



THE OKEFENOKEE'S QUEST FOR WORLD HERITAGE INSCRIPTION

Securing a resilient and prosperous future for the Okefenokee region

Summary

Nomination and inscription on the World Heritage List is the highest honor in the world for sites of cultural and ecological importance. Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) contains ecological features of Outstanding Universal Value that warrant recognition on the World Heritage List, which would bring immense economic and conservation benefits to the Okefenokee and surrounding communities. But Okefenokee NWR cannot gain global recognition as a World Heritage Site until the U.S. Department of the Interior “greenlights” the Refuge to prepare and submit a nomination to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Centre.

What is World Heritage?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage (WH) List is an international list of cultural and natural properties nominated by the signatories to the WH Convention (1972) for their Outstanding Universal Value.¹ The WH Committee, composed of representatives from 21 nations elected as the governing body of the WH Convention, makes the final decisions on which nominations to accept on the WH List at its annual meeting each summer. Although the United States is not a member of UNESCO, it continues to participate in the WH Convention, which is an independent treaty. There are 1,154 WH sites in 167 of the 194 signatory countries. The United States has 24 sites inscribed on the WH List. World Heritage sites often become a significant attraction for tourists and help to develop the tourism industry of the locality or country.

What is the Tentative List?

The UNESCO WH Committee requires each signatory country to the UNESCO WH Convention² to prepare a Tentative List of properties that the country believes meet the criteria for UNESCO WH listing and from which that country may make nominations. Only properties included on the U.S. Tentative List are eligible for nomination by the Department of the Interior (DOI). Inclusion on the Tentative List does not, however, guarantee future nomination.³

Why the Okefenokee?

Okefenokee NWR boasts a wetlands footprint largely undisturbed since prehistoric times, hosts significant stores of sequestered carbon, and is home to an exceptionally diverse and abundant array of flora and fauna, which rely on a unique balance of natural water cycles and fire to thrive. Yet the Okefenokee NWR faces several stark environmental threats to its peatlands and sustainable hydrology. Uncontrolled wildfires (as distinct from essential managed fires) are a threat to the Okefenokee NWR and its contiguous property owners, as are the activities of extractive industries on the Okefenokee NWR's doorstep. Communities around the Okefenokee NWR are also facing difficult circumstances, with residents seeking to build meaningful lives despite persistent economic uncertainty. UNESCO WH inscription holds the potential to strengthen this global natural resource in ways that support education & vocational training; scientific programs; expanded recreation & ecotourism; support climate resilience; and create a communication & safety infrastructure around the Okefenokee NWR.

¹ As measured against 10 criteria (six of which are used to judge potential cultural sites and four of which are used to assess potential natural sites, like the Okefenokee).

² The U.S. is not a member state of UNESCO since departure at the end of 2018 but continues to be a State Party to the World Heritage Convention. The departure of the U.S. from UNESCO is not a formal obstacle to any possible World Heritage nomination.

³ Neither inclusion in the Tentative List nor inscription as a World Heritage Site imposes legal restrictions on owners or neighbors of sites, nor does it give the United Nations any management authority or ownership rights in U.S. World Heritage Sites, which continue to be subject to U.S. laws.



How did the Okefenokee get onto the Tentative List?

Decisions on properties to include on the Tentative List are made, after considering public comments, by the Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. The Okefenokee NWR has remained on the U.S. Tentative List for 40 years (since 1982), including through the two formal reassessment periods in 2007 and 2017 during which the Okefenokee NWR presented extensive materials, advice of a wide range of subject-matter experts, and public commentary supporting its continued inclusion on the list. The properties added in 2008 were selected from among those that submitted voluntary applications; those added in 2017 were identified by an expert Working Group established as a sub-committee of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, a Federal Advisory Committee for the U.S. Department of State. Today, the Okefenokee NWR remains on the U.S. Tentative list alongside a number of other U.S. natural sites, including Big Bend National Park, Texas; Central California Current, California (consisting of a combination of marine sanctuaries, national seashores and recreation areas); the Marianas Trench National Monument, U.S. Territory, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam; the National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa/Rose Atoll National Marine Monument (Formerly Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary); the Pacific Remote Islands National Monument, U.S. Territorial Waters; the Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona; and the White Sands National Monument, New Mexico.

The Federal Interagency Panel on WH recommends to the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks which sites should be authorized to prepare nomination packages. Bryan Arroyo currently represents the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the Panel and supports the nomination of Okefenokee NWR to the UNESCO WH List.

How and when does a country submit a nomination package to the World Heritage Committee?

