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Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
World Heritage Site Bid

This week the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service launched a unique public/private partnership to seek World Heritage Site status from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). World Heritage status would further the US Fish and Wildlife Service vision to protect the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and its vast ecological resources for years to come.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service partnered with the Okefenokee Swamp Park, Inc., (OSP) a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating the public about the Okefenokee Swamp and inspiring conservation advocacy. The partnership will offer private assistance to the Okefenokee NWR to organize, develop, and fund the World Heritage approval process.

“It’s an opportunity to unite the communities of the Okefenokee in a meaningful dialogue on the many benefits of having both a National Wildlife Refuge and World Heritage Site at the heart of the region,” states OSP Executive Director Kim Bednarek.

Depending on the type and accessibility of a site, World Heritage status may result in increased global visibility and potential growth in sustainable tourism, with related economic benefits for the regional community. World Heritage status does not involve any delegation of rights or jurisdiction over a site, rather – if a site is one day deemed to no longer be sufficiently protected or authentic – UNESCO will simply delist the site.

The vision of the Okefenokee NWR is “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.” Securing the designation as a World Heritage Site will further this vision for generations.

“If inscribed, Okefenokee NWR would be the first site entirely managed by the National Wildlife Refuge System and the first natural site of its kind to be recognized as a World Heritage Site,” states Southeast Regional Director Leopoldo Miranda-Castro of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Okefenokee NWR and the Okefenokee swamp hold many national and international designations that demonstrate the value of this vast wetland that covers over 680 square miles in the southeast corner of Georgia and northeast Florida. More than 93% of the Okefenokee swamp is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through the Okefenokee NWR. The entire National Wildlife Refuge system is comprised of 568 refuges that in totality manage over 150 million acres of land and water across the United States.

The Okefenokee NWR is the largest National Wildlife Refuge in the eastern United States. The majority of the Okefenokee NWR was designated as a National Wilderness Area in 1974 by an act of Congress. The Wilderness designation created additional protections that have allowed managers to further protect the wild and untamed swamp. The Convention on Wetlands (RAMSAR), an intergovernmental treaty, recognizes the Okefenokee as a Wetland of International Importance, one of only 41 sites in the United States.

A World Heritage Site is officially defined as a natural or man-made site recognized as being of “outstanding universal value.” The Okefenokee NWR was originally identified as a potential World Heritage Site in 1982. In 2007, the Okefenokee NWR was placed on the United States Tentative List, where it has remained as a candidate World Heritage Site until the present. More than 40 local, state, and national organizations support the Okefenokee’s bid for World Heritage status, citing the World Heritage List as the highest honor in the world for natural and cultural sites.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the OSP will soon be signing a memorandum of understanding for project management and financial resources to support what is expected to be at least a three-year inscription process working closely with the Department of the Interior that oversees the World Heritage Site nomination process for the United States. The OSP has established a dedicated World Heritage website to encourage engagement with this important project https://okefenokeeworldheritage.org.

For further information on the Okefenokee-UNESCO bid:
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