

Environmental Studies Program: Ongoing Study

Field	Study Information
Title	Cultural Heritage and Traditional Knowledge of Vulnerable Coastal Communities (GM-23-04)
Administered by	Gulf of America Regional Office
BOEM Contact(s)	Dustin Reuther (dustin.reuther@boem.gov)
Procurement Type(s)	Cooperative Agreement
Conducting Organization(s)	University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL)
Total BOEM Cost	\$925,000
Performance Period	FY 2023–2027
Final Report Due	September 2027
Date Revised	June 10, 2025
Problem	Due to coastal land loss and nearshore development activities, archaeological sites and traditional cultural properties are being lost to in a rapidly changing environmental and anthropogenic landscape. It is not fully understood how this has affected coastal communities, Tribes, and their relationships with these cultural resources nor how best to incorporate these communities into consultation and mitigation processes for actions which may affect these sites.
Intervention	This study will work with coastal communities and Tribes to proactively understand their perspectives of submerging and submerged archaeological sites and traditional cultural properties, including their preferences for how State and Federal agencies manage, document, and/or mitigate these resources.
Comparison	Some local community perspectives may champion continued ecological change and development, others may bring a different perspective based on their unique experiences. Refining areas of concern and communities that wish to engage will better target meaningful environmental analyses and consultation work, especially possible carbon sequestration in the Gulf of America.
Outcome	A BOEM-specific Community Engagement Plan will be prepared using collected data and improved, targeted communication will help develop trust and facilitate Tribal and other community stakeholder involvement in State and Federal NEPA and consultation processes.
Context	Central GOA planning area.

BOEM Information Need(s): Little is known about the concerns of Tribes and community stakeholders surrounding the loss of coastal archaeological sites and the degradation of cultural landscapes due to coastal land loss, and the effects of their loss from the Native American and/or community perspective. The State of Louisiana, for instance, has repeatedly expressed the critical need to document archaeological sites threatened by coastal land loss as well as document how Louisiana's

environmentally vulnerable coastal communities are affected by the loss of archaeological sites and their traditional cultural properties (TCP). The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma voiced similar concerns during previous consultations under Section 106 of the NHPA, as part of a separate BOEM study, when they requested studies that identified the spiritual impacts of archaeological site loss in addition to the physical impacts. State concerns include offshore infrastructure (e.g., pipelines and transmission lines) and activities such as increased vessel traffic that passes through state lands and may affect submerged archaeological sites, some of which are known to contain human remains. Addressing these needs will help BOEM to further its commitment to Executive and Secretarial Orders related to Tribal consultation and energy development including E.O.s 13175 and 14154 and S.O.s 3317 and 3418. The proposed study will provide important information from affected communities for cultural resource management purposes as well as inform NEPA analyses related to the effects of BOEM's OCS activities on coastal archaeological sites. Additionally, as the potential impacts of offshore renewable energy on cultural resources in coastal Louisiana are yet to be fully realized, this study would provide much needed baseline data for future NEPA analyses, consultations, and effects-determinations of many BOEM program activities. This study proposes to develop strategies for managing at-risk archaeological sites and TCPs along Louisiana's coast, incorporating Tribal and other affected communities' involvement, and recommending how BOEM should incorporate these considerations into its consultations and NEPA analyses.

Background: The State of Louisiana contains 40% of the nation's wetlands and experiences 90% of the land loss in the lower 48 states, equivalent to approximately 25 to 35 square miles per year (LA DNR 2015). The rapid loss of Louisiana's coastline is not only an environmental crisis, but a resource management crisis as well. The loss of critical archaeological and ecological information will hamper the State Historic Preservation Office's (as well as other portions of Louisiana's Office of Cultural Development), and by extension, BOEM's efforts to document, manage, protect, and consider impacts to non-renewable cultural resources. According to Louisiana's Office of Cultural Development Historic Preservation Plan, "One of the greatest challenges...is the task of simply identifying significant historic properties before they are altered or destroyed. This is particularly true for the less tangible properties such as cultural landscapes or traditional cultural properties..." (LA OCD 2011).

