



*After snacking on leaves and a drink from the local watering hole, a trio of mastodons lay in the shade of a wax myrtle tree – a fragrant bayberry smell emanating from the leaves they’ve crushed beneath them on a hot, dry day ...
a day 12,000 years ago.*

Thanks to extraordinarily preserved clues from Florida’s prehistoric past that lay hidden in the University of Miami’s Little Salt Spring, Rosenstiel School underwater archeologists are able to put together a picture like this and many others to understand the habitat and activity that occurred during Paleo-Indian times in current-day Sarasota County, Florida, USA.



Among the hundreds of items unearthed, Rosenstiel School researchers have found unique burial artifacts estimated to be approximately 8,000 years old, including a green stone pendant (shown to the left.) Archaeologists have also found a sharpened wooden stake dated back over 13,000 years ago — the second oldest artifact ever uncovered in the southeast United States.

The 250-foot deep, hourglass-shaped spring measures 240 feet in diameter and is fed from an underground source that has no dissolved oxygen in the water. Consequently, bacteria cannot grow and decompose wood and other organic material, offering unique preservation.

Several unique wooden artifacts have been recovered, such as a portion of an oak boomerang. It is similar to those found in northern Australia. Not like those used by American Indian groups. The artifact may be the oldest of this type of boomerang known in the Western Hemisphere.



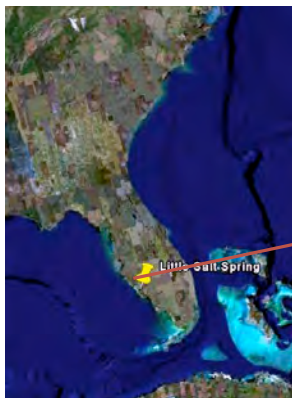
Panoramic view from the west edge across the spring basin

History

Donated to the University of Miami in 1982, Little Salt Spring was first recognized as an underwater archeological site in the late 1950's. It was the first 'wet site' discovered in Florida. During the 1970s exploration and excavation yielded well-preserved wood artifacts ranging from 7,000 to 14,000 years old. Many of these are of unknown function, as there are no other examples known with which they may be compared.

In 1982 the spring and over a hundred acres of buffer land were donated to the University of Miami by the General Development Corporation of Miami.

Since 1982 the property has been used by the University in a very limited manner. RSMAS conducts an interdisciplinary field school there in prehistoric underwater archaeology for undergraduate and graduate students. Meticulous technique and minimal funding have limited excavation progress to what can be accomplished in the annual two-week field class.



Significance

The sinkhole's water chemistry and temperature have helped to create a one-of-a-kind, prehistoric submerged site that has the potential to link us with America's Ice Age past.

Over the past fifteen years more unique late Paleo-Indian and Archaic artifacts have been excavated in just a few square meters of the spring basin.

Approximately 95 percent of the sinkhole remains unexplored. Scientists believe our most revealing lessons in history await discovery within Little Salt Spring. The great abundance of artifacts, vertebrate and invertebrate animals, and plant fossils preserved in its anoxic environment afford a unique opportunity to reconstruct the natural and cultural environment of Florida and the Southeast.

A testament to its significance: this site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in July, 1979.



Official Name
Little Salt Spring Archeological and Ecological Preserve

Location
Sarasota Co., Florida, USA

Acreage
~ 111 acres

Water Source
Floridan Aquifer

Spring Type
Anoxic

Diameter at surface
240'

Depth
200' - 250'

Age
+ 15,000 years

Geology
Cover-collapse sinkhole

Biology
Pond ecosystem, undisturbed hydric hammock vegetation

Chemistry
Total dissolved solids avg. 3,000 Mg/l

Official Florida site file name
8So18



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