

OKEFENOKEE ALLIGATOR PROJECT

The **Okefenokee Alligator Project** is a team of herpetologists who conduct world-class research and education through partnerships and the development of future wildlife professionals.

Goal: \$120,000 (\$40,000 Annually)

In 2017, the Okefenokee Swamp Park joined forces with the Coastal Ecology Lab at the University of Georgia Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant to begin work on American alligators, creating the **Okefenokee Alligator Project**. As professional herpetologists, the UGA team conducts **field research** at all three entrances and throughout the Okefenokee Swamp. Through scientific exploration, the team and our communities learn about alligator populations and what they need to thrive in both natural and human-influenced environments.



KIMBERLY ANDREWS, PHD Coastal Ecology Specialist

Kimberly Andrews manages the Coastal Ecology Lab at UGA Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant in Brunswick, GA.



MARK HOOG PhD Student

Mark Hoog is a doctoral student in Environmental Science at Georgia Southern University. His dissertation focuses on alligator behavior, genetics, and epigenetics.



More than 600,000 people visit the Okefenokee Swamp annually, and the number of visitors and residents is on the rise. This growth is critical for thriving communities but can result in unintended negative impacts on wildlife and their habitats. As part of our work in the Okefenokee Swamp with the iconic American alligator, we are committed to taking **proactive** measures to encourage social and economic prosperity while **protecting** our beautiful and uniquely biodiverse ecosystem. To be successful in this commitment, it will take the support of stakeholders and communities to ensure that it can all grow in parallel and balanced ways. When this balance is lost, our large wildlife predators, who are simultaneously feared and admired, tend to be the ones displaced. Removal of our ecosystem's natural predators is often due to a misunderstanding that this elimination is necessary for people's safety. However, it leaves us with irreparable changes to our ecosystem's balance, and we lose an incredible and unique aspect of our natural, southern heritage.

Alligators are part of the unparalleled beauty of our wild spaces, and the feeling of wonder that is the essence of the *Okefenokee Experience*. To guarantee that *Experience*, alligators must be protected. To do this, we must understand their population, where they need to move, where they eat, and where they find mates; we need to understand what they need to **thrive**.

Over the past two years since Mark started his PhD, the UGA Alligator Team has generated >\$85,000 in student fellowships, grants, and awards. We are seeking \$120,000 in additional support in the next three years toward the completion of his degree.

Population research maintains a baseline for alligators in the Okefenokee and provides a comparison against which we can quantify potential negative impacts if there is development along the Okefenokee's border. This builds capacity for timely detection and critical response.

Investing in this project is an investment in the **next generation of scientists and leaders**, specifically supporting PhD student Mark Hoog's dissertation at Georgia Southern University. Mark is using genetics and molecular ecology to characterize alligator family units and mating pairs. His work will help to protect population diversity in the Swamp.



HEALTHY ALLIGATORS LEAD TO HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS.

- Keystone predators provide valuable services, such as population control of deer, raccoon, possums, and snakes.
- Ecosystem engineers create wallows and dens, which are important sources of water and refuge in droughts.
- Health indicator of the overall ecosystem

Investing in the Okefenokee Alligator Project also positively impacts local communities and their economies. This work reaches a diverse base of stakeholders and end users, including both residents and tourists. It contributes to the goals of the Okefenokee Experience by generating real-world and live-action content for Swamp naturalists and tour guides at all three entrances. Using research-based storytelling about the individual wild alligators that guests see on their excursions creates **immersive and enhanced** visitor experiences.



Contributions to the Okefenokee Alligator Project also help to develop non-lethal alternatives to “recondition” wild alligators who have become acclimated to people and pose a potential risk. This supports its partners through science-based guidance to regulatory agencies and on-the-ground conservation action with our entrance managers. It provides **capacity-building** training for staff and wildlife response to prevent and resolve conflicts, thereby ensuring the **safe coexistence** of people and wild animals and guaranteeing that the Okefenokee Experience can be enjoyed by future generations.

The **Okefenokee Alligator Project** began with the simple goals of better understanding and protecting the American alligator while increasing awareness and tourism to the Okefenokee Swamp.

The Project started at the Okefenokee Swamp Park, the northern entrance to the Swamp, and has expanded to encompass the entire

Swamp, capturing over 400 alligators, publishing multiple scientific articles, creating content for the public, leading staff training, helping the United States Fish and Wildlife Service manage the alligator population throughout the Swamp, and aiding the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in their capacity to learn about our native wildlife and make management decisions that ensure the long-term persistence of alligator populations.

PhD Student Stipend: \$50,000
Laboratory Analysis: \$50,000
Scientific Communication: \$20,000

Our goal is to raise \$120,000 for three years of support for workforce development of graduate students and early career professionals, like Mark Hoog, to increase awareness of the Okefenokee Swamp.

The partnerships are built, the expert skillsets and technical knowledge are there, and there is a passion for the natural wonder of the Swamp. Now, all that is needed is investment in the program to continue into a conservation-based future. With your help, a safer and stronger ecosystem can be created that will persist for all Georgians now and forever.

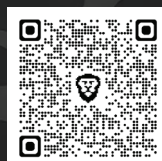
Building unique partnerships and creating novel solutions conserves the wild nature of iconic native alligators which are a crucial part of our Okefenokee Swamp and the State of Georgia.



“The Brave Wilderness team and I had so much fun working, learning, and contributing to future research on the American alligator; it was an experience I’ll never forget. It’s wonderful to see that conservation efforts to protect these iconic reptiles are alive and well in the great state of Georgia.”

- Coyote Peterson

If you would like to contribute to the Okefenokee Alligator Project through the Communities of Coastal Georgia Foundation, please visit bit.ly/OkeAlligators or scan the code below and select one of the predetermined amounts or enter your own amount.



Every donation counts and is appreciated by the Okefenokee Alligator Project.