The current rules of the WH Committee limit countries to one nomination per year, though the U.S. does not make nominations every year. Specifically, before a formal WH site dossier and nomination package can be prepared for UNESCO submission, the site must be authorized by the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, Shannon Estenoz, who reports to the Secretary of the Department of the Interior, Debra Haaland. Indeed, U.S. nominations are made at the discretion of the Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, and there is no fixed schedule for doing so. Ultimately, the Assistant Secretary, with advice from the Federal Interagency Panel on WH, considers a number of factors in identifying properties for formal nomination.⁴ Bryan Arroyo currently represents the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the Panel and supports the nomination of Okefenokee NWR to the UNESCO WH List.

Moving forward from the Tentative List (“the Greenlight”)

Yet even before a site is formally introduced to the Assistant Secretary, the U.S. has developed an informal “greenlight” process by which sites on the Tentative List remain in a holding pattern until a further benchmark is met -- namely recommendation by the Office of International Affairs (OIA) of the National Park Service (NPS). That agency has considerable knowledge of the potential cultural and natural sites (as many of the sites are National Parks or properties) and develops a dialogue with sites such as the Okefenokee NWR to assess how ready is a site to move forward more formally. OIA has periodic meetings with the Assistant Secretary and its recommendation to the Assistant Secretary constitutes an additional filtering process to ensure potential sites are ready to begin the formal journey toward UNESCO inscription.

⁴ One current factor is the statutory prohibition, in place since 2011, on the U.S. paying dues to UNESCO or the World Heritage Fund. This situation has created considerable uncertainty about the U.S.’s ability to continue to make World Heritage nominations. While Congress has recently appropriated an amount of funds to pay a portion of the UNESCO dues, a waiver may be required to get those funds released to UNESCO.



History of the Okefenokee NWR's Tentative List and Greenlight Process

Date	Event	Outcome
1982	The Okefenokee NWR originally identified as a potential WH site	The Okefenokee NWR remains on this list for 25 years, as dozens of U.S. natural site packages are prepared, nominated, and approved
2007	U.S. cultural and natural sites, formerly identified as candidates, are requested to resubmit applications to become a part of the official U.S. Tentative List	The Okefenokee NWR prepares extensive research and community endorsement supporting its unique biological processes and vast diversity of wildlife
2008	The DOI announces its official U.S. Tentative List in January 2008	The Okefenokee NWR is allowed to remain on the U.S. Tentative List
2017-2018	U.S. cultural and natural sites requested to resubmit applications to remain part of the official U.S. Tentative List	The Okefenokee NWR prepares extensive research supporting its unique biological processes and vast diversity of wildlife
2017-2018	U.S. cultural and natural sites requested to resubmit applications to remain part of the official U.S. Tentative List	Tilman Jaeger, UNESCO Advisor and Expert on eligibility of natural sites, visits refuge with OIA's Jonathan Putnam to opine on Okefenokee NWR attributes/qualifications for Outstanding Universal Value
2018	U.S. cultural and natural sites requested to resubmit applications to remain part of the official U.S. Tentative List	The Okefenokee NWR is allowed to remain on the U.S. Tentative List
August 2021	501(c)(3), OSP, Inc. partners with USFWS and is authorized to lead a Project Management Office (PMO) to propel the UNESCO bid further - from Tentative List – to “Queue” - to Formal Nomination	The PMO initiates work to attain a “greenlight” to join “the queue” from the Assistant Secretary of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
November 2021	The OIA meets with the Assistant Secretary to Discuss moving the Okefenokee NWR from Tentative List to the “Queue” representing a more active dossier preparation state	The OIA notifies the Okefenokee NWR that it is not yet convinced the Okefenokee NWR is ready to begin active work on the nomination package
September-October 2021	Engaged U.S. WH candidates and sites to understand the process, cost, and timeline of a bid	From September 2021 to October 2021, at OIA's recommendation, the PMO met with selected U.S. sites on the tentative list and/or those recently inscribed on the WH List, to discuss budgeting, timelines, and lessons learned. Prior to a November 2021 meeting between OIA and the Assistant Secretary, the PMO organized a virtual roundtable with selected U.S. WH sites and OIA to share experiences. The OIA's November 2021 meeting did not result in a greenlight for the ONWR to move from the Tentative List to “the Queue.”
December 2021	Assembling a dedicated pool of scientific and UNESCO World Heritage Experts	The PMO has built an impressive pool of scientific experts -- including initiating and maintaining a vigorous dialogue with UNESCO experts, Cyril Kormos and Tilman Jaeger. The active and enthusiastic scientific pool now encompasses notable experts in global wetland and peatland ecology, biogeophysics and hydrology, longleaf pine habitats, and flora and fauna - including plants, birds, mammals, herpetofauna, and invasive species.
February 2022	Press Release	Okefenokee NWR and OSP, Inc. completed a draft press release announcing the public-private



