



## U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

### *Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge*

# Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge On the Road to Becoming a World Heritage Site

#### 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 under the World Heritage Convention. Sites are nominated by national governments and approved by the World Heritage Committee. Sites that meet the rigorous standards are inscribed on the World Heritage List, which is maintained by the United Nations Environmental, Scientific, and Cultural Organization – UNESCO - <http://whc.unesco.org>.

Sites are designated based on either Cultural or Natural criteria or both. Currently there are 1073 sites in 167 countries. Twenty-four sites are in the United States (US), of which 11 are designated for culture, 12 for natural and 1 for both cultural and natural criteria. Examples of natural areas designated as World Heritage Sites in the U.S. are the Grand Canyon, Everglades, and Yellowstone National Parks.

#### Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR), located in the southeastern US on the North American Coastal Plain, protects the world-renowned Okefenokee Swamp and is an exceptional example of the southern yellow pine savannas that was once the most extensive forest type in the US. The diversity of wetland and upland habitats supports over 1,270 flora and fauna species, exclusive of thousands of invertebrate species.

The Refuge is currently 165,000 contiguous hectares and is part of the world's largest collection of lands and waters specifically managed for fish and wildlife by the US Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge was originally identified as a potential World Heritage (WH) site in 1982. In 2007, it was officially placed on the US Tentative List and remained on the list during a revision in 2017. If inscribed, it would be the first site entirely managed by the National Wildlife Refuge System and the first natural site representative of the subtropical habitats on the North American Coastal Plain. The Refuge has established a working group in anticipation of submitting a nomination package in the fall of 2023. However, the application process is lengthy and could easily take up to two or three years once an application is completed.

#### The Benefits of a World Heritage Site

Being recognized as a World Heritage Site broadens the scope of the site's significance to the world. It draws attention to the unique natural resources and ecosystem processes that govern the site. Being designated as a World Heritage Site does not confer any ownership or management authority over the property to the United Nations. Management of the ONWR would not be changed because the Refuge is already managed in such a way as to maintain its biological integrity in perpetuity. UNESCO only monitors the current conditions and potential threats to the designated properties. If the ONWR is inscribed as a World Heritage Site, the Refuge would continue to be wholly owned and managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, as it is currently.

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 in the neighboring communities. Communities can benefit in many ways if they provide amenities in support of tourism to the designated site.

## 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 Swamp is the largest, best-preserved precipitation-based freshwater wetland ecosystem in the conterminous United States and one of the world's largest naturally driven freshwater ecosystems in the highly populated temperate/subtropical climate zone.
- Despite numerous attempts to alter the Okefenokee Swamp, its original footprint is remarkably largely intact. Its resiliency and current management as a Refuge and Wilderness area where natural, ecological and biological processes still govern has preserved its natural integrity making current conditions characteristic of its former pristine landscape.
- Extensive peat beds store notable amounts of carbon and preserves the historic record of regional terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems over the past several millennia. With less than 1% of the ONWR's peatland disturbed by man, it is the largest remaining intact planar peat bed on the North American Coastal Plain and within the Northern Hemisphere's subtropical zone.
- In addition, ONWR's uplands represent the southern yellow pine savannas that once were the most extensive "forest" type in the United States. With only 4% of the original range of longleaf pine remaining today, restoration efforts on ONWR contribute to the longleaf pine initiative across the southeast.

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.

- ONWR represents the 36<sup>th</sup> recognized global biodiversity hotspot, the North American Coastal Plain (NACP), by providing quality freshwater wetland and upland habitats that support 14% of the flora species and 29% of the fauna species found in this hotspot. This is remarkable considering this hotspot includes a large marine component as well.
- This NACP hotspot has a significant number of endemics, and many are represented within ONWR. ONWR is world renowned for its herpetofauna and supports 25% of the reptile species and 32% of the amphibian species that are considered endemic to the NACP. Twelve percent of the endemic bird species utilize ONWR including the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker and rare Wood Stork. Nine percent of the endemic fish species prosper within ONWR's acidic, tannin waters. The expanse of ONWR also supports a large population of Florida black bears and in the past was considered for the re-introduction of Florida panthers, two large mammal species endemic to the NACP.
- Over 850 plant species have been identified on ONWR, which includes 18 carnivorous plant species, with the giant Okefenokee pitcher plant (*Sarracenia minor* var. *okefenokeensis*) endemic to the Okefenokee Swamp. There are also numerous 500+ year old pond cypress trees scattered over approximately 2,000 acres of the swamp.
- ONWR is located within the Southeast United States Conifer Savannas Terrestrial ecoregion where only 1-4% of the habitat remains unaltered. Floral species richness within this habitat is "unparalleled outside of [the] tropics", especially in regard to rare, endemic, and carnivorous species (Peet and Allard, 1993).