

The St. Marys River

FAST FACTS

A remote blackwater stream, the St. Marys River is located in southeastern Georgia and northeastern Florida, forming the easternmost border between the two states.

The St. Marys River begins deep within the Okefenokee Swamp and flows along a twisting 130-mile-long path into the Cumberland Sound and the Atlantic Ocean only 40 air-miles from its headwaters.

The historic St. Marys River

For at least 13,000 years prior to the 16th century and the appearance of European explorers, soldiers, missionaries and colonists, the Timucuan Indians occupied the St. Marys River Basin. With its marsh, tidal, stream and estuary ecosystems, the basin provided the Timucuan with an ample source of food. The Timucuan came into contact with Spanish settlers in 1537, then with French settlers in 1562. By 1763 the Timucuan were no more, due to warfare, disease and relocation during two and a half centuries of the colonial period.

During the 1600s and 1700s, Spanish and British explorers established settlements in the area and brought commerce to the region. Major crops included cotton, sugar cane, indigo and rice, which were shipped from river plantations to Europe. Longleaf yellow pine was harvested and used to mast Royal Navy ships and to frame mills in New England. During this period, schooners and sloops were used to transport cargo up and down the river.

In the late 1800s, steamers were introduced to the river, carrying passengers, cargo and mail. By this time, the St. Marys River had become an active shipping route for numerous lumber mills located along its banks, such as at Coleraine, Kings Ferry and Crandell. This logging activity lasted until the early 1900s, when the mills closed their doors due to a lack of accessible timber. This left the St. Marys River to rejuvenate itself naturally and to develop into its present serene condition.

The river undergoes three distinct physical changes on its path to the ocean. Its headwaters, from the Okefenokee Swamp (the north "prong") and the Pinhook Swamp (the middle "prong"), are narrow and winding. Cypress and tupelo trees and white sandbars dominate the scenery. In the middle portion, from Traders Hill to the U.S. 17 bridge, the river widens and is characterized by bottomland swamps and sandy bluffs. The lower portion of the river, from the U.S. 17 bridge to Cumberland Sound, is tidally influenced, with reverse flows occurring twice daily. Freshwater and saltwater marshes dominate this area.

Many native plant species are found in the St. Marys River Basin, including bald cypress, longleaf pine, black gum, southern magnolia, red maple, American holly, poplar, black willow