

THE OKEFENOCHEE SWAMP

ONE OF THE MOST
BEAUTIFUL PLACES ON EARTH

STORY BY SHERRI MCLENDON

PHOTO COURTESY OF USFWS



PHOTO BY NATHAN MCMILLIAN PHOTOS

OKEFENOCHEE REGION POISED TO ADVANCE ECOLOGICAL TOURISM ECONOMY

When skeptical visitors first arrive at the Okefenokee Swamp, they are quickly astonished by the beauty and diversity of North America's largest protected wetland.

"What I see is a transition, where they recognize it's a beautiful place," says Josh Snead, interpretive ranger at Stephen C. Foster State Park, Fargo.

Visitors later recall Spanish moss waving in the breeze; tall cypress trees reflected in blackwater; sightings of alligators, bobcats, foxes or black bears; or migratory birds, like the sand-hill crane.

"Fictional swamps are often depicted as dirty, dark, murky places where monsters and malaria hide," says Snead. By comparison, the Okefenokee is bright and full of life.

When the world agrees, recognition follows. In 2017, a USA Today poll voted Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge as the second most beautiful campground in the United States. In 2012, National Geographic recognized the Okefenokee Swamp as one of the Top 100 Most Beautiful Places on Earth. Additionally, the Refuge is designated as a RAMSAR Wetland of International Importance, a significant global recognition.

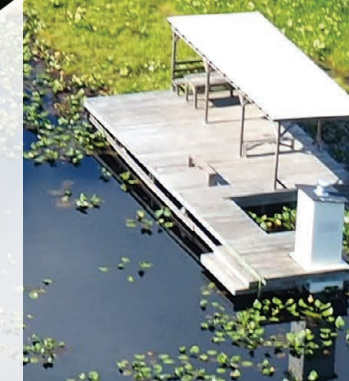




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As a result, the world was taken aback in April 2020, when the advocacy group, American Rivers (AR), named the Okefenokee Swamp - and the nearby “Wild and Scenic” Saint Mary’s River - to its list of the most endangered places in the world. AR attributed its decision to the threat they believe titanium mining poses to the waterways’ clean water, wetlands, and wildlife habitat.

In 2021, even as the mining debate continues, and after more than 40 years, the 407,000 acre Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge has now been added to the official register for United States nominations to the United Nations’ Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) World Heritage List. As the most complete large freshwater wetland ecosystem remaining on the highly populated North American Coastal Plain, it is considered an irreplaceable world resource.

“The Okefenokee is a unique, intact, gorgeous ecosystem,” says Kim Bednerak, Executive Director, Okefenokee Swamp Park & Okefenokee Adventures. “People need to know how important it is. When guests visit and experience the Okefenokee, they will want it conserved and want others to visit.”

OKEFENOCKEE REGION: AT AN ECOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC CROSSROADS

Bednerak believes the region may be at a crossroads from a natural resources perspective. The question? Whether to extract resources versus conserve them.

“The Okefenokee has the potential to be a catalyst for regional economic development rooted in conservation,” says Bednerak. “When communities are vulnerable, they may make decisions that are not in their best interests. With support, they can think strategically to make the best long term, sustainable decisions for the future.”

Ecological tourism, or ecotourism, offers a unique opportunity to recast the Okefenokee Swamp as a significant economic driver within the regional economy, she says.

“There’s an underdeveloped story about the swamp as the true anchor for economic development in this region,” says Bednerak.

The numbers support Bednerak’s position. In 2019, five percent of overnight visitors to the state - and four percent of day visitors - indicated that ecotourism was an activity of special interest, according to Ashley Barfield, Ph.D., director



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(Except Photo of Dr. William Clark)

of tourism research with the Georgia Department of Economic Development. That means roughly 9% of Georgia’s overall \$34.9 billion - or \$3.14 billion - in travel spending derives from eco-tourism dollars.

Equally compelling are the numbers in southeast Georgia’s Congressional District 1, which encompasses the Okefenokee Swamp, Georgia’s Golden Isles, and historic Savannah. In all, as much as 29 percent of the region’s reported \$3.2 billion travel spending may be attributed to eco-tourism, according to U.S. Travel data.

“We know that the swamp has a major economic impact,” according to William Clark III, M.D., chairman of the board of trustees for the non-profit Okefenokee Swamp Park, and president of the Waycross-Ware County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

According to the most recent Banking on Nature report, published in 2018, the Okefenokee Swamp generates 753 local jobs, \$17.2 million in employee income, \$5.4 million in total tax revenues, \$64.7 million in economic output, and recorded an impressive 724,000 visits across entrances.

“Tourism dollars are the cleanest dollars received in any community,” Clark says. “We want to employ more people and raise the general tide of prosperity in Ware County and throughout the Okefenokee region.”

Created after World War II in 1946, when U.S. 1 was the main thoroughfare between Maine and Miami, the Swamp Park board of trustees today plans to reinvigorate the future prospects for regional tourism.

“We want to invite ecotourism investment in Ware, Charlton, and Clinch counties so that the Okefenokee can achieve its potential,” says Bednerak.



