

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
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News Release



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Youth Gain Valuable Experience at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

Folkston, GA...During the summer months, area youth have been hard at work on Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) students, as well as interns, dedicated their time and work efforts to the mission of conservation within the refuge. Ranging in ages from 17-22, high school and college students were given the opportunity to gain valuable work experience as well as earn summer money and stipends. The YCC team included students Ethan Hunter, Trint Mahoney, Richard Honeycutt, Bailey Singleton-Stump, and Carnesia Holmes from the local Charlton County High School. Refuge interns included college students Sierra Hoisington from Clemson University in South Carolina and Denise Diaz from Florida International University in Florida.

The students were not only being exposed to a serious work ethic that is incredibly beneficial, they also had the opportunity to become involved in conservation through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). Sierra is majoring in Wildlife and Fisheries Biology and Denise is majoring in Environmental Science and Sustainability, both of which go hand in hand with the mission and goals of the USFWS and the NWRS.

While the high school students are still finding their own bearings concerning where they want to go and what they want to study, the YCC program is fundamental in showing youth just how exciting and rewarding a career in conservation can be. From assisting in and presenting environmental education programs in local libraries to trail clearing along the Chesser Island Boardwalk, these young people have been hard at work. The YCC worked alongside their leader, Henry Kirk, a long-term volunteer of refuges. Kirk was extremely appreciative to have such hardworking and dedicated young workers to help during the summer. With Kirk's leadership, the YCC learned how to operate equipment safely in order to maintain lawns, assisted in vehicle maintenance, performed trail maintenance both in the swamp and uplands, and also assisted in painting facilities around the refuge. The YCC also played a significant role in the summer camp offered for children ages 5-7 and 8-12 years old, which included everything from assisting in activities and programs, gathering camp supplies, to even leading games and being positive role models to the much younger generation.

Denise Diaz, an intern through the Student Conservation Association (SCA) in a USFWS program known as the Career Discovery Internship Program (CDIP), was instrumental in creating programming and managing the refuge summer camps held in late June. Sierra Hoisington, an intern through the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA), has experienced all aspects of managing a refuge while participating in areas including public use, forestry, and biology programs. Both Sierra and Denise worked alongside each other during the first month in order to help plan and assist in the set up and execution of programs for children and their families offered by Okefenokee NWR such as the Banks Lake NWR Fishing Derby, refuge summer camps, library programs involving puppet shows, and several outreach programs in surrounding communities.

During their time here, the YCC and interns had the opportunity to participate in several exciting service

learning opportunities. The service learning provided chances for the youth to get a glimpse at how other conservation and historic preservation organizations outside the refuge are maintained and what they have to offer to the public in terms of educational outreach. The YCC and interns were able to visit and participate in educational programs at the Driftwood Nature Center and Fort Frederica National Monument on St. Simon's Island, as well as Okefenokee Swamp Park in Waycross. During these service learning opportunities, the youth were able to learn about the challenging, yet fascinating art of seining, the biology of aquatic life in the shoreline waters of the beach, the history of past wars and battles fought in the area, and the history and biology of the people who used to call the Okefenokee Swamp home; otherwise known as "swampers."

Working within the Okefenokee NWR has exposed these students to the wonders of the world of conservation and given them a firsthand look at what can result if dedicated people come together and make an effort in order to conserve the splendor that the natural world has to offer. Programs like the YCC, SCA-CDIP, and NWRA internships pave the way for young people to become interested and involved in the National Wildlife Refuge System. It's through these young men and women that we can promote conservation for generations to come.

Photo: YCC crew and interns for the summer. Pictured from left to right: Carnesia Holmes, Bailey Singleton-Stump, Denise Diaz, Henry Kirk, Sierra Hoisington, Richard Honeycutt, Ethan Hunter, and Trint Mahoney.

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The Suwannee Canal Recreation Area (East Entrance) to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is the primary entrance managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is located 11 miles southwest of Folkston, GA off Hwy 121/23. Entrance fees are \$5 per vehicle/\$1 per bicycle for a daily pass (good for 7 days). Annual passes are also available. The refuge is open daily and offers a variety of opportunities for the visiting public. Call 912-496-7836 or visit the refuge website at www.fws.gov/refuge/okefenokee for hours of operation, upcoming events, and entrance fee information.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is committed to providing access to our events for all participants. Persons needing reasonable accommodations in order to attend and participate in our events should contact Susan Heisey at (912) 496-7366 ext. 233 or Susan_Heisey@fws.gov. In order to allow sufficient time to process requests, please contact us for assistance at least five business days before the event.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook pages at www.facebook.com/okefenokeewildliferefuge or www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast