INTRODUCTION:
Of Georgia’s seven natural wonders, the Okefenokee is the most vast, most wild and most fabled—some 440,000 acres of primeval wilderness—the largest wilderness area in Georgia and the largest National Wildlife Refuge in the eastern U.S. It is not a place conducive to drive-by tourism. To see and experience it, you must enter it—most easily by boat. Since 1946, Okefenokee Swamp Park, a private, non-profit organization created by swamp boosters from the Waycross area, has introduced millions of visitors from around the world to the swamp. The park provides boat and walking tours of the swamp, wildlife education programs and wildlife research. Recently, it has embarked on a marketing plan with the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and Stephen C. Foster State Park to bring more people to the swamp to learn about and appreciate its wonders—a critical public education component as the health and beauty of the swamp is threatened by outside forces.

THE WATER BODY:
The “land of trembling earth,” the Okefenokee Swamp encompasses nearly 700 square miles of Clinch, Ware, and Charlton counties in Georgia and Baker County in Florida. Considered the largest blackwater wetland in the U.S., it has been protected by the federal government since 1937, has been named a Wetland of International Importance, designated as a National Natural Landmark and is listed as a tentative UNESCO World Heritage Site. A biological treasure trove, it harbors more than 600 species of plants, 40 mammals, 50 reptiles, and 60 amphibians. More than 200 species of birds have been identified within the swamp, including the federally protected red cockaded woodpecker and wood stork. Beneath the surface of the swamp’s tea-colored water can be found 34 species of fish. The swamp also holds the headwaters of the Suwannee and St. Marys Rivers. A place like no other, the Okefenokee is used by some 600,000 people annually who boat, bird, fish and hunt amongst its moss-draped cypress trees and lily-padded lakes.

THE CLEAN:
At Okefenokee Swamp Park, they are used to awing visitors. Alligators bellow at one another; wood storks walk through blackwater on stilt-like legs; turtles bask on logs; frogs join a chorus of chirps and croaks.
“People tend to get real quiet when they enter the swamp,” said Kim Bednarek, the park’s Executive Director, “It’s a very magical place.”

Interestingly, despite the swamp’s uniqueness and the growing interest in “eco-tourism,” annual visitorship at the park has declined noticeably since the 1970s when I-95 began syphoning Florida-bound tourists off U.S. 1 in Waycross which ran past the entrance to the park. The result of the changing transportation landscape is a reduction in the number of people who are aware of the swamp’s wonders and willing to advocate for its protection.

That’s one reason Okefenokee Swamp Park has begun partnering with the National Wildlife Refuge, Stephen C. Foster State Park and Valdosta State University to develop a comprehensive marketing strategy for swamp-based tourism. The effort dovetails with the park’s ultimate goal: “for the public to develop an appreciation for the wildlife, culture and natural beauty of the Land of Trembling Earth.”

Recently, that goal has taken on a sense of urgency with the proposed development of a titanium mine in Charlton County that could impact swamp water levels—and thus, swamp-based tourism.

As the Park works to bring more people to the swamp, it continues its tradition of education and research. In addition to adults and family groups, it annually hosts thousands of school children on field trips, presents daily live animal shows and boat excursions, and regularly conducts “Okefenokology” classes that highlight the natural and cultural history of the swamp.

The park’s core research project is conducted in partnership with the University of Georgia whose students and faculty track, observe and capture some of the swamp’s more than 10,000 alligators to expand knowledge of the animal’s behavior and genetics. Part of this research involves placing satellite trackers on the alligators.

Should you find yourself in southeast Georgia, Okefenokee Swamp Park’s boosters would urge you leave the superhighway and find your way to Waycross and the 74-year-old park. But, first prepare yourself to be awed.

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