

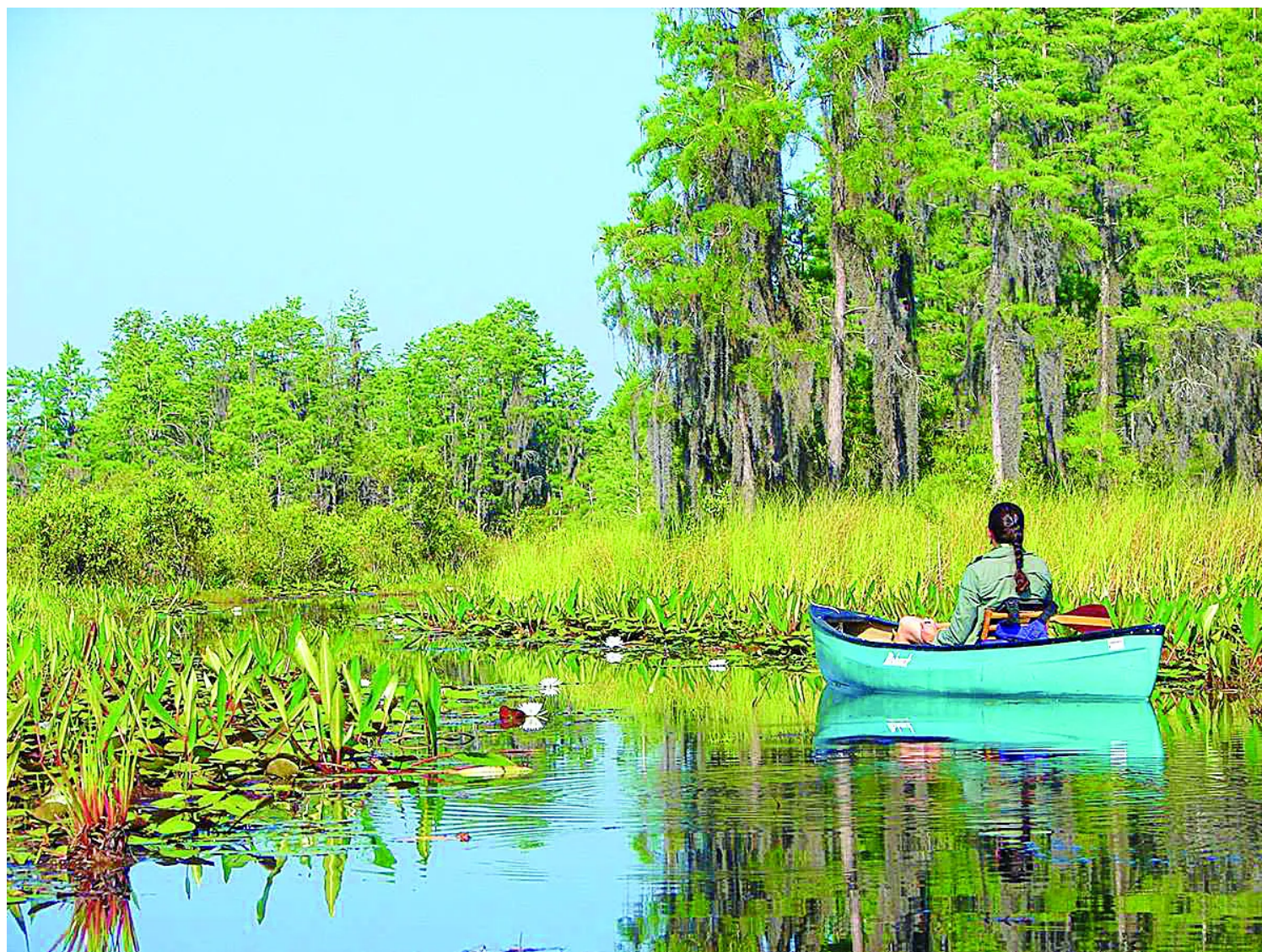
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Above the Waterline: Will Georgia's Republican leaders defend the Okefenokee?



by **Sally Bethea**

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Okefenokee Swamp (Courtesy Georgia River Network)

When the conflict, turmoil, and tragedy around the world becomes too overwhelming—as frequently happens during these dark days—I turn to nature to help me cope. Finding solace among trees, beside moving water, and on park trails helps relieve my stress and fears about the future for the people and places I love.

