

Suwannee River Basin

When the Spaniards with DeSoto first crossed this river, they called it Rio De Venado or “River of the Deer.” Its name is derived from a former Seminole village on its banks, which took its name from a Cherokee settlement of Suwani.

Quick Facts:



- From its origin in central Georgia, the Suwannee flows south 45 miles to White Springs, Florida and then forms a wide loop toward the west and empties into the Gulf of Mexico.
- The Suwannee River basin drains approximately 11,020 square miles including part or all of 20 Georgia counties, with approximately half of the basin's area in Georgia.

Population and Employment:

- Population centers in the Suwannee watershed include the development surrounding Valdosta, Tifton, Moultrie and Fitzgerald.
- The Suwannee River basin supported 87,100 jobs in 1995. Because of the large agricultural and forestry base in the watershed, these activities largely contribute to the local economy.

Ground Water Resources:

About half of the ground water resources in the Suwannee River basin are supplied by the Floridan aquifer system, one of the most productive ground water reservoirs in the United States. Most of the upper Suwannee has essentially no recharge of the aquifer and groundwater levels are declining an average of a foot a year for the past 25 years. This has major implications for continued support of center-pivot irrigation and industrial growth in the area.

Biological Resources:

- Fish populations in the Georgia portion of Suwannee basin are limited in productivity by acidic waters, low alkalinity, and extreme variation in flow.
- The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge encompasses approximately 400,000 acres and contains several open water lakes within the Okefenokee Swamp for excellent fishing opportunities
- Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge is located in Lanier County and contains 1,500 acres of marsh, 1,549 acres of cypress swamp, and 1,000 acres of open water with fishing opportunities.
- The Alapaha River is a small blackwater river with good fisheries
- Coastal Plain Streams are characterized by clear, clean “blackwater”. The dark tea color comes from tannic acid in decaying riverbank vegetation.
- Blackwater rivers, like those in the Suwannee watershed, exemplify the image of world-famous South Georgia swamps with their alligators, snakes, and other spectacular wildlife communities.

Health of the River:

- In the Suwannee River Basin, there are approximately 27 rivers and streams listed on the 2002 303(d) list as waters not meeting their designated use of fishing, and they comprise 281 miles of water.
- A four-year drought in North Florida has left the Suwannee's water level low, especially the upper parts of the river.

Cultural Information:

“Old Folks at Home” - In 1851 Stephen Collins Foster wrote “Old Folks at Home” in which he immortalized the river that snakes through Florida's Panhandle. The song became a symbol of love for home and inspired the Florida Legislature to adopt it as the official state song in 1935. Most people recognize by the opening line, "Way down upon the Suwanee River." Excerpt from “Old Folks at Home”“As we shoved off in our rented canoe, the most noticeable feature of the river was its vertical limestone banks. It's the same porous limestone characteristic of the huge Floridan Aquifer. Over thousands of years, the river has carved into the limestone to create the vertical walls and reveal springs -- openings where the aquifer flows at the surface. In some places along the river, the slight wake of a passing canoe washes into the limestone holes, creating a musical sound behind the canoe. Trees send elaborate root formations through the limestone to reach water along the banks and appear fused into the walls. Sloping sand banks retain the footprints of turkey, deer and other animals that drink from the river.”

Tourist Sites / Significant Parks Pertaining to River:

Fargo State Park: will be a new state park on the Suwannee River featuring an ecolodge and cabins on the river. \$5.6 million has been allocated to develop and build the park.

Stephen C. Foster State Park: This remote park is a primary entrance to the famed Okefenokee Swamp and is one of the most intriguing areas in Georgia

Reed Bingham State Park: “This park surrounds a 375-acre lake that is a popular boating and water skiing attraction in South Georgia.”

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge: “The name ‘Okefenokee’ is the white man’s rendition of the Indian words meaning “Land of the Trembling Earth.” Only 5 percent of the Okefenokee is solid ground. The rest is a vast bog inside a huge, saucer shaped depression that was once part of the ocean floor.”

Okefenokee Swamp Park: “OSP is a Disney-esque educational experience for the first-time visitor to the magnificent Okefenokee Swamp.”

How to Get Involved

Upper Suwannee River Watershed Initiative

UGA Biological and Agricultural Engineering

CAES Tifton Campus

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