EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER OFFICIAL UNESCO INSCRIPTION

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Is Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site

PRESS CONTACT
Kim Bednarek
Executive Director
kim.bednarek@okeswamp.org
904-207-8057
www.okeswamp.org

ABOUT
America's 27th World Heritage Site

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2026, joining a list of fewer than 1,250 places on Earth recognized for "outstanding universal value." It became the 27th World Heritage Site in the United States and the first site in the state of Georgia.

The Okefenokee now stands alongside the country's most iconic natural and cultural landmarks: Yellowstone and Mesa Verde National Parks, the first two U.S. sites inscribed in 1978, plus Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, the Statue of Liberty, Independence Hall, the Florida Everglades, and others. It joins a global list that includes the Galapagos Islands, Stonehenge, the Taj Mahal, and the Great Barrier Reef.

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is a nearly half-million-acre mosaic of upland forests, wet and dry prairies, and wetlands in southeast Georgia and northeast Florida that provide habitat and breeding grounds for hundreds of species, including many that are threatened or endangered. It is the headwaters of the St. Marys and Suwannee Rivers, creating a continuous wildlife corridor from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf.

The Okefenokee is a National Wildlife Refuge, the first ever managed entirely by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to receive the designation, and represents the largest predominantly rainwater-fed lowland peatland in the subtropical zone worldwide, and is one of the largest and most intact remaining ecosystems within the North American Coastal Plain Biodiversity Hotspot. The Okefenokee UNESCO World Heritage Inscription book is the most comprehensive scientific analysis ever conducted on the Okefenokee Swamp, and it was formally recommended for inscription by IUCN, the official advisory body for natural sites to UNESCO.

Okefenokee Swamp Park and Okefenokee Adventures are the two primary gateways to the Refuge, along with Stephen Foster State Park. Okefenokee Swamp Park, Inc. served as the nonprofit partner supporting the World Heritage nomination throughout 2021–2026, including the final phase leading to UNESCO approval. The bid has been in progress for more than four decades.

27th	1st	1st	40+
U.S. World Heritage Site	World Heritage Site in Georgia	National Wildlife Refuge inscribed	years in the making

DESIGNATIONS & RECOGNITION
More than a National Wildlife Refuge

The Okefenokee Swamp, one of Georgia's Seven Natural Wonders, has earned numerous distinguished designations, now anchored by its newest and most significant recognition.

UNESCO World Heritage Site

Inscribed July 25th, 2026 as the **27th U.S. World Heritage Site**, following a process that began in 1982 and culminated in a vote of the World Heritage Committee in July 2026 in Busan, South Korea.

Wetland of International Importance

The Ramsar Convention
(an international treaty signed in 1971) designated the swamp a wetland of international importance because of its significant biodiversity and ecological value.

National Natural Landmark

The U.S. National Park Service designated the Okefenokee Swamp as a National Natural Landmark in recognition of its extraordinary natural resources and to encourage its long-term conservation.

Class 1 Wilderness

In 1974, over 350,000 acres of the Okefenokee were designated **Class 1 Wilderness**, providing additional protection to the swamp against development.

Important Bird Area

The **National Audubon Society** recognizes the Okefenokee Swamp as an Important Bird Area for its exceptional habitat diversity and the wide variety of bird species it supports.

International Dark Sky Park

Stephen C. Foster State Park, located along the western edge of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, is designated an International Dark Sky Park by **DarkSky International**. The refuge is home to some of the darkest night skies in the southeastern United States.

KEY STORY ANGLES

The Okefenokee Swamp is a dynamic, complex system that changes frequently. These story angles do not represent the entirety of narratives that can be explored in the Okefenokee region.

Forty Years in the Making

This is the culmination of a journey that began in 1982 with Okefenokee's first identification as a potential future World Heritage nomination, with more intense efforts initiated in 2022 under a public-private partnership between Okefenokee Swamp Park and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service which finally moved the nomination from a dream to reality.What followed was a multi-year, public-private campaign: a Project Management Office formed in 2021, a Steering Committee of Okefenokee Swamp Park and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, more than $725,000 raised across 20 states and 35 Georgia cities, and a coalition spanning conservation groups, First Nations partners, business leaders, and a bipartisan slate of elected officials.

