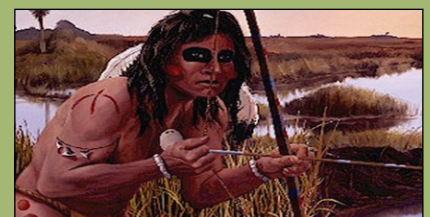
How did these people survive in the swamp? The Big Cypress Swamp was rich in food and material resources for the peoples living in and around it. Game, including white-tailed deer, marsh rabbits, and all kinds of fish and reptiles were plentiful. Evidence from prehistoric trash middens suggests that both fish and reptiles made up the largest part of the Glades diet. A vast array of plants served the Glades people as food and medicines. Hog plums, coco plums, prickly pears, and palmetto berries were all consumed by the Glades people. Most sites within Big Cypress seem to have been devoted to processing food, and one can imagine large amounts of fish, shellfish, and other animals being cooked and preserved in what would appear to be large hunting or fishing camps. This kind of activity carries on today in seasonal camps used by today’s hunters, sport anglers, and in modern Miccosukee and Seminole villages.

Material Culture

While much of the culture of the early inhabitants of Big Cypress remains a mystery, archaeology has provided a

Interpretation Through Art

We know very little about the people that once inhabited the Big Cypress Swamp. Scant written records and archaeology provide pieces to the puzzle, which also provide inspiration to present-day artists. While we will never know exactly how these people appeared or lived, based on solid research, art can help us better understand and connect to the first Floridians.



glimpse of how these people survived in the swamp. Shell was the most common material used for making tools. Perforated shells were used as weapons and tools, made by cutting holes in large shells and securing them to rods.

Fishhooks were carved from bone or antler, and arrowheads and other projectile points made of bone or mineral were also used. Shark teeth and stingray spines were used to make cutting tools and weapons, and palmetto fiber was used to weave nets. The fronds could be used as thatch for roofing.

What Happened to the Glades People?

In the two centuries after contact with Europeans in the early 1500s, the Glades peoples went into decline. War with the Spanish and other American Indian tribes, slave raids by Europeans, and most devastating disease caused the rapid decrease in native population. By 1763, when the Spanish ceded Florida to Great Britain, many of the remaining South Florida tribes had already settled in Cuba in the hills overlooking Havana, where many are said to have eventually died of disease. While a small amount of aboriginal Indians might have remained in South Florida into the 1800s, they were probably absorbed by the incoming migration of Seminole and Miccosukee tribes from further north.

A Stolen Heritage

Treasure hunters have stolen many artifacts—erasing our heritage. Many times archaeologists prefer to leave sites as is to preserve artifacts.

What You Can Do to Help

- If you find pottery shards, arrowheads, or other artifacts, it is best to leave them in place and notify a ranger. This helps archaeologists determine the characteristics of the site.
- Report the theft of artifacts. Looters and “treasure hunters” can do irreparable damage to archaeological sites. When artifacts are taken, we lose potentially valuable knowledge about our shared heritage.

References

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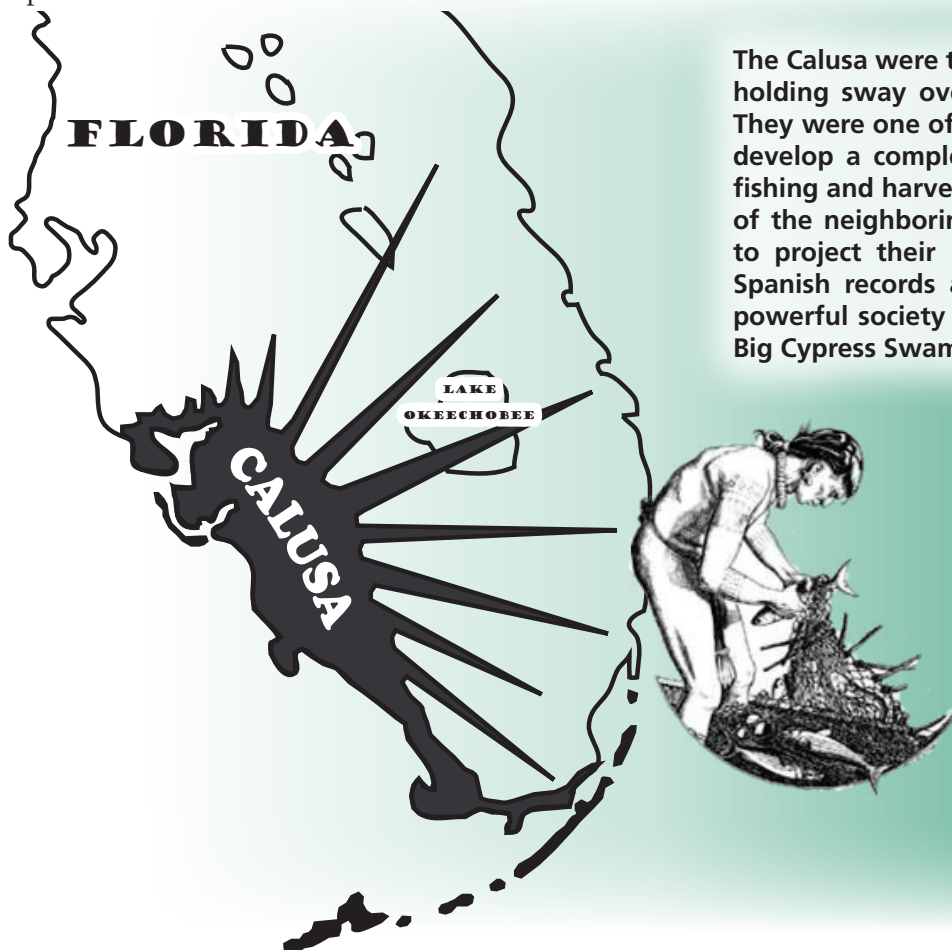
Learn More!

To learn more about the Miccosukee and Seminole of Florida, the tribal cultures of the region today, go to:

www.miccosukeeresort.com/tribe.htm

- or -

www.semtribe.com



The Calusa were the most powerful tribe in the region holding sway over all of South Florida and beyond. They were one of the few American Indian cultures to develop a complex society based almost entirely on fishing and harvesting marine life. Due to the richness of the neighboring marine estuaries, they were able to project their power far beyond their homeland. Spanish records and modern archaeology confirm a powerful society on the southwestern frontier of the Big Cypress Swamp.