

Invaders at Your Doorstep!

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If you look at a satellite map of southern Georgia and northern Florida, you will notice that Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) appears as a green blotch surrounded by shades of tan and gray, which represents human development. The Refuge might appear as an island of nature unto itself, unaffected by the outside world which surrounds it. However, this natural haven is facing a great threat, the threat of invasive species, which could forever alter the ecology of Okefenokee.

An "invasive species" is a plant, animal, and other organism that is not native to an area, and whose introduction can cause environmental harm, economic harm, or harm to human health. Invasive species often out compete native species, altering habitats, disrupting food webs, reducing biological diversity, changing predator/prey relationships, and transmitting foreign diseases and parasites. It can be very difficult to impossible to remove an invasive from an ecosystem once they become established.

Today, the Okefenokee NWR and its surrounding communities face both invasive animal and plant threats. One invasive plant is cogongrass, an aggressive weed that was recently found in Charlton County not far from the refuge. This federally-listed noxious weed invades forests, fields and roadsides, creating thick circular-shaped patches that push-out native vegetation and reduce wildlife habitat. Cogongrass can grow to 6-feet in height, and can reproduce by both seed and rhizome. It is also extremely flammable, and can create dangerous wildfire conditions. Like most invasives, once it is established, it is extremely difficult to control.

Another threat is the Channeled apple snail. Originally from South America, this large snail can grow up to 4 inches in diameter. The Channeled apple snail reproduces rapidly, laying clusters of up to 1000 bright pink eggs that hatch in less than two weeks. Able to eat virtually all types of aquatic vegetation, their voracious appetite can negatively impact populations of invertebrates, a major food source for smaller fish. Since the Channeled apple snail has few predators, a major concern is that it could out compete native snails for food and habitat, thus negatively effecting prey species, including the endangered Florida Snail Kite, which depends on native snails for its survival.

Additional invasives that are in or near Okefenokee NWR include kudzu, water hyacinth, yellow thistle, ambrosia beetle, feral hogs, and the popcorn tree. Refuge staff and volunteers are carefully monitoring areas within and just outside the refuge to be able to react quickly to infestations. Methods for controlling invasive plants include pulling, cutting, and the spraying of herbicides. Traps, hunting, and the spraying of pesticides are used to eliminate invasive animal species.

Refuge staff cannot stop the threat alone. There are some things that you can do to help control invasive species.

- Learn how to identify invasive species and how to avoid transferring them.
- Inspect and clean your boat, trailer, vehicle, waders, clothing and equipment prior to leaving your fishing area. Remove all vegetation, seeds, and mud.
- Do not use non-native live bait.

- Plant native plants instead of exotic plants that can become invasive.
- Do not release pets into the wild; find them a new home instead.
- Do not empty fish tanks into waterways.
- Clean your equipment after you mow or do any soil work. This will help prevent seeds from being dispersed to new areas.

You can find more information about what you can do to help prevent the spread of invasive species at these websites: www.gaepc.org, and www.invasive.org. With your help and the help of other concerned citizens, we can protect both the Okefenokee NWR and our own communities from invasive species.