United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization · World Heritage Convention

STATEMENT OF OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUE

Brief Synthesis

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (OKE) is one of the world's largest intact freshwater ecosystems comprising over 350,000 acres in the southern part of the United States. The OKE is a diverse community home to many different species of wildlife and plants. The OKE's impressive biodiversity is due, in part, to the many different habitat types found here including open lakes, black gum forests, bay forests, prairies, cypress stands, and shrub swamps.

The OKE is an ecologically diverse Refuge that supports a vast array of terrestrial and marine life. Its different ecosystems are supported by one another and protected by the United States government as a space that is celebrated and used for research and educational purposes. For example, the way natural fire is used as a positive regenerative force makes it unique, while the ecosystem serving as the headwaters for the Suwannee and St. Mary's River provide a comfortable environment for a wide variety of wildlife.

As an ecosystem in a biodiversity hotspot, OKE has many features that can be found nowhere else in the world and deserves protection for the value it brings to science through research and conservation, and the home it gives to the wildlife within its borders. These features make OKE worthy of being dedicated a World Heritage site by UNESCO.

Criteria IX

OKE is a rare mosaic of ecosystems mingling and is of value for science and the continued survival and possible reintroduction of species that live there. The forces that drive OKE are fire and water. As an area with high occurrences of lighting, the area is in constant flux from the resulting fires. This continual change allows for the normal processes of the wetland to continue in their seasonal ebb and flow. The ecosystem is reliant on fire because of its composition of longleaf pines and the extensive amount of peat bogs in the area; it thrives on the maintenance of overgrowth and trimming that comes from lighting storm fires

Longleaf pines once covered 90 million acres of the south-eastern United States. However, only 3 million acres remain today. When longleaf pine trees first grow, they need full sunlight to survive. However, because these trees are slower-growing, they often get put in the shade by the other faster-growing trees. Controlled fires keep the other faster growing trees from stealing the sunshine from the longleaf pine trees. These controlled fires not only promote the growth of the ever-essential longleaf pines, but also create a diverse natural ground layer. This interaction plays a crucial role in the maintenance of the area to keep a low understory, allowing the area to be home to the federally endangered and globally vulnerable Red-cockaded Woodpecker and gopher tortoise.

Most peatlands are found at high latitudes in cooler climates, making OKE a rare example of a subtropical peat bed. For example, while Canada has about 130 million hectares of peat bogs, while the United States only has about 7 million hectares. Peat is a natural carbon sink, which means that it helps to mitigate the climate crisis and its protection is important. In fact, damaged peatlands are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, responsible for almost 5% of global anthropogenic CO_2 emissions.

Beyond the evolutionary and successional changes that can be studied and observed in OKE, there are also many species found in OKE with international value.

Criteria X

The OKE houses some creatures that do not exist anywhere else in the world, such as the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker and the Round-tailed Muskrat. Its intermingling ecosystems encourage the development and evolution of a variety of biological and ecological species. OKE falls within the 36th biodiversity hotspot, the North America Coastal Plain (NACP); within a Terrestrial Global 200 priority region, the Southern Coniferous and Broadleaf Forest Ecosystem; and within the region with the highest amphibian diversity in North America, the southeastern United States. OKE supports 88 percent of bird species found within NACP, equaling 238 resident and migrant species. In fact, OKE is classified as an 'Important Bird Area' of international significance by Bird Life International because of its protection for 42 endangered or high conservation priority bird species. OKE also supports 20 percent of reptilian species in the NACP, including one of the largest populations of the American alligator. In addition, seven out of the 13 turtle species and 17 out of 34 snake species occurring on OKE are endemic to the NACP. 48 species of mammals, 16% of mammal species in the NACP, live in OKE.

OKE is also the headwaters for two different rivers, the Suwannee and Saint Mary's. Because of the protection OKE currently has, these rivers can support their own wildlife from OKE to the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic respectively. The Suwannee River supports around ten to fifteen other wildlife management areas or state parks, each working to support species that can only be found in the Southeastern United States. The Saint Mary's River supports about three other protected areas, including Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, a coastal wetland area. All these areas are also found within the NACP biodiversity hotspot.

There are also over 900 plants in the longleaf ecosystem which are not found anywhere else on the globe. The Hairy Rattleweed is found here and is endemic to only Brantley and Wayne Counties in Georgia, not existing anywhere else in the world. This is the only plant species native to the OKE that appears on the federal endangered plant list, however, several plants that appear on the Georgia list of plants of concern can be found in the area. The Pond Cypress occurs naturally throughout the ecosystem as scattered individuals, meaning small patches mixed in with other vegetation. These types of trees have recently re-established themselves throughout the OKE, by aging 80 plus years. This multitude of endangered species is a great example of how the OKE contains the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity.

Statement of Integrity

The features that convey the integrity of the proposed outstanding universal value of the OKE can be demonstrated by its intactness, resilience, and variety of ecosystems. Decades of logging operations in the early 1900's took its toll on the OKE. However, with the protection regimes now in place, nature is taking over once again. The overall hydrology and water quality is exceptionally intact, and the overall state of conservation of the ecosystems that make up the OKE is exceptionally maintained.

There are currently three mining operations proposed adjacent to the property, which threatens hydrologic dynamics of the ecosystems and would influence the ongoing ecological processes occurring. Many environmental organizations standing with OKE are working to protect the OKE against any potential degradation caused by said mining proposals. In addition to its own property, OKE is connected to other conservation lands via the rivers originating

within its borders. All of this makes the OKE a wonderful example of a mosaic of ecosystems that cascade together and are supported by natural processes, which are prioritised more than man-made systems or recreations of natural processes.

Protection and Management

The OKE is maintained by a variety of groups that are interested in maintaining the integrity of habitats around the world. There was a renewed interest in the establishment and development of the site in 1938, with an Executive Order being passed for the establishment of the refuge. Research surrounding the OKE dates to the mid 1930s and includes a multiyear management plan. The Comprehensive Conservative Plan not only ensures that the management of the OKE is consistent with the requirements set forth in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, but also makes sure that administration is coordinated with federal, state, and county plans. In addition, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has a management and conservation plan protecting and managing the OKE under this umbrella for future generations. The goal of OKE is to protect, restore, and conserve the qualities of the land that make it an area of ongoing evolutionary changes supporting the plethora of life within OKE's borders.