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News Release

For Immediate Release   Contact: Susan Heisey, 912-496-7366, ex 233
Date: August 9, 2019   Supervisory Refuge Ranger

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
Ecotourism Stimulates Local Economy; Refuge Provides Exceptional Visitor Experience

Folkston, GA….Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is one of over 560 National Wildlife Refuges across the country managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. With 55 million annual visits nationally, the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) is committed to maintaining and understanding customer satisfaction, public engagement, and economic value related to tourism. The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge has recently participated in two national studies – the 2018 National Wildlife Refuge System Visitor Survey and the 2017 Banking on Nature economic report.

On average, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge reports 600,000 visits annually to the three primary entrances and two secondary entrances of the refuge. Of those visitors, non-residents (people living more than 50 miles away) make up approximately 66% of visitors, with representation from all 50 states and Puerto Rico domestically. Additionally, about 10% of the refuge visitation is international, with visitors from over 46 countries recorded annually. Spending in the local area generates and supports economic activity within the four county area (Charlton, Clinch, Ware, GA; and Baker County, FL). The contribution of recreational spending in local communities was associated with 753 jobs, $17.2 million in employee income, $5.4 million in total tax revenue, and $64.7 million in economic output annually *(Banking on Nature Report – May 2019)*

"Tourism to the local area because of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge provides a significant positive impact to the local community. Tourism is the second largest industry in the state of Georgia, and Okefenokee is an iconic tourist destination for visitors from around the world," states Refuge Manager Michael Lusk.

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Survey findings show that 96% of visitors were extremely satisfied with the overall experience and 93% of visitors were extremely satisfied with the refuge's job in conserving fish, wildlife, and their habitats. 50% of visitors did indicate that if the quality of the wetlands or the quantity of water decreased, that they would be less likely to participate in recreation at the refuge in the future. Visitors reported that on average, they spend $78 per person per day to visit the refuge, including lodging, food, transportation, etc. "The refuge perfectly straddled the line of making us feel welcome but protecting the natural world. We were visitors in another world and the creatures, water… in that world were more important than us. As it should be" statement from a respondent of the 2018 National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Survey.

For inquiries about the Banking on Nature Report or the NWRS Visitor Survey, please contact Susan Heisey at 912-496-7366 ex 233 or susan_heisey@fws.gov.

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is open daily. For more information about recreational opportunities at the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, please contact the Richard S. Bolt Visitor Center at 912-496-7836 or refuge concession, Okefenokee Adventures at 912-496-7156.

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