

It's Okefenokee's turn to take the global stage

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Guest columnist

From its sweeping pine savannas to the intricate mosaic of wetlands patrolled by wood storks, alligators and snapping turtles, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is a crown jewel of the southeastern United States.

But its significance extends far beyond our own backyard.

With hundreds of species of birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians, Okefenokee is globally exceptional as one of the largest substantially intact freshwater ecosystems remaining in the world.

That's why I'm urging the Biden administration to grant Okefenokee the acclaim it deserves by nominating it for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The list is reserved for cultural and natural sites that have "Outstanding Universal Value" to all people of the world across generations. Current natural World Heritage sites range from the Kenya Lake System in the Great Rift Valley to the rocky ridges of South China Karst and include many notable wetlands like the Pantanal Conservation Area in Brazil and Everglades National Park here in Florida.

As home to a flourishing diversity of plants and wildlife found nowhere else on Earth, Okefenokee deserves its place among these globally important sites. It is the largest blackwater swamp in North America. Unlike many wetlands, which receive water from rivers, Okefenokee is the source of two rivers — the St. Marys and the Suwannee.

The remarkable array of species supported by the refuge includes 48 mammals, 200 birds, 101 reptiles and amphibians, 33 fish and as many as 1,000 species of moths.

Many of these species, like the red-cockaded woodpecker and alligator snapping turtle, are globally imperiled. Okefenokee also offers key unfragmented habitat for large mammals like the federally endangered Florida panther and the black bear.

Okefenokee is renowned for its impressive variety of reptiles and amphibians, many of which depend on multiple, distinct habitat types to survive. For example, globally imperiled striped newts live out much of their lives buried in the ground in pine forests until breeding season,

when they search out temporary, fishless ponds for courtship. Gopher tortoises dig intricate burrows that they share with hundreds of other species.

The refuge also holds closely guarded secrets about our collective environmental history. Below Okefenokee's waters, centuries of decomposed vegetation forms a thick bed of peat that contains information on global environmental changes over the past 5,000 years or more. Unstable masses of peat may push to the surface of the swamp or tremble, giving rise to Okefenokee's name, a Choctaw word meaning "Land of the Trembling Earth."

Indigenous people have lived in and around Okefenokee for thousands of years, marking the swamp's deep historical and cultural significance.

It's no wonder Okefenokee is a must-see tourist destination. It draws visitors from across the globe to stand in reverence under canopies of endangered longleaf pine forests or silently glide in canoes or kayaks through 400-year-old cypress stands rising from the tea-colored waters.

The vast wilderness areas totaling more than 350,000 protected acres offer a sanctuary of solitude and deep connection with nature. Dark skies, unmarred by artificial light, are a stargazer's delight.

It is all of these features — and more — that make Okefenokee a compelling candidate for inscription on the World Heritage List, which would bring no additional restrictions on the refuge or surrounding properties, only benefits.

The international designation would attract tourists and scientists from across the globe, boosting local economies.

Joining the ranks of globally renowned cultural and natural sites is the highest honor Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge could receive.

It would spotlight that the unique wild wonder of Okefenokee must be preserved, just as it is, for future generations to explore and enjoy.

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