

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 and therefore as deserving special protection. Sites are nominated to and designated by the World Heritage Convention (an organization of the United Nations Environmental, Scientific, and Cultural Organization – UNESCO - <http://whc.unesco.org>).

Sites are designated based on either or both Cultural and Natural criteria. Currently there are 1073 sites in 167 countries. Twenty three sites are in the U.S., of which 10 are designated for culture, 12 for natural and 1 for both cultural and natural criteria. Examples of natural designated World Heritage Sites are the Grand Canyon, the Everglades, and Yellowstone.

In 2007, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge was placed on the US World Heritage Tentative List meaning that it could be nominated for consideration as a World Heritage Site. The Refuge is currently working on the nomination documentation and a rough draft is expected in late 2018.

What are the benefits of being a World Heritage Site?

Being recognized as a World Heritage Site broadens the scope of significance to the world. It elevates the drive to protect and preserve its natural resources and the processes that govern the ecosystem. However, no management restrictions are placed on the property. UNESCO only monitors the current conditions and potential threats to the designated properties.

World Heritage Sites attract international tourists and scientists. These visitors benefit the local economy when they seek overnight accommodations, restaurants, souvenirs and other recreational activities.

Universal Significance

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

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 NWR has exceptional natural integrity where natural ecological and biological processes govern the interconnected, mosaic of habitats found within the largely intact freshwater Okefenokee Swamp and the surrounding critically rare longleaf pine flatwood uplands. The Okefenokee Swamp is one of the world's largest naturally driven freshwater ecosystems. Its 5,000-year-old peat beds provide important information about the development of terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems throughout the Atlantic Coastal Plain. It is also significant as an ecological analogue for the forests that formed the world's great coal deposits. Large protected wetlands will be increasingly important as the impacts of climate change are recognized by the general public and the availability of natural resources decreases. Birds now using coastal wetlands may find the Okefenokee increasingly more attractive as habitat changes occur along the coast.

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 is a significant venue for the conservation of biological diversity because it remains a relatively intact system with few direct influences from outside sources. It is world renowned for its biological diversity, particularly the range of amphibian and reptile species. The rich biodiversity of fauna and flora species, which include high numbers of endemic species as well as threatened and endangered species, are adapted to the water and fire regimes that characterize each of the many habitat types.