



January 26, 2021

To: Jonathan Putnam  
Office of International Affairs  
National Park Service  
1849 C Street NW  
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Re: Nominating Okefenokee NWR for UNESCO World Heritage List, Docket Number  
NPS-WASO-OIA-31249 PIN00IO14.XI0000



Dear Mr. Putnam,

As you know, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR) is on the UNESCO Tentative List for the United States, and thus is eligible for the U.S. to submit an ONWR nomination file.

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5252/>



As Suwannee Riverkeeper and for our umbrella organization WWALS Watershed Coalition, Inc., I would like to encourage you to nominate ONWR this year. The vast majority of the Okefenokee Swamp is in the Suwannee River Basin, and some 85% of the outflow of the Swamp goes down the Suwannee River, which continues through Georgia and across Florida, where it is the subject of the state song, to the Gulf of Mexico.

WWALS member Bobby McKenzie sums it up from his perspective:

“As a world traveler for the past 20 plus years I must say that the Okefenokee Swamp holds its own when it comes to enchantment. I never would have thought I would have used the term enchantment to describe a swamp, but it happens to be the best one. My adventures have taken me to many places, each with their own charm and enchantment and history. I recall my first experience outside the United States, it was to the Chagos Archipelago part of the British Indian Ocean Territory. The crystal-clear waters of the islands and the sanctity of the massive coconut crabs and the hawksbill sea turtles. Soon I found myself living in South Korea and experiencing the Buddhist temples embedded in the cliffs of the East Sea (more well known as the Sea of Japan) and the fishing islands of Sunyu-do in the yellow sea. At Jeju Island with its botanical gardens, lava tubes, and extinct volcano, I ascended the stairs of Mt Sanbanggalsa Temple where a spring drips from the ceiling pools into the temple cave and had a ceremonial sip. Years living in Europe showed me the awe of the Dolomites, the Carpathian Mountains, the Iron Gates, the Danube Delta and the switchback road of Transfagarasan. I have met the wonders of the Black Forest, I’ve skied Mount Blanc, Matterhorn, and the Zugspitze and swam in the ocean at Vilamoura in Algarve with its ocean caves. I dove the cliffs of Ischia and enjoyed the hot thermal springs of the Mediterranean. I’ve hiked miles through the Ardennes Forests and the ancient vineyards along the Mosel River. I have witnessed the famed White Cliffs of Dover, the puzzling Stonehenge, the North Sea, English Channel, and the beaches of Normandy. My time in Hawaii introduced me to the many natural phenomena such as the Makapu Tide Pools, the Queen’s Bath at Moku Nui, and the Mermaid Caves in Nanakuli. The pill boxes at Lanikai, Coco Head along with the Hidden Lagoon offered breath-taking views of the island of Oahu.

“There are many places I that I can recall that I have not mentioned. But all these places share one thing in common, they are amazing places that most people have never heard of or will see in their lifetime. They are all wonderful and inspiring places in their own right. This is true with the Okefenokee Swamp. I first learned of the Okefenokee as I was planning my move to South Georgia from Hawaii. I was searching for outdoor activities and the first thing I came

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WWALS is an IRS 501(c)(3) nonprofit  
charity est. June 2012

*WWALS Watershed Coalition advocates for conservation and stewardship of the Withlacoochee, Willacoochee, Alapaha, Little, Santa Fe, and Suwannee River watersheds in south Georgia and north Florida through education, awareness, environmental monitoring, and citizen activities.*

*Suwannee RIVERKEEPER® is a program and a paid staff position of WWALS.*



across was a website talking about 120 miles of water trail and multiple camping options in the swamp. I immediately wanted to do this trip or at least a portion of it. I have since made a handful of trips into the swamp and learned about the history of Billy's Island, the Sill, the timber operation and among other stories. My most recent trip into the swamp was with the WWALS Watershed Coalition. We paddled 8 miles out to camp at Floyds Island. The entire journey was just so peaceful. However, when we made the turn onto the green trail from Stephen C. Foster State Park, the swamp became extraordinarily enchanting. The cathedral-like tunnel that we paddled through for miles until we reached Floyd's Island was like a portal to a fairytale dimension. In many instances, the colors of the fall, the canopy formation of the trees and the mirrored reflections were hypnotizing, we could have paddled this natural tunnel for hours and still want more. Upon reaching the camp site, everyone in our party was just magically delighted about the spiritual connection that the swamp bestowed upon us. The return trip the next day was even more mesmerizing. I never would have thought that I would have used the word enchanting to describe a swamp, but it was just that. I am glad to add the Okefenokee Swamp to my long list of must-see places. As with all of the places listed above, I never knew that I needed to experience them until I did. The Okefenokee is no different, it's an enchanting place that you never knew you needed to experience.”