I cannot completely turn away from the troubles. I want to understand what is happening in the world—with our fraught politics, fragile democracy, and deteriorating ecosystems. At the same time, I am learning to live more in the present with gratitude for simple pleasures and the sense of wonder and awe that nature provides.

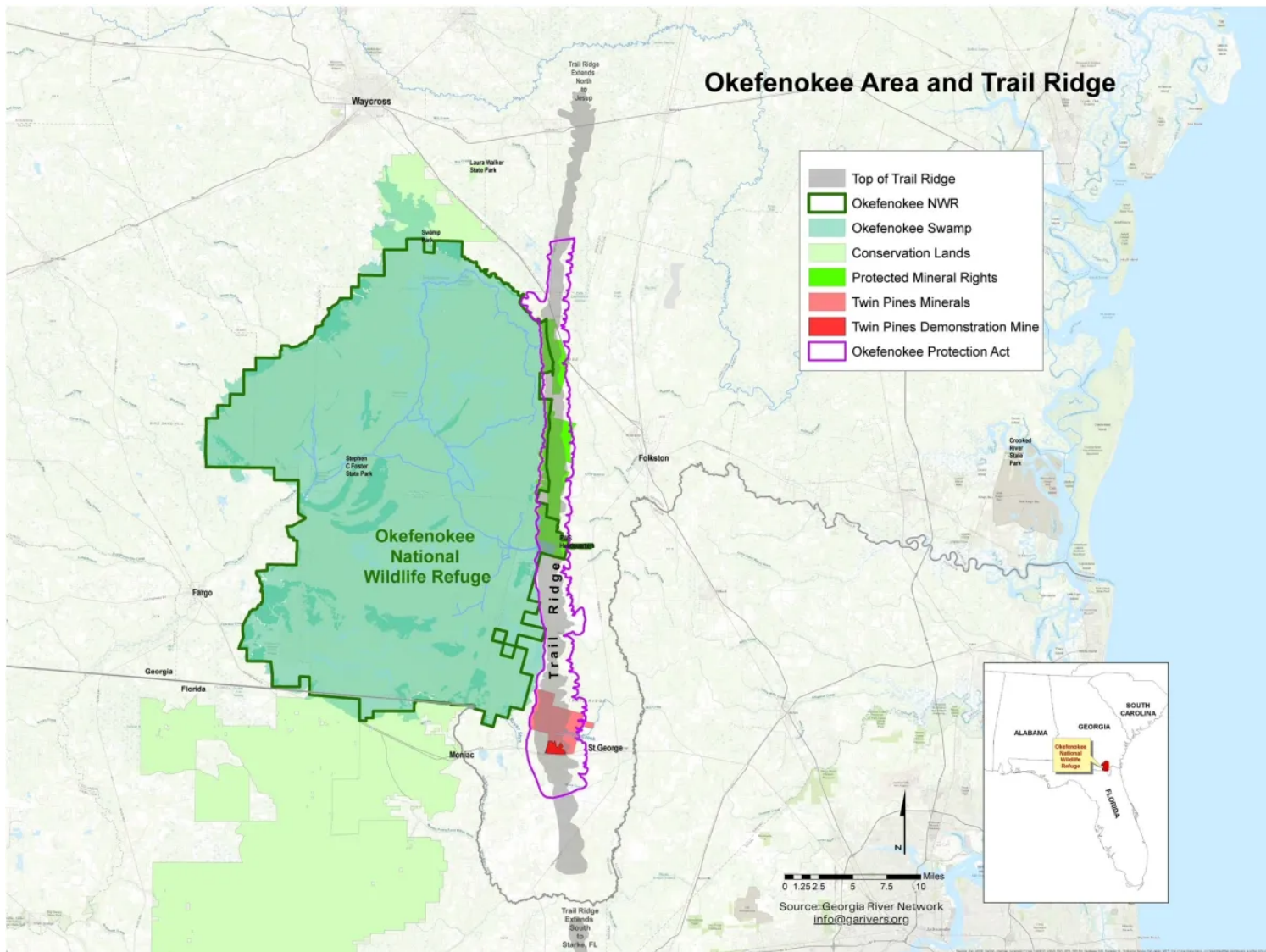
“It is not enough to fight for the land; it’s even more important to enjoy it. While you can. While it’s still here... Explore the forests, climb the mountains, bag the peaks, run the rivers,” wrote author and wilderness defender Ed Abbey. I would add: spend time in your local parks, walk regularly through the seasons, and practice attentiveness to nature’s lines, colors, smells, and details.