Dr. William Clark, Chairman, Okefenokee Swamp Park Board of Trustees & President, Waycross-Ware County CVB



COLLECTIVE IMPACT: WAYCROSS, FOLKSTON AND FARGO ARE BETTER TOGETHER

Today, the Okefenokee Swamp Park is a member of the new cooperative Okefenokee Partnership, working alongside its strategic partners, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, Folkston, and Stephen C. Foster State Park, Fargo. Together, the three agencies hope to enhance appreciation for the Okefenokee Swamp through education and marketing, increasing visitation



"THE ISOLATION IS A PART OF THE ADVENTURE. YOU CAN DISCONNECT AND EMBRACE WHAT THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE CAN OFFER." - Josh Snead

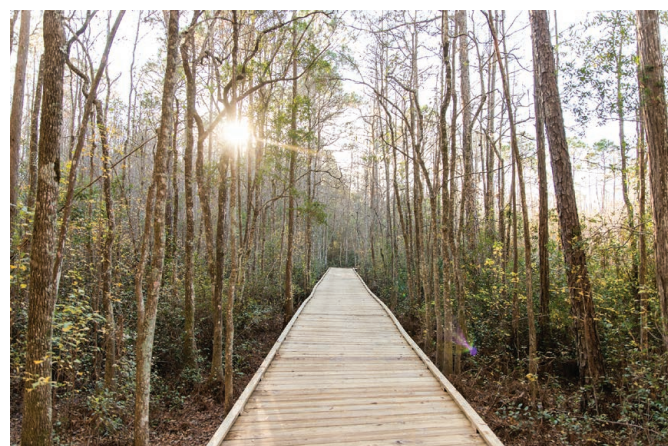


PHOTO BY CHRIS MONCUS PHOTOGRAPHY

at each entrance, and growing the positive economic impact for south Georgia.

Already, the group's innovative partnership has yielded new recognition for the Okefenokee Swamp. First, the launch of a new website, www.visittheswamp.com, features visitor experiences at all three locations. A new permanent exhibit at the Port Wentworth (Savannah) Visitor Information Center opened in October to fanfare, later garnering recognition as one of the top five exhibits at the recent Travel Blazers conference.

Forming impactful partnerships is a technique Bednerak calls "collective impact," an intentional process of bringing disparate groups of people together to work and solve complex problems.



PHOTO BY NATHAN MCMILLIAN PHOTOS

"As the only national wildlife refuge that has both a state park and a non-profit within its borders, we are forming a model of public-private partnership that can help produce a new standard for how to cooperate and move things forward," says Clark.

"We are committed to develop a way to educate the travelling public on the importance of the maintenance and recovery of wetlands wherever they exist," he says.

COVID, RECOVERY AND OPPORTUNITY IN THE OKEFENOKEE REGION

Visitation at the Okefenokee also declined by about 25 percent during COVID, as groups and international guests cancelled their trips right at the peak of tourist season.

"The Okefenokee Swamp is a destination," says Susan Heisey, supervisory refuge ranger at the National Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge, Folkston. "This is not the type of place that you jump off the interstate to visit."

Pre-COVID, the three swamp entrances would see visitors from all 50 states and over 46 different countries on a regular basis, says Heisey, who collates the "gold star" quality data for all three swamp entrances, counting visits as well as visitors.



PHOTO BY CHRIS MONCUS PHOTOGRAPHY

"On average, the Okefenokee would see 500-600,000 visits per year," according to Heisey. "At minimum, we see about 250,000 distinct visitors in a year to the swamp as a whole."

Post-COVID, statewide recovery scenarios developed by Tourism Economics for Explore Georgia in September 2020 suggest that the rural and outdoor destinations, like the Okefenokee Swamp, are dramatically outperforming urban destinations for travel spending, both in the southeast and across the nation.

"Recreationally, the Okefenokee is a really hot ecotourism destination," says Bednerak. "What we need to do is build up what people can do, and where they can stay, to complement their visit to the Okefenokee."

Destinations with a mix of local and out-of-town visitors will recover faster, along with destinations with recreation

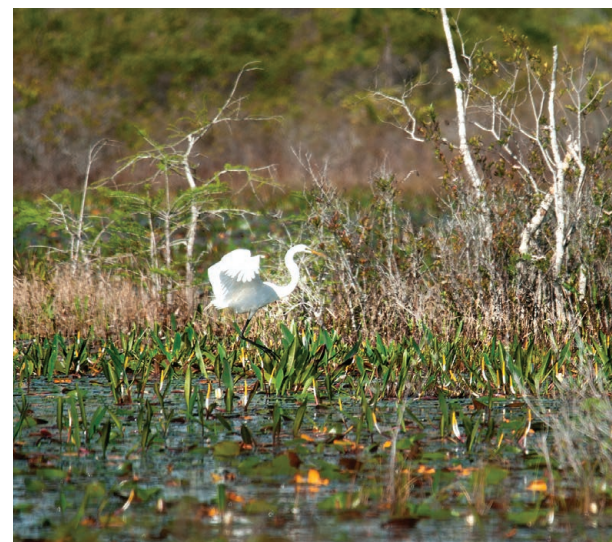


PHOTO BY BILL RHODES

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

- *North America's largest protected wetland*
- *Ranked by a USA Today poll as the second most beautiful campground in the United States (2017).*
- *Recognized by National Geographic as one of the Top 100 Most Beautiful Places on Earth (2012).*
- On average, the Okefenokee has 500,000 - 600,000 visits per year representing all 50 states and over 46 different countries.

