

*The clever, powerful Calusa Indians thrived on Florida's coast for at least 1,500 years—until European explorers began arriving. Their innovative fishing culture is described in the following excerpt from *The Calusa and Their Legacy*, by Darcie A. MacMahon and William H. Marquardt.*

THE CALUSA WERE A FASCINATING but little-known Native American people who controlled the entire southern half of Florida when Europeans first arrived in the early 1500s. Their domain included more than 50 villages, which were centered at Charlotte Harbor near present-day Fort Myers. There, the blue-green waters of Southwest Florida's estuaries—places where fresh water from the land meets and mixes with salt water of the ocean—provided the Calusa with such abundance that they thrived for many centuries without ever needing to farm. Theirs was a fishing culture.

But by the mid-1700s, little more than 200 years after the Europeans arrived, the Calusa were gone from Florida—victims of European-introduced diseases, slavery, and militarism. By 1711, most of the Calusa people had been enslaved, killed, or driven from their homeland. Some lived for a time in



the Florida Keys, under continuing pressure from Indian slavers working for English colonists. Spaniards living in Cuba rescued some of the South Florida Indian people, but most died of typhus and smallpox soon after reaching Cuba. A few South Florida Indians went to Cuba in 1760. Calusa society fades from the historical record after that time.

Some of what we know about the Calusa comes from the writings of the Spanish, French, and English adventurers who encountered them. The Calusa themselves left no written record. But many artifacts have been found, allowing archaeologists to trace Calusa culture to A.D. 500—about 1,500 years ago.

The artifacts provide clues about how the Calusa lived. From one exceptional site on present-day Marco Island, objects of shell, bone, fired clay, antler, wood, and fiber were perfectly preserved in the oxygen-free conditions of the muck. They included fishing nets with

CALUSA





The above illustration is artist Merald Clark's conception of a canal leading into a Calusa village.

On facing page:
Shown at top is a quartzite bifacial knife—one of many artifacts found in South Florida archaeological sites.
At bottom is one of several masks found at the Key Marco archaeological site.

Images courtesy Florida Museum of Natural History and National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



Drawing shows the area of Calusa influence at the time of European contact.

Courtesy Florida Museum of Natural History



An antique French map, though inaccurate in detail, places the province and capital of Calos in South Florida.

Courtesy of Special and Area Studies Collections, University of Florida Libraries.

wooden floats and clamshell weights still attached, carved and painted wooden masks, and intricately sculpted wooden figurines of human and animal forms.

These artifacts and others have revealed that the Calusa were an inventive, artistic, and spiritual people who prospered from the immense bounty of their coastal world. They harvested more than 50 fish species and more than 20 kinds of mollusks and crustaceans. They ate shellfish, crabs, land and aquatic turtles, ducks, deer, rodents, and other animals; but fish were the main staple food.

They used numerous plants for food, medicine, fuel, and as raw materials for tools, handles, containers, clothing, thatching, mats, weapons, canoes, fishing gear, and cordage for the all-important nets. Their wood and palm-thatch houses were constructed on mounds and ridges of seashells and soil, called middens. They also used mounds, as well as cemeteries, to bury their dead.

Their tools were made from bones, teeth, and shells. From palm-fiber cord, they made nets with different-sized openings to catch fish of different sizes; they changed nets with the sea-

son, as fish grew larger. The knot they used, a sheet bend, is still used today for making nets. Cypress-wood pegs and hollow gourds kept the top of the net afloat. Shells and stones weighed down the bottom. Netting technology changed very little until the middle of the 20th century.

Though fish were most often caught with nets, the Calusa also employed spears, hooks, throat gorges, and probably weirs and traps. In 1696, Philadelphian Jonathan Dickinson observed one south Florida fishing technique:

This morning the Caseekey [the principal leader, often spelled "cacique"]...sent his son with his striking staff to the inlet to strike fish for us; which was performed with great dexterity...though we looked very earnestly when he threw his staff, [we] could not see a fish at which time he saw it, and brought it on shore on the end of his staff. Sometimes he would run swiftly pursuing a fish, and seldom missed when he darted at him. In two hours time he got as many fish as would serve twenty men.

The Calusa traveled far by canoe and engineered canals to connect coastal towns to inland waterways and communities.





Artifacts of mollusk shell, bone, turtle shell, and shark teeth—tools that were vital to Calusa daily life.

Image courtesy Florida Museum of Natural History.

They may have used oil from shark livers to make body paint that repelled mosquitoes.

We can only speculate about whether the Calusa were descended from the first people who ever lived on Florida's coastal estuaries. This is because Florida's original coastline is now under many feet of water, making archaeological evidence of earlier coastal people inaccessible. The coast went much further out and Florida was almost double its current size, because the sea level was lower during the Ice Age—when seawater froze at the North and South poles. As the earth warmed up and polar ice melted, the rising sea defined Florida's modern coastline between four and six thousand years ago.

There is evidence that people prospered from a fishing economy as early as six thousand years ago. Archaeologists have analyzed the remnants of settlements built high atop ancient dune ridges, such as Horr's Island in Collier County and Useppa Island in Lee County. Were these people Calusa? Perhaps, but at this point, we just don't know.

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MacMahon and Marquardt installed a permanent exhibit, the Hall of South Florida People and Environments, at the museum located on the University of Florida campus in Gainesville. Images with this article appear in The Calusa and their Legacy.

Illustration on facing page, at bottom, shows artist's conception of the Calusa leader's canoe (in background), based on descriptions in Spanish documents. In the foreground, commoners unload daily catch from a canoe barge as children play with toy canoes.

Illustration below shows a Calusa boy watching a canoe pass in a village canal.

Images courtesy Florida Museum of Natural History