The Wild Heart of Georgia

At dusk in early November, I took a boat ride in Georgia’s Okefenokee: the largest swamp in North America, a national wildlife refuge, a hub of local eco-tourism, and a global treasure. Leaving man-made structures and glaring lights behind, we entered what is called “the wild heart of Georgia.”

Lines of diagonal clouds in the mackerel sky reflected the setting sun in shades of pink and peach above the still, ink-colored water. Silhouettes of tupelo and bald cypress trees reached upward, pointing to the beauty in the sky, as their reflections pierced the black swamp water, extending their majesty earthward. I breathed deeply, inhaling the diversity and reciprocity of all life. I felt calm and refreshed.

The next day, I listened to Michael Lusk, the manager of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, give a passionate and science-based presentation about the need to safeguard Trail Ridge: a 100-mile-long remnant of a Pleistocene barrier island system that holds the 10,000-year-old swamp in place. On Lusk’s map (shown below), the sandy ridge on the eastern edge of the Okefenokee looks like out-stretched arms: a sort of “geologic grandmother” protecting the wetland ecosystem from harm.



Mining Threat

Mining companies have long sought to establish stripping operations in and near Trail Ridge to extract minerals for sale worldwide. In the 1990s, DuPont Corporation proposed a titanium mine; however, when Georgia’s leaders spoke out against the plan, the company withdrew its proposal. More recently, Twin Pines Minerals applied to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) for permits to mine titanium at a 775-acre “demonstration” site and withdraw millions of gallons of groundwater: a plan that threatens the Okefenokee and tourism-related jobs in the area.

Notably, Twin Pines falsely claimed property rights on land held by another private property owner in its permit applications. Companies affiliated with Twin Pines have caused pollution problems in north Georgia where they burned creosote-soaked wood and at facilities in North Carolina and Florida. Put simply, a bad-actor company wants permission to disrupt the land and hydrology adjacent to an international treasure.

What could go wrong? Everything, say scientific experts.

Studies conclude that the Twin Pines project is “likely to impact” the Okefenokee, resulting in “the possibility of permanently altering the hydrology” by lowering water tables and disrupting the natural flow of water. (Could this action also constitute a legal taking of an essential value—water—from this property held in trust for all Americans since 1937?) Soil stability in Trail Ridge could be “negatively affected,” allowing leakage, and the swamp’s ability to store carbon in its peat soils could be reduced, worsening the climate crisis.

Solutions Stalled

The governor-appointed Georgia Board of Natural Resources could advise EPD to reject the Twin Pines application based on multiple concerns. The fact that this board has, thus far, failed to do so indicates that Gov. Brian Kemp is not—yet—willing to take reasonable, prudent steps to safeguard the Okefenokee and its waters. What, or who, is keeping Kemp from protecting this Georgia-grown treasure? Why won’t he support the tens of thousands of Georgians who have repeatedly urged EPD to reject the mining and groundwater applications?

Even if the Twin Pines plan is rejected, or the company finds someone to pay it not to mine (perhaps it’s Plan B, if not Plan A), Trail Ridge and the Okefenokee will remain vulnerable to future mining. Again, a solution is available, but it has been stymied by Republican leadership. The Okefenokee Protection Act (HB 71) currently languishes in a House committee chaired by Rep. Lynn Smith (R-Newnan), although more than half of her House colleagues are co-sponsors of the bill: 65 Democrats and 29 Republicans. Why won’t Rep. Smith allow a hearing and a vote?

HB 71 is limited in scope but would provide long-term protection for the Okefenokee. It prevents future, risky mining on a very specific, narrowly defined area of Trail Ridge. It does not affect previously applied for permits, including the one from Twin Pines that should be rejected by EPD. The bill must pass both the Georgia House and Senate by the end of the 2024 session next spring or it will die. Help defend Georgia’s extraordinary Okefenokee—a place of beauty, resilience, and solace in our troubled world by urging members of the General Assembly to pass HB 71.

What You Can Do

Learn more about HB 71, the Okefenokee, and whether your House member supports the bill at gawater.org/okefenokee-swamp. Urge him/her to sign on, if they are not a co-sponsor, and thank them if they are. Write Gov. Kemp at The Office of the Governor, 206 Washington St. Suite 203, State Capitol, Atlanta, GA 30334.

