



On the Road to Becoming a World Heritage Site

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge



The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is over 407,000 acres and supports over 1270 flora and fauna species, exclusive of thousands of invertebrate species.

What is a World Heritage Site?

A World Heritage Site is a natural or man-made site, area, or structure recognized as being of outstanding international importance under the World Heritage Convention.

Sites are nominated by national governments and approved by the World Heritage Committee. Sites that meet the rigorous standards are inscribed on the World Heritage List, which is maintained by the United Nations Environmental, Scientific, and Cultural Organization – (UNESCO - <http://whc.unesco.org>).

Sites are designated based on either Cultural or Natural criteria or both. Currently there are 1073 sites in 167 countries. Twenty-four sites are in the United States (US), of which 11 are designated for culture, 12 for natural and one for both. Examples of natural areas designated as World Heritage Sites in the U.S. are the Grand Canyon, Everglades, and Yellowstone National Parks.

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), located in the southeastern US on the North American Coastal Plain, protects the world-renowned Okefenokee Swamp and is an exceptional example of the southern yellow pine savannas that were once the most extensive forest type in the US. The diversity of wetland and upland habitats supports over 1,270 flora and fauna species, exclusive of thousands of invertebrate species.

The Refuge is over 407,000 acres and is part of the world's largest collection of lands and waters specifically managed for fish and wildlife by the US Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge was originally identified as a potential World Heritage Site in 1982. On September 25, 2023, a Notice was published in the Federal Register (88 FR 65748) authorizing the Service to prepare a draft nomination for inscription as a World Heritage Site. However, the application process is lengthy and could easily

take up to two or three years once an application is completed.

Benefits of a World Heritage Site

Being recognized as a World Heritage Site increases a site's significance to the world. Becoming a World Heritage Site does not confer any ownership or management authority to the United Nations. UNESCO only monitors the current conditions and potential threats to the designated properties. The Refuge would continue to be wholly owned and managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

World Heritage Sites attract international tourists and scientists. Communities can benefit in many ways if they provide amenities in support of tourism to the designated site. These visitors benefit the local economy when they seek overnight accommodations, restaurants, souvenirs, and other recreational activities in the neighboring communities.

Universal Significance

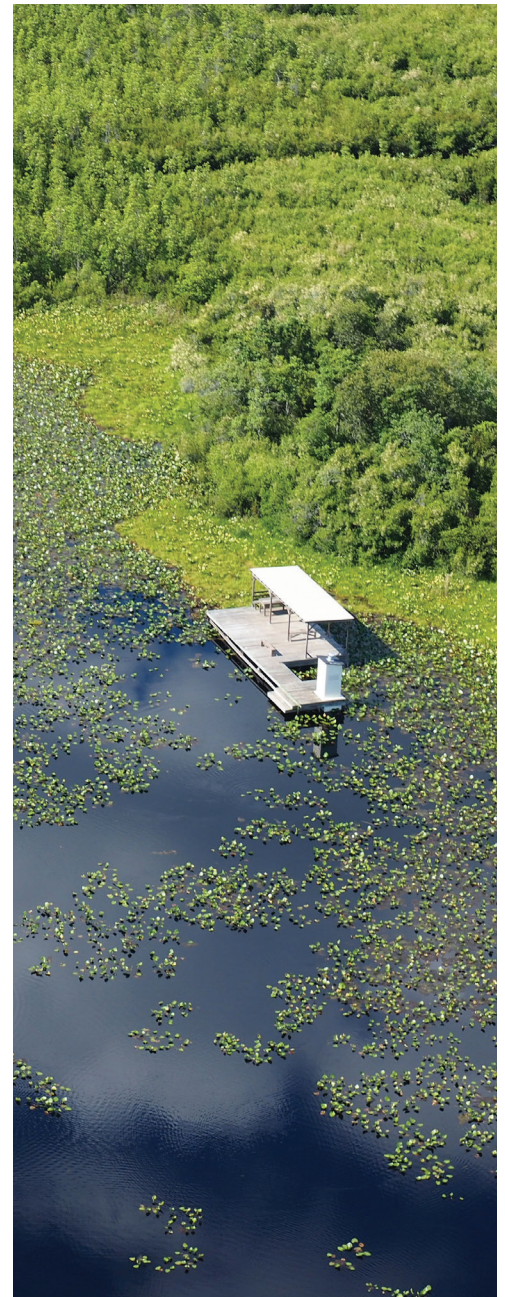
The Okefenokee NWR is a strong candidate for World Heritage status based on:

World Heritage Selection Criterion ix: An outstanding example representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems and communities of plants and animals.

- The Okefenokee Swamp is the largest, best-preserved precipitation-based freshwater wetland ecosystem in the United States and one of the world's largest naturally driven freshwater ecosystems in the highly populated temperate/subtropical climate zone.
- Despite numerous attempts to alter the Okefenokee Swamp, its original footprint is largely intact. Its resiliency and management as a Refuge and Wilderness area where natural, ecological, and biological processes still govern has preserved its natural integrity, maintaining its former pristine landscape.
- Extensive peat beds store notable amounts of carbon and keep a record of the land and water history for thousands of years. With less than 1% of the Okefenokee NWR's peatland disturbed by man, it is the largest remaining intact peat bed on the North American Coastal Plain and within the Northern region.
- In addition, Okefenokee NWR's uplands represent the southern yellow pine savannas that once were the most extensive "forest" type in the United States. With only 4% of the original range of longleaf pine remaining today, restoration efforts on Okefenokee NWR contribute to the longleaf pine initiative across the southeast.

World Heritage Selection Criterion x: Contains the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

- Okefenokee NWR falls within the North American Coastal Plain (NACP), which is the 36th recognized global biodiversity hotspot. It provides habitats for both freshwater wetlands and uplands. Okefenokee NWR supports 14% of plant species and 29% of animal species found in this hotspot, even though the NACP also includes a large marine area.
- Okefenokee NWR is famous for its herpetofauna (reptiles and amphibians). It hosts 25% of the reptile species and 32% of the amphibian species that are unique to NACP. Additionally, 12% of the endemic birds (including the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker and wood stork) call Okefenokee NWR home. Nine percent of the native fish species thrive in Okefenokee NWR's acidic waters. The refuge also supports a large population of Florida black bears and was once considered for reintroducing Florida panthers—two large mammal species native to the NACP.
- More than 850 plant species have been identified on Okefenokee NWR. Notably, it houses 18 carnivorous plant species, including the giant Okefenokee pitcher plant (*Sarracenia minor* var. *okefenokeensis*), which is only found in the Okefenokee Swamp. The swamp also boasts numerous 500+ year old pond cypress trees spread across approximately 2,000 acres.
- Okefenokee NWR is located within the Southeast United States Conifer Savannas Terrestrial ecoregion where only 1-4% of the habitat remains unaltered. Floral species richness within this habitat is "unparalleled outside of [the] tropics", especially regarding rare, endemic, and carnivorous species (Peet and Allard, 1993).



Top: Becoming a World Heritage Site has the potential to increase tourism to the region.

Bottom: Despite numerous attempts to alter the Okefenokee Swamp, like the digging of the Suwannee Canal, the swamp's original footprint remains largely intact today.