Yet for the second time in twenty years, a titanium strip mine threatens the Okefenokee Swamp, this time organized by coal miners from Alabama. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has abdicated oversight, leaving only the state of Georgia, with decisions on five permit applications, standing between the miners and the Swamp. <https://wwals.net/?p=54459> The Swamp and the ONWR can use all the protection they can get.

While the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge most obviously satisfies number x of the ten Selection Criteria, and it may be necessary to satisfy only one of them, the ONWR actually has significant features of all ten criteria.

### **(i) to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;**

While the Okefenokee Swamp is primarily a wild ecosystem, ONWR carefully prunes paddle trails into tree tunnels that continue to enable almost religious experiences for paddlers. One of our very experienced paddlers recently on the way to Floyd's Island was overwhelmed with awe at the way the tree tunnel trail framed the natural swamp; see above testimonial by Bobby McKenzie. The paddle trails and sleeping platforms in general make the Swamp accessible to paddlers without unduly disrupting the ecosystem that paddlers come to experience.

### **(ii) to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world...;**

Fifty years ago, WWALS President Tom H. Johnson Jr. grew up driving 57 miles to Stephen C. Foster State Park, fishing and looking there all day with other high schoolers. He says, “I never dreamed that what I took for granted, could or would seem like religious experience to others.” We can not take the Okefenokee for granted; we must preserve it for future generations. The Okefenokee Swamp is especially important to south Georgia and north Florida, which form a cultural area unlike the rest of either of those states. Yet when the Swamp is threatened, as it is now by another proposal to strip mine for titanium, the supporters of the culture of appreciation of nature, boating, birding, and fishing, with hunting nearby, represented by the Okefenokee Swamp, turn out to be from all over the U.S. and the world.

**(iii) to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;**

The Okefenokee Swamp was long a refuge for native Americans, first Timucuan from the Spanish, then Creeks during the American Revolution. Billy's Island is named for Billy Bowlegs, an Indian who lived there until he was murdered by cattle rustlers, who were later caught. White settlers arrived in the nineteenth century and formed a Cracker Culture, documented in its late stages by naturalist Francis Harper. Many of their descendants still live not far away. Even the logging culture with its swamp railroads was a very unusual cultural tradition now gone.

**(iv) to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;**

Several stages of American history are represented in (iii), some of them unusual, if not unique to the Okefenokee. The Chesser Island homestead is maintained by ONWR, and the Lee Cemetery on Billys Island, as well as a cabin on Floyd's Island and other relics.

**(v) to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;**

The logging culture or exploitation of the Okefenokee ended with exhaustion of the reachable tree supply, and that end became irreversible with the formation of the ONWR. Similarly, the white settler Cracker Culture was overtaken by the loggers, and then the creation of the ONWR resulted in all of them leaving the Swamp, partly due to depredations of their livestock by wildlife they could no longer stop.

**(vi) to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);**

Francis Harper's records of the swamp culture are as much artistic and literary works as scientific. Musician Walter Parks continues the tradition of the haunting swamp hollers people used to use to communicate far across the Swamp, recorded among others by the Library of Congress. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xZVOF\\_nGYg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xZVOF_nGYg) Plus there is Walt Kelly's Pogo comic strip, which in its heyday was the conscience of America.

**(vii) to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of**

## **exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;**

This is why people come to the ONWR from all over the world: to see the birds, alligators, fish, raccoons, black bears, dragonflies, spiders, and other wildlife of the Okefenokee Swamp, among their native cypress, blackgum, maple, and pine trees. The ONWR has been a RAMSAR wetland of international importance since 1986. <https://rsis.ramsar.org/ris/350> “The swamp is a mosaic of habitats from wet marshes, lakes, scrub-shrub, cypress forests, and islands of oak and pine. Fire and water define the swamp’s habitats. Habitats provide for endangered and threatened species such as red-cockaded woodpeckers, wood storks, indigo snakes and a wide variety of other wildlife species. It is world renowned for its diverse amphibian populations.”

