



OKEFENOKEE

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

WORLD HERITAGE BID



To the Muscogee Nation, the “shaking water in a low place” is “the most blissful spot of the earth.” For writer and ecologist Janisse Ray, it is “gigantic, ethereal, god-touched...like no other place on earth.” For Deborah Reed, whose family has operated a small grocery store in southeast Georgia since 1948, one thing is certain: “Even in your wildest dreams, you would not have been able to come up with the Okefenokee. It’s not a man thing. It’s a goodness thing. It’s a spiritual thing.”

Originally formed more than 6,500 years ago, **the Okefenokee is the largest blackwater wetland in North America and one of the world’s most well-preserved and intact freshwater ecosystems.** The Okefenokee is characterized by peat batteries, land prairies, creek channels, cypress forests, and longleaf pine flatwoods that are home to hundreds of species of flora and fauna—many that are threatened and endangered—including alligators, sandhill cranes, gopher tortoises, red-cockaded woodpeckers, indigo snakes, more than 600 plant species, and a population of amphibians that are regarded as critical bioindicators. The Okefenokee is the headwaters of the St. Marys and Suwannee Rivers, and provides an important baseline for wetland research worldwide. Further, the Okefenokee contains the largest undisturbed peat deposit on the North American Coastal Plain, providing unmatched carbon sequestration services.

For nearly 100 years, the protection and stewardship of this vital ecosystem has been a federal and state priority, and the significance of the Okefenokee has naturally garnered it **distinctions both national and international in scope.** Most notably, the Okefenokee was established as a **National Wildlife Refuge (NWR)** in 1937—one of the top 20 most visited National Wildlife Refuges in the country—and was identified as a potential United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) **World Heritage Site** in 1982. In 2007, the Okefenokee NWR was placed on the United States Tentative List, where it currently remains.

The 438,000-acre Okefenokee Swamp, North America's largest "blackwater" wetland and one of Georgia's "Seven Natural Wonders," was designated as a National Wilderness Area in 1974. In 2022, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp proclaimed February 8th to be "Okefenokee Swamp Day" – an annual statewide celebration of the "wild heart of Georgia," as it has come to be known. The Swamp has further been named a "Wetland of International Importance" by the Ramsar Convention and a National Natural Landmark – a designation reserved for "the best examples of biological and geological features" in the country, and Stephen C. Foster State Park, the western entrance into the National Wildlife Refuge, is acknowledged as Gold-tier International Dark Sky Park by the International Dark-Sky Association ("IDA") – one of fewer than 200 such sites in the world.

The Okefenokee – UNESCO Bid

More than 40 years ago, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge was identified as a potential **UNESCO World Heritage Site** – the first step to being accepted as a site of "outstanding universal value." In 2007, the refuge was officially placed on the **United States Tentative List**, where it remains.

UNESCO World Heritage inscription is a highly competitive process, at both the national and international levels. A World Heritage Site is a natural or man-made site recognized as being of "**outstanding universal value.**" As of July 2021, 1,154 World Heritage Sites existed across 167 countries.

The United States has 25 UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These sites are places of importance in America's rich history and represent the remarkable diversity of its people and landscapes. When inscribed, Okefenokee NWR will be the first site entirely managed by the National Wildlife Refuge System (as distinct from the National Park Service) and the first site representative of the subtropical habitats on the North American Coastal Plain.

UNESCO recognition is widely acknowledged to result in **increased global visibility**, as well as a growth in tourism and ensuing economic benefits for the regional community. The Okefenokee inscription will **broadcast the extraordinary story of the Okefenokee** to people and institutions across the globe and open social, cultural, and economic opportunities for the region. Along with the enhanced visibility, economic opportunity, and community spirit, will come increased capacity to "*protect and enhance wildlife and its habitat, ensure integrity of the ecological system, and embrace the grandeur, mystery, and cultural heritage that lead to an enrichment of the human spirit,*" a guiding vision of the bid team.

There is more to the UNESCO bid than the ultimate win. The bid process – a multi-year journey involving private sector, public sector, and nonprofit institutions – **yields tangible rewards**. Other World Heritage sites have heralded the bid process as educating and uniting the community, sparking a meaningful dialogue on the myriad benefits and uses of the candidate site.

The Okefenokee Swamp Park, Inc. and the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge are embarking on a powerful **public-private partnership** – working together towards the goals of the Okefenokee NWR being inscribed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Pursuit of the Okefenokee's World Heritage **inscription was accelerated** by the September 2023 National Park Service announcement that it will nominate the site, which could yield a final decision in 2026. The total cost of the bid is estimated at \$500,000 and the majority of that funding is used to produce a formal "dossier" that is published for review by UNESCO. The "dossier" will take the form of a glossy "coffee table book" bursting with rich visuals as well as well-researched scientific support for the "outstanding universal value" of the Okefenokee. Patrons of this "Okefenokee – UNESCO World Heritage Fund" will be recognized on the Okefenokee website, as well as in the Okefenokee – UNESCO Dossier, to be published for international review and archived in perpetuity as the definitive volume representing the Okefenokee's inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

For questions, suggestions, and / or collaboration, please contact:

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