A First for Wildlife Refuges

The Okefenokee is the first site ever inscribed under the National Wildlife Refuge System, distinct from a National Park. National Parks operate under a dual mandate: conservation and public enjoyment, balanced together. National Wildlife Refuges operate under a different standard: wildlife conservation is the controlling priority, and any public use — recreation, education, hunting, fishing — must be shown to be compatible with that priority before it's allowed. The inscription positions the Okefenokee as a model for how the world's largest protected wildlife landscapes can responsibly welcome a growing number of visitors without compromising the wilderness that made them significant in the first place.

A Resilient Ecosystem

The swamp has a long history of overcoming adversity, beginning in 1891 when the Suwannee Canal Company purchased more than 238,000 acres of the Okefenokee with plans to drain it for logging. For three years, the company dug a primary drainage canal, but abandoned efforts in 1894 after failing to purge the Trail Ridge on the eastern border of the swamp. The company's sawmill site at Camp Cornelia is, today, the home of Okefenokee Adventures, the official tour operator for the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. The canal itself remains a defining feature of the landscape, and now provides access into the swamp for kayakers and boaters.

Economic & Community Impact

The Okefenokee Swamp is a vital economic driver for surrounding rural communities in southern Georgia. Pre-inscription estimates (Conservation Fund, Feb. 2024) projected tourism growth accelerating from a 4% annual baseline to 6-8% post-inscription, visitation roughly doubling to 1.4 - 1.6 million by 2035,creating up to 700 new jobs, and having a $140M+ regional economic impact.

Outstanding Universal Value

"Outstanding Universal Value" is the formal UNESCO criterion the Okefenokee's nomination was judged against. The swamp's status as the largest blackwater wetland in North America, a subtropical peat ecosystem, and home to the largest remaining undisturbed peat deposit on the North American Coastal Plain all solidified its OUV. Active alligator research with the University of Georgia (UGA), a five-year black bear population study (started in 2023), red-cockaded woodpecker research and population management, and bat and nightjar surveys are all key programs dedicated to monitoring and maintaining the health of the ecosystem.

Jacksonville is the Gateway City to the Okefenokee

The Okefenokee extends into Florida in Baker County and is the northern anchor of the 18-million acre Florida Wildlife Corridor. North Florida is part of the ecosystem of the Okefenokee as the headwaters of the Suwannee River and the St. Marys River - two important rivers in and to Florida - the St. Marys being the border river between the states in these regions. Jacksonville is the closest metropolitan day-visit drive market to the Okefenokee. The Jacksonville International Airport (JAX) is the closest major airport to the Okefenokee. The Folkston gate is about 60 minutes from most points in the Jacksonville metro area.

FACTS & FIGURES

- 27th U.S. World Heritage Site
- 1st World Heritage Site in Georgia
- 1st National Wildlife Refuge ever inscribed as a World Heritage Site
- 1982 - 2026 — 40+ years from initial identification to inscription
- 1.4 - 1.6 million projected annual visitors by 2035, up from roughly 700,000 today
- 700+ new jobs projected regionwide
- $140 million+ projected regional economic impact
- The Okefenokee is the largest blackwater wetland in North America
- The Refuge protects over 90% of the swamp: 407,000 acres
- Headwaters of the Suwannee & St. Marys Rivers, which are crucial to Florida's and Georgia's drinking water
- The UNESCO World Heritage Site bid was bilateral with Georgia and Florida as the Okefenokee extends into Baker County, Florida and is part of the regional ecosystem
- The Okefenokee Swamp is the iconic northern anchor of the 18-million-acre Florida Wildlife Corridor
- 80 years of conservation education at Okefenokee Swamp Park
- Refuge contains 120 miles of paddling trails
- The swamp is home to 850 plant species, 37 amphibian species, 238 bird species, 39 fish species, 50 mammal species, and 64 reptile species

MEDIA ASSETS

The following assets are available at the links below for editorial use only. Please credit Okefenokee Swamp Park, Inc. on all published materials, as well as the photographers/videographers mentioned in the filenames.

Photo Gallery | **Logos & Branding** | **Video Reel**

OKEFENOKEE SWAMP PARK
5700 Okefenokee Swamp Park Road
Waycross, Georgia
okeswamp.org

OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE
OKEFENOKEE ADVENTURES
4159 Suwannee Canal Road
Folkston, Georgia
okeswamp.org