

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 1, 2023

Shannon Estenoz  
Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks  
Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Assistant Secretary Estenoz,

We write to urge you to nominate the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The Okefenokee is a national treasure, known for its pristine habitats, complex ecosystem, and rich biodiversity. A World Heritage Site designation would provide more global recognition of its immense environmental and cultural value and encourage people from all over the world to experience its natural splendor.

Established in 1937, the Refuge is one of the world's largest freshwater ecosystems, home to over a thousand species with hundreds of acres of wetlands, and it provides carbon storage benefits through its peatlands. It has already been recognized for its uniqueness and significance nationally and internationally. The Environmental Protection Agency has identified it as an Aquatic Resource of National Importance, it is a National Natural Landmark and a National Wilderness Area, and it has been designated a Wetland of International Importance by the Ramsar Convention.

The Refuge was first placed on the U.S. World Heritage Tentative List (List) in 2008 and nominated for a World Heritage Site designation. While other sites have been removed from the List over time, the Refuge has remained on it for the last fifteen years. The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge has consistently been considered and evaluated as ecologically and culturally significant and clearly meets the criteria for a World Heritage Site nomination.

The Refuge contains critically important and significant habitats for wildlife and plants as well as numerous threatened and endangered species. It remains a relatively intact hydrological site, insulated from outside impacts, and is the source of two rivers, one that flows into the Atlantic and the other into the Gulf of Mexico. The range of species and the high level of biodiversity found in the Refuge make it unique and deserving of a nomination. As you know, large, protected wetlands will be increasingly important as we fight to address the impacts of climate change.


The Refuge also has extensive peat deposits that have preserved an environmental record for the last 5,000 years. These peat beds provide important information about the development of land and freshwater ecosystems across the Atlantic Coastal Plain.

The Okefenokee holds significant cultural importance to Native American tribes, including the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. The Refuge contains at least 74 Native American mounds and is in the process of being recognized as a Traditional Cultural Property for its relevance to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's culture. Excavations by archaeologists have revealed that thousands of Native Americans have lived in the area over centuries.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge would encourage environmental protection and economic prosperity for the region. It would support efforts to protect and preserve the Refuge's natural and cultural resources and further important scientific exploration and analysis. The nomination would also attract tourism and benefit the local and recreational economy and communities.


For these reasons, we urge you to move forward with the nomination process. Thank you for your leadership on this issue already and thank you for your consideration of this next step to protect the Refuge.

Sincerely,



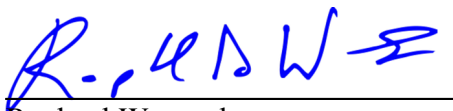
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Jon Ossoff  
United States Senator



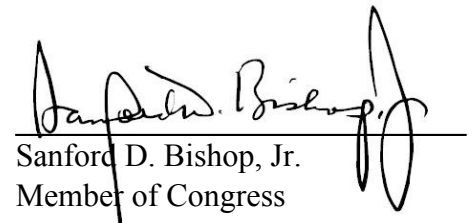
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Earl L. "Buddy" Carter  
Member of Congress




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Raphael Warnock  
United States Senator




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Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.  
Member of Congress



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Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress



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Nikema Williams  
Member of Congress



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Lucy McBath  
Member of Congress



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David Scott  
Member of Congress