EVERY ALLIGATOR LIFE HAS A STORY

For the first time, individuals with an interest in the conservation of the American alligator in the Okefenokee Swamp have an opportunity to get to know one firsthand. This, thanks to a new, one-of-a-kind sponsorship opportunity from the University System of Georgia.

Adopters "sponsor" a real, live alligator, and help choose its official name. The alligator is caught, tagged, returned to its natural habitat, then followed with a GPS tracker for an entire year.

Sponsors receive detailed monthly updates on the activities and movements of their alligator as it makes its way through the Great Swamp. They also receive photographs and tracking information and a one-of-a-kind painting made by their alligator.

The sponsorship offers an opportunity to be part of groundbreaking new research into alligator behaviors, say Okefenokee Swamp Park experts. The research is conducted by Georgia Southern University master's candidate Mark Hoog, an alligator research technician with the Brunswick station of the Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant at the University of Georgia.

"Alligators are often misunderstood and persecuted," says Hoog. "Not only will this project help us better protect the American alligator and its environment, but it will also allow me to teach people about alligators and why they are so important."

The sponsorship also covers expenses related to field research, and it is expected to contribute significantly to understandings of the behaviors, relationships, and habits of the American alligator. Learn more at <https://gacoast.uga.edu/research/major-projects/alligator-research/>



PHOTO BY BILL RHODES

WORLD CLASS STAR GAZING AMAZES IN FARGO

Five years ago, Fargo's Stephen C. Foster State Park entrance to the Okefenokee Swamp was named Georgia's first accredited gold tier International Dark Sky Park.

Today, Sky watchers and star gazers visit the location from all over the world.

Little natural darkness remains in the eastern or southeastern United States, making the recognition particularly noteworthy, according to the International Dark Sky Association, headquartered in Tucson, Ariz. The Fargo location is uniquely well suited for viewing, due to consciously low light pollution from the nearby small town and its 300 residents.

Pre-COVID, weekly programming at the park expanded to include night-time astronomy programs throughout the year. These, using 8- and 10- inch telescopes, are expected to resume when it's safe to do so. The overwhelming favorite is "The Swamper's Guide to the Galaxy," according to Fargo rangers.

"People love that program," says Josh Snead, interpretive ranger at the park.

We get to show off different things in the sky at certain times of the year."

On cloudless nights, it's possible to view the moon's craters, Venus, Mars, and the North Star, among other night sky wonders. Nighttime boat tours are also a great way to observe the stars from the natural environment, Snead says.

"The experience is immersive; It feels and sounds like what night in the Swamp should feel like."

For more on world class Okefenokee stargazing, visit <https://gastateparks.org/StephenCFoster>.



PHOTOS BY BILL RHODES

opportunities that allow for social distancing, according to report findings.

"I don't think we're going to see visitation go down in the future, says Heisey. "It's only going to increase."

Eco-tourism needs to be a pillar of the region's new economic development story, with the Okefenokee as the anchor, says Bednerek.

"Communities can really embrace opportunities when there is an iconic location in your backyard," says Heisey, citing examples of other gateway towns, such as Pigeon Forge, known as the "Gateway to the Smokies."

"There's a whole market for tourism in these small towns that can be supported by an iconic location like the Okefenokee Swamp," she says.

Visitors often have an interest in the culture, stories, traditions, handicrafts, and lifeways of swamper families, many of whom remain in the region. As a result, they tend to seek out handmade or locally sourced souvenirs.

"They like one-of-a-kind items that remind them of their Okefenokee experiences and allow them to contribute to the local community," says Heisey.

In neighboring Clinch county, the small town of Fargo with a population of 300, is decidedly off the beaten track. But that's what visitors are looking for when they choose the Stephen C. Foster entrance to the state park, according to Snead.

"The isolation is a part of the adventure," he explains. "It's what makes this a special wild place, removed from the hustle and bustle of the outside world and the busyness of life."

Removed is right. Cell phones don't work in the cabins or campground, and there are no city lights to spoil the night sky with its internationally respected "Dark Sky Park" designation.

"Here, you can really unwind and be a part of a place. You can disconnect and embrace what the natural landscape can offer."

Recently, the positive economic impact of travelers in and out of Fargo got the nod from Dollar General. The retailer sited one of its stores in the town, the only general store for 45 miles. It joins a Fargo restaurant, Joe Billy's, a few outfitters, small motels, and campsites that serve park visitors.

"Campers use the store to resupply," says Snead. **OL**

Writer Sherri L. McLendon is a descendant of Okefenokee pioneers Jake and Sinie Hurst Carter. She lives in Atlanta.