


OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

The Fate of the Okefenokee Swamp Is in Your Hands

Feb. 27, 2023, 5:00 a.m. ET



Gregory Miller

 Give this article







By Margaret Renkl

Ms. Renkl is a contributing Opinion writer who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

NASHVILLE — I have a dim memory of being taken on a boat ride in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge when I was 4 or 5. I remember tea-dark water lapping at the boat, a white bird on stilt

remembered dark water lapping at the boat, a white bird on stilts legs and a drifting log that startled me by turning into an alligator. That's it. Years later, I had to consult my brother to be sure I hadn't dreamed the whole thing up out of nothing but a word-besotted child's delight in the swamp's name.

Last fall, [in a moving essay for The Bitter Southerner](#), the writer Janisse Ray called the Okefenokee “a gigantic, ethereal, god-touched swamp in southeast Georgia that's like no other place on earth.” This is the kind of ecstatic language the refuge inevitably inspires. Some [700,000](#) people visit it each year, and I have always intended to return. Now I'm worried I won't ever have the chance.

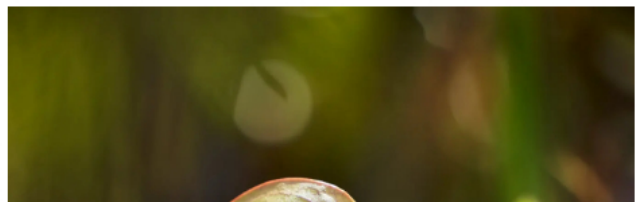
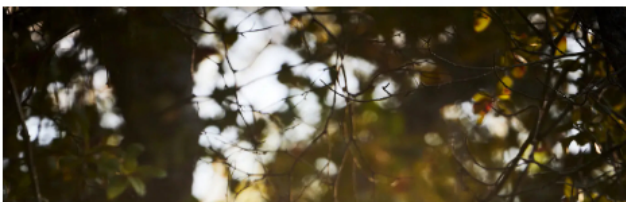
Twin Pines Minerals, an Alabama-based mining company, has applied to build a strip mine less than three miles from the wildlife refuge. The mining operation would target a geological formation called Trail Ridge, a raised area of land on the eastern border of the swamp. During prehistoric times, Trail Ridge was a barrier island. Today the ocean is some 45 miles away, and Trail Ridge functions as a low earthen dam that holds the Okefenokee in place. “Trail Ridge is not only ecologically important in and of itself,” [notes the Georgia Conservancy](#), “but also serves as scaffolding for the health of the Okefenokee.”

But Trail Ridge contains titanium dioxide. Twin Pines proposes to extract the mineral by peeling off the topsoil, digging out the sand pits, separating the sand containing titanium and then returning the mineral-free sand to its approximate original location.

It might sound like a decent plan if you've never seen what happens when a coal company practices [mountaintop removal mining](#), which also works according to a destroy-extract-replace model. Strip mines dramatically alter the environment. Recreating ancient ecosystems afterward isn't possible.

And as the [Okefenokee Protection Alliance](#) points out, risking this wildlife refuge just isn't necessary. Titanium dioxide isn't hard to find elsewhere, and procuring it is [not exactly an issue of national security](#): “Though titanium is used in everything from surgical tools to military equipment, mineral commodity experts expect the minerals that might be obtained here to be used for more pedestrian purposes — primarily as a pigment for coloring things white like paint, plastic and even toothpaste.”

On Jan. 19, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division opened a period of public comment about [the company's draft plan](#). It's not necessary to live in Georgia to comment.





Gregory Miller



Gregory Miller

The Okefenokee is one of the great natural wonders of this country. Its 438,000 acres — nearly 700 square miles — spill over the Florida line to make up the largest ecologically intact blackwater swamp we have. Its [diverse ecosystems](#) include marsh, upland forest, prairie, cypress swamp and an intricate labyrinth of waterways.

The refuge supports 620 plant species and provides habitat for [an immense range of wildlife](#): at least 50 mammal species, including black bears, otters and bobcats; 234 species of birds; 64 species of reptiles (including, of course, alligators); and 37 species of amphibians, the [most vulnerable wildlife class there is](#). Several of the plants and creatures in the Okefenokee are rare or in trouble.