## **(viii) to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;**

The eastern dam of the Okefenokee Swamp is Trail Ridge, which is hypothesized to be ancient shoreline beach dunes, and certainly dates from as far back as the Cretaceous era, 65 million years ago, when much of the current Southeast U.S. Coastal Plain was under the sea.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275619883\\_Heavy-Mineral\\_Mining\\_in\\_the\\_Atlantic\\_Coastal\\_Plain\\_and\\_What\\_Deposit\\_Locations\\_Tell\\_Us\\_about\\_Ancient\\_Shorelines](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275619883_Heavy-Mineral_Mining_in_the_Atlantic_Coastal_Plain_and_What_Deposit_Locations_Tell_Us_about_Ancient_Shorelines)

The depression now housing the Swamp itself is hypothesized to have been formed by waves bouncing off Trail Ridge when it was offshore barrier islands.

<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/geography-environment/natural-history-okefenokee-swamp>

Trail Ridge also contains significant deposits of titanium dioxide, coveted for white paint and other uses. Most sections north and south of the Swamp having already been mined, now for the second time in two decades miners are attempting to exploit Trail Ridge within miles of the Swamp.

## **(ix) to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;**

The Okefenokee Swamp is characterized by dynamic disclimax, most easily illustrated by its plant communities: “The successional climax community would be southern mixed hardwoods, but it is never realized due to continuous natural and anthropogenic disturbance. The model for plant community succession is from open marsh to cypress, or from shrub swamp to broad leaved evergreen or mixed hardwood forests (Hamilton, 1982; Glasser, 1986). Plant succession is routinely set back by such factors as historically frequent fires (INR Progress Report, 1987), the upwelling of peat batteries due to outgassing of 266 methane from peat decomposition (King et al., 1981), and the influence of the fluctuating water table (Greening and Gerritsen, 1987). In the early 1900's, canals were dug and the swamp was logged of its dominant cypress communities, further altering evapotranspiration, water flow and community structure. These recurring disturbance regimes lead to a heterogeneous and ever changing "disclimax" ecosystem with a mosaic of habitats.”

<https://smartech.gatech.edu/bitstream/handle/1853/44153/BergstedtA-97.pdf>

**(x) to contain 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**

Almost every species of bird and mammal of the U.S. Southeast can be found in the Okefenokee Swamp at some season of the year. The sheer diversity of finding them all there makes the ONWR a most important and significant habitat for conservation. The 2006 RAMSAR update notes: “The wetlands are used as a feeding ground by nationally endangered wood storks (*Mycteria americana*), while the Alligator Snapping Turtle (*Macrolemys temminckii*) (Vulnerable; IUCN, 2006 and CITES Appendix III) are found year-round within the waters of the Okefenokee NWR. The communities of native longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*), considered vulnerable by IUCN, are being restored on the uplands of the refuge and also support the nationally-endangered and IUCN-vulnerable Red-Cockaded Woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*); and the Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), this last one considered nationally threatened, IUCN vulnerable and included in CITES Appendix II.... The site is world renowned for the diversity of amphibians and reptiles that are found here, which are biological indicators of global health.... With its diversity of habitats, Okefenokee NWR is home to over 620 plant, 39 fish, 37 amphibian, 64 reptile, 234 bird and 50 mammal species.... The Florida sandhill cranes (*Grus canadensis pratensis*) are non-migratory and are considered to be isolated from other populations in the southeast. In the mid-1980’s the population at the refuge was estimated at 403 individuals. Since this time, it appears that there has been a decline in the population, which nevertheless still exceeds the 1% threshold of 50 Florida sandhill cranes. During the winter, large numbers (up to 1,000) of greater sandhill cranes (*G. canadensis*) migrate to the swamp and overwinter.”

For all these reasons I recommend that the U.S. nominate the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge as a World Heritage site this year.

Thank you for your consideration.

For the rivers and the aquifer,

John S. Quarterman

Suwannee RIVERKEEPER®

/s

WWALS Watershed Coalition, Inc.

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