



STATEMENT OF OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE

Brief Synthesis

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR), situated just north of the Georgia-Florida border in the southeastern United States, encompasses a mosaic of wetlands, forests, mires, rivers, prairies, and other ecosystems. Covering over 160,000 hectares, it is the third largest National Wilderness Area east of the Mississippi River. It encompasses 21 wetland and upland habitats that support over 1,270 species of flora and fauna, and thousands of invertebrate species. The ONWR is unique in that its wetland ecosystems—which are both important and rare global environmental assets according to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature—are driven largely by natural processes contained within the ONWR.

Today's ONWR is a snapshot of time, a modern window into natural processes relevant to our planet's past and future. The ONWR changes seasonally, but also sporadically as lightning fire naturally clears underbrush, removes debris from the forest floor, and nourishes the soil. Human activity affected the ONWR in the early 20th century, but conservation efforts facilitated the natural healing process in the ONWR. As a result, it is a remarkably intact habitat for hundreds of endemic species, as well as a resting place for dozens of species of migratory birds. The ONWR meets Outstanding Universal Value criteria ix and x because of its varied and rare ecosystems, species richness, and its role in the conservation of high-interest and super endangered species.

Criteria Justification

Criterion (ix): The ONWR meets criterion (ix), which focuses on unique geography and ecosystems, because its varied habitats and geological processes give it qualities that are unmatched in the rest of the world. The ONWR is one of the largest and most intact landmasses within the North American Coastal Plain (NACP), which is a major hotspot of biodiversity as defined by the Conservation International and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund. The ONWR has also been singled out as one of only eleven Priority 1 ecoregions in North America identified by the World Wildlife Fund, making it both globally outstanding.

The ONWR contains a diverse mosaic of wetland, peatland, and longleaf pine ecosystems connected through a dynamic system of waterways. Unlike other wetlands worldwide, ONWR serves as the headwaters for two major rivers—the St. Mary's and Suwanee. It is thus protected from incoming pollutants, and is critical to the health of those downstream ecosystems. ONWR's vast peatbogs are of particular global significance. The vast amount of essentially undisturbed peat stores incredible amounts of carbon, which lowers greenhouse gases. ONWR's peat serves as a globally important resource to combat climate change, especially as peat-forming wetlands are disappearing worldwide. ONWR's longleaf pine forests are also globally significant because they represent some of the last bastions of this ecosystem, which once covered millions of hectares worldwide. Unsurprisingly, this rare habitat serves as a home for many rare species. The longleaf pine forests are maintained partly because of the high amount of lightning that strikes the ONWR, which causes fires that burn the wilderness and clear underbrush.

Criterion (x): The ONWR is well known for its overall species richness and its role in the conservation of high-interest and super endangered species. Teaming with biodiversity, the ONWR serves as an important habitat for a vast array of flora and fauna, including over 3,000 species of trees, 48 species of mammals, 238 species of birds, 39 species of fish, 101 species of reptiles and amphibians and an untold number of invertebrate species. Located within the North American Coastal Plain, the ONWR contains 14% of the plant species and 59% of the fauna endemic to this region. This level of biodiversity is rare among

freshwater wetlands with relatively little changes in elevation. In fact, the ONWR's species richness is comparable to that of the Everglades National Park and Yellowstone National Park, despite its much smaller size (ONWR's total area is 164,565 ha, while Yellowstone's is 898,349 and the Everglades' is 567,017 ha).

The ONWR also plays an important role in the preservation of critical species. It is home to 42 species that are considered endangered and high conservation priority, including the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker, Indigo Snake, Wood Stork, and Flatwoods Salamander. The site is world renowned for its amphibians and reptiles, housing not only one of the largest populations of the American Alligator (recovering from near extinction), but also many other species, making up 25% of the reptiles and 32% of the amphibians endemic to the NACP. The area also protects many important plant species, such as 18 carnivorous plants, which are themselves rare outside of the tropics. This includes the endangered and largely unprotected Longleaf Pine forests. Due to the interplay between natural fires and precipitation, these Longleaf Pine areas form a high canopy with low understory, further adding to ONWR's role as a critical natural habitat whose importance in preservation will only grow in the future.

Integrity

The ONWR, encompasses 97% of the Okefenokee Swamp. This area falls under the protection of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and has been protected since 1936, which preserves the native habitat's wilderness character. Additionally, the ONWR is surrounded by southern yellow pine savannas that form a natural barrier to human encroachment. It is a vast, unfragmented, and mostly intact freshwater wetland within one of the world's most highly developed temperate zones – a wetland of comparable scale and degree of naturalness does not exist anywhere else on the globe. Furthermore, the ONWR serves as the headwaters for two major rivers, and its water is supplied mostly by rainfall; thus, all the natural processes necessary for its continued health are contained within its borders, and it has no source of point pollution.

While human activity has caused some alterations to the landscape, the ONWR's size and rugged terrain have protected it largely intact. Though much of the primary forests were cut, the ONWR has healed naturally over most of the last century. Additionally, the ONWR's water quality and peat deposits have been essentially preserved in their original state because of the ONWR's self-sufficiency and conservation efforts. While there are some human activities threatening the ONWR, its status as a wildlife refuge has solidified its borders and protects its natural processes, effectively protecting it from all man-made threats.

Protection and Management

The ONWR is effectively protected and has few threats to its integrity. As a national wildlife refuge managed by the USFWS, the ONWR is protected by the United States government. Established in 1937, its borders are secure and unchallenged. Additionally, the USFWS requires the refuge to create Comprehensive Conservation Plans for periods of 15 years, which address conservation of fish, wildlife, and plant resources, while providing opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreation uses.

The integrity of the ONWR's border is especially important considering that the ONWR allows wildfires to progress naturally. Fire is often caused by frequent lightning strikes on the ONWR and is important to the conservation of the ONWR. Further, the ONWR fires have helped conservationists better understand fire's important role in the health of some ecosystems. When wildfires are infrequent, prescribed burning is applied to the uplands to imitate them.

Because fire and other natural processes govern the landscape of the ONWR, and evidence of human presence remains minimal. While there are threats to the ONWR, it is popularly supported throughout the region as an important ecosystem worth protecting. Local organizations such as the Greater Okefenokee Association of Landowners work to protect it and have an open dialogue with the ONWR. Furthermore, the ONWR has not been logged for close to a century, which has allowed its forests to naturally recover. Tourism has also contributed to promising conservation prospects for the ONWR, as over 400,000 people visit the refuge annually. While tourism has some negative impacts on the reserve, they are largely localized to the few places easily accessible by trails.