It's also important to note that wetlands sequester immense amounts of carbon. Over time, waterlogged plants that don't completely decompose will compact beneath the water to form peat. Across the globe, peatlands [store twice as much carbon as forests do](#). Unmolested, then, the Okefenokee is a massive carbon sink. If all that peat is disturbed, the reverse will be true, releasing ancient carbon into the atmosphere instead of safely storing it under the dark water. It's not too much to say that to endanger the Okefenokee would be to endanger the whole world.

Last week, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division held two public hearings on the proposed mine, both virtual. Aside from a Twin Pines representative, not a single person spoke in favor of the mine.

The meeting I attended lasted more than three and a half hours and included passionate, sometimes tearful testimonies from

dozens of Georgians who love their swamp — teachers and students, paddlers and amateur astronomers, farmers and native-plant advocates, artists and birders. Pastors spoke about their faith and its call to stewardship. Locals worried about the mining company's [poor environmental record](#). A member of the Lower Muskogee Creek Tribe spoke about the burial grounds of her ancestors.

Scientists and environmental advocates came out in force, too, offering reams of data that undercut every argument Twin Pines has made regarding the environmental impact of the proposed mine. They explained why the [mining company's hydrology study is flawed](#), based on the wrong river gauge. They noted that a strip mine could irretrievably alter the water levels and water flow of the swamp, and they explained what those changes would mean for the flora and fauna of the refuge. They talked about the increased risk of drought and wildfires with any drop in the water table of a water-based landscape. They pointed out the environmental impact of light pollution on an ecosystem that evolved beneath [dark night skies](#). They observed that the Twin Pines environmental impact projections are based on historical records, not on predictions of a changing climate.

[According to the Georgia River Network](#), the initial demonstration phase of the mine alone “would destroy over 300 acres of wetlands, pump over a million gallons a day of fresh groundwater, discharge pollution, destroy important habitat and cast noise and light over the refuge, which will likely damage the visitor experience and the local economy.”

For longtime paddlers, fishermen and environmental activists in Georgia, this fight is nothing new. During the 1990s, the chemical company DuPont also made plans to strip mine titanium on the eastern border of the swamp. That effort ended even before DuPont applied for the necessary permits because [Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt shut it down](#). “You can study this, you can write all the documents in the world, but they are not going to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that there will be no impact,” he said at the time. “It is apparent on the face of it that this refuge and this mining project are not compatible.”

The Okefenokee is beloved in Georgia. Sixty-nine percent of Georgians [support protecting it permanently](#), and it enjoys bipartisan support politically. In the U.S. Senate, Jon Ossoff, a Democrat, has [fought relentlessly to protect it](#). In the Georgia House of Representatives, Darlene Taylor, a Republican, [filed a bill to protect the refuge](#) at the state level. Her bill has more than 50 co-signers from both parties, but [a similar bill died in committee](#) last year. And even this version passes, it will not affect the Twin Pines proposal currently under debate.



Gregory Miller

Unlike our other coastal and freshwater wetlands, most of which have been dredged and drained and filled and ruined, the Okefenokee is as close to pristine as any landscape Americans have. In 1937 it was [designated a national wildlife refuge](#). In 1974 more than 350,000 acres in the refuge were designated a national wilderness area, [the highest form of federal protection](#) the U.S. gives an ecosystem. National wilderness areas are the wildest of our wild places, protected from commercial use because they are vital to their inhabitants' futures and to ours.

What Mr. Babbitt said of DuPont in 1997 is equally true of Twin Pines today: It is simply not possible to prove that mining activity will not affect the swamp. As the University of Georgia's [River Basin Center explains](#), everything in the surrounding area affects the swamp.

We must stop this mine. Please write or call the Georgia Environmental Protection Division. Ask it to deny all mining permit requests by Twin Pines or anybody else and keep the Okefenokee safe. Remind it that the refuge belongs to all of us. And to all the generations to come.

Comments on the proposed mine can be sent to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division through online forms at the [Southern Environmental Law Center](#) or the [Nature Conservancy](#) or by [emailing the Georgia E.P.D.](#) directly. The comment period ends March 20 at 4:30 p.m. Eastern time.

Margaret Renkl, a contributing Opinion writer, is the author of the books "Graceland" at

Margaret Fleming, a contributing opinion writer, is the author of the books ["The Last: Notes on Hope and Heartache From the American South"](#) and ["Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss."](#)

The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#).