This study supports BOEM's assessments and consultations by identifying the effects of coastal land loss and archaeological and TCP site loss on Tribes and other local communities, and provide BOEM with the requisite data to make informed decisions about its future programmatic activities. The study will provide background information (baselines) on specific groups identified as having been affected by archaeological and TCP site loss and will provide insight into how each group and their sites have been affected in the past and how these sites may be affected in the future by ongoing coastal land loss and future development from BOEM and BSEE program activities. As land loss progresses, new and future OCS-related infrastructure (e.g., oil and gas pipelines, carbon capture technologies, or sand and gravel extraction and beach renourishment activities) could pass through undetected submerged archaeological sites or TCPs, causing irreparable damage and loss of archaeological information and potential damage to sacred sites. Under E.O. 13175 and S.O. 3317, federal agencies are required to consult with affected Tribes on actions that have Tribal implications. This study will provide an opportunity to continue a dialogue with Tribes that have current and ancestral ties to coastal Louisiana and inform future government-to-government consultations. The information and analyses will be incorporated into Tribal consultations, consultations with affected Gulf States, NEPA documents, human environment analyses, and OCS-related programmatic reviews. Further, this project will facilitate periodic meetings between BOEM SMEs and stakeholders, in their communities. These meetings will lay

the foundations for meaningful outreach and engagement with Tribal and other local communities, building rapport around a tangible product which could be tailored to meeting their individual needs.

Ethnographic research and partnerships with Tribes and other local communities, can provide critical information on the history and cultural significance of sites that are now threatened by erosion and land loss. By taking a combined archaeological data-recovery and ethnographic approach to understanding the importance of these sites, BOEM is also assisting other federal agencies, the State of Louisiana, and stakeholder communities with obtaining the information needed for their respective purposes (Sorset 2013).

Objectives:

- Create an inventory and characterization of place-based cultural heritage of coastal Louisiana's terrestrial and submerged cultural sites by surveying the coast Tribes and other local communities and recording their respective histories.
- Document perspectives of Tribal groups and other local communities on archaeological sites and TCPs endangered by land loss and development along coastal Louisiana.

Methods: Through the Mississippi River Delta Archaeological Mitigation Project (MRDAM), which itself was based on an earlier proposed BOEM study, the U.S. National Park Service and University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL) initiated land loss planning across coastal Louisiana and BOEM will similarly need to address land loss within states affected by BOEM's ongoing and future OCS-related activities (NCPTT 2020; Rockman 2015). To-date the MRDAM project has laid an impressive foundation of modeling and initial archeological site reconnaissance but has not been able to adequately initiate or engage with the diverse stakeholder communities. To that end, for this project, ethnographers, anthropologists, archaeologists, and/or other community-based social scientists will collect information and perspectives from stakeholder communities on the loss and potential loss of archaeological sites and TCPs due to sea-level rise, erosion, and subsidence. These stakeholder communities could potentially include multiple Federal, State, and other Tribal governments and organizations; self-identifying "Cajuns" and "Creoles"; African American descendent communities; southeast Asian communities; Croatians; geographically situated communities; and other collectively identifying groups who have historical and cultural ties to Louisiana's coastal region. Researchers will seek input into how submerged and submerging cultural landscapes should be managed, documented, and/or mitigated by local, State, or Federal agencies. They will request information pertaining to the effects of coastal land loss on the cultural significance of TCPs. The study will result in a Cultural Heritage Inventory, a Community Engagement Plan, and a public-facing story map. Because of the initial efforts by MRDAM, which serve as a springboard for BOEM to address its needs in this area, this study recommends funding through a single source cooperative agreement with ULL.

Specific Research Question(s):

1. How has land loss, energy/resource development, and BOEM/BSEE program activities affected how coastal communities and Tribes relate to impacted place-based cultural heritage?
2. How does a retreating shoreline affect local perspectives on how best to balance development, ecological protections, and preservation of archaeological sites and/or TCPs?
3. How do coastal communities and Tribes want State and Federal agencies to manage, document and/or mitigate submerged sites and TCPs?

Current Status: This study was awarded to ULL in September 2023. A fulltime staff ethnographer was hired shortly thereafter to assist the PIs with logistics, data collection, and analyses. Currently over a dozen communities have been identified for incorporation into this study. ULL is in the process of subcontracting community ethnographers, collecting data, and analyzing data as it is received.

Publications Completed: None

Affiliated WWW Sites: None

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