



From its headwaters in Georgia's famed Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge to its mouth at the Atlantic Ocean in Florida, the 130-mile St. Marys River is a cherished resource. The river defines the boundary between the two states winding through thousands of acres of forestry land and two growing population centers. The St. Marys Riverkeeper (SMRK) plays a vital role in maintaining the health of the river, keeping it safe for tourism, recreation, commercial fishing and safe drinking water as well as protecting its diverse natural ecosystems.

SMRK was founded in 2016 when the St. Marys River Management Committee helped create the nonprofit organization to monitor the health of the river. Fecal coliform impairments from poorly maintained septic systems are a primary threat to the river, creating a need for consistent, widespread water quality monitoring. SMRK trained volunteers using Georgia's Adopt-A-Stream protocols and began adding bacterial water monitoring sites. Today, more than 50 sites are monitored for *E-coli*, dissolved oxygen, turbidity and other measures. It also has begun chemical monitoring and testing for toxic chemicals known as PFAS.

Sites in need of water quality testing are carefully selected, and volunteers are assigned sites to test each month. A portion of the sites are monitored by high school science classes -- one of the organization's most successful outreach projects. Efforts are focused on supplementing the states' monitoring programs and developing a baseline dataset to look for monthly trends and identify areas in need of timely action. The water

quality data is used to advocate for improved protections from threats such as poor septic systems, coal ash, mining, landfills, and overdevelopment. The data -- available at stmarysriverkeeper.org -- has been integral in making critical decisions regarding the health of the river.

SMRK also works to improve the resiliency of our local communities and ecosystems. The St. Marys River watershed comprises over 40 percent wetlands; maintaining these wetlands is imperative to the health of communities. As rampant growth continues in many areas, the SMRK advocates for improved watershed planning and wetland conservation.

One example of a habitat restoration project is the Fernandina Beach Old Town Living Shoreline. SMRK teamed with students from the University of North Florida to create a new oyster habitat that serves as a wave break. The project, now in its third year, has been successful in growing new oysters and providing important data for student scientists. The organization is now involved with efforts to create more living shorelines at other locations.

The organization also organizes volunteer clean-up efforts, such as the annual St. Marys River Clean Up. Joining forces with Keep Nassau Beautiful, more than 250 volunteers collected more than eight tons of trash and debris in 2021. The St. Marys Riverkeeper organization has plans to expand its volunteer and educational efforts in the coming years.