

# CANOES THROUGH TIME



Today, roads and highways cut across the South Florida landscape, disrupting the natural flow of ecosystems while cars pollute the air. But for thousands of years canoes provided the primary means of transportation and waterways served as natural conduits for travel.

Canoes have a long history and are part of Indigenous cultures all over the world. Traditions from across Indigenous tribes in the Americas agree that the ancestors used canoes and kayaks since time immemorial, and archaeologists place the widespread use of canoes to well over 10,000 years ago. Considering that canoes remained central to Seminole life into the 20th century, and that they continue as a craft tradition among Tribal citizens today, the importance of canoes to Seminole culture and their strong link to the ancestors is obvious. As Tribal member Pedro Zepeda says, "there has never been a time in our history when we have not made dugout canoes."

The canoes built by ancestors came in many varieties and sizes. Records of European colonizers describe canoes with outriggers that could cross open water, and war canoes that could carry 80 warriors. In 2020, an ancestral Seminole canoe with features for attaching sails was discovered on the shores of Egmont Key, indicating that it was built to navigate coastal waters. More streamlined canoes carried ancestors to their camps deep in the Everglades where they evaded enemies and carried on their traditions.

Like other examples of Indigenous science, canoes were appropriated by colonizers who depended on traditional Indigenous knowledge for their survival. Indigenous engineering cleverly adapted canoes to many tasks and many different environments. Colonizers quickly recognized the broad utility of canoes and used them to their own ends.

For generations, canoes were central to everyday life for the Seminole, serving fundamental needs of transportation. But, as Seminole canoe carver Daniel Tommie has stated, canoes also "were a lifeline", ensuring the survival of Tribal members and Tribal traditions through challenging times.

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**Photo:** This canoe washed up on Egmont Key following Hurricane Dorian. Even broken, the section is 16 feet in length. Radio carbon dating has placed it as over 500 years old.