		partnership that is behind the Okefenokee UNESCO bid and explaining the purpose of the work for public consumption
March 2022	Raising UNESCO-dedicated funds to support the bid process	OSP, Inc. — the non-profit partner and fiduciary — reached an initial milestone of ~\$100,000 raised, moving toward an initial goal of \$500,000. This funding may be used for research, writing, mapping, photos, editing and/or donations (including to UNESCO) that might be required to facilitate the consideration of and approval of the Okefenokee NWR as a WH site
April 2022	ONWR-UNESCO Website	OSP, Inc. and the PMO launched an initial website designed to publicize and educate the public about the Okefenokee NWR bid for WH status
April 2022	Convening the first Okefenokee Virtual Experts Summit	The PMO convened the first Okefenokee NWR-UNESCO Virtual Experts Meeting including scientific and UNESCO experts, the OIA, and numerous community supporters, in attendance. Following five months of parallel academic work and vigorous debate during this Experts Meeting, the group arrived at working theses addressing two of the possible four UNESCO Criteria (a site need only prove one Criterion for inscription). The primary Criteria under consideration are Criterion ix - unique biological processes and Criterion x – wildlife diversity. UNESCO experts opined that the theses for these Criteria “make a good story” and that these types of “composite” arguments have historically been “compelling” to UNESCO.

Table 2: OKE PMO Objectives

Objective	Description	Outcomes
Community Engagement	Establish a platform for dialogue with key actors and stakeholders. Engage with the community actively and transparently to communicate the implications and benefits of a WH nomination.	Consistent and increasing local engagement with stakeholders ranging from local land and business owners, e.g., GOAL, to corporate interests, foundations, and advocacy groups, e.g., OPA
Political Engagement	Engage with locally supportive politicians on both sides of the political aisle	Repeated meetings with Senator’s Ossoff, Warnock and their respective staff. Constructive meetings with Congressman Buddy Carter. Letters of support from Ossoff, as well as U.S. Fish and Wildlife, DOI, including Sec Haaland.
Expert Consultations	Identifying and engaging prominent “champions” of a prospective WH nomination with globally significant academic credentials.	Assembled a vocal and engaged experts panel January 2022. Engaged throughout winter/spring commencing in the April 2022 Experts Panel. The Experts Panel consists of globally recognized academic and UNESCO experts.
Message Management	Build a credible and consistent WH nomination narrative for all communication purposes, including a dedicated WH website. Press releases are drafted along with responses to community feedback.	https://okefenokeeworldheritage.org/
Dossier Advancement	Establish a technical working group (the PMO) for the elaboration of the nomination dossier,	Hired independent writing team, led by ecology and hydrology PhD student with strong writing background, with volunteer assistance from PMO staff, U.S.



	including scientific and UNESCO experts.	Fish & Wildlife staff and UGA law school staff.
Launch Oke Mapping to Support Dossier	Invest in high quality mapping and overall visual attractiveness of the nomination dossier.	Independent and U.S. Fish and Wildlife mapping teams have produced quality maps illustrating key characteristics of the Oke.
Fundraising	Build an advancement effort within OSP, Inc. for fundraising for a UNESCO-specific bucket	U.S. Fish and Wildlife MoU drafted in parallel with OSP Inc.
Ongoing Site Visits	Bring global experts onsite to see, first-hand –the outstanding universal value of the Oke	The PMO hosted OIA’s Jonathan Putnam and IUCN UNESCO expert and forests expert Cyril Kormos onsite in October 2022. Similarly, the PMO has hosted Senator Ossoff onsite on several occasions, as well as Regional U.S. Fish & Wildlife Head, Leo Miranda, and Secretary Debra Haaland.

In short, we believe the considerable and accelerating work that has been assembled over the past decade – and particularly the past twelve months – reveals that the Okefenokee NWR’s should be “greenlit” to begin the rigorous bid process and provide an opportunity for the Okefenokee NWR to be considered by UNESCO as a World Heritage site in the coming years.

We further believe this process will be a lynchpin for building an interdependent and resilient economic development model, one in which non-profit educational institutions, the private sector, and government work collaboratively through the prism of one of the world’s great natural resources, the Okefenokee.



For further information on the Okefenokee-UNESCO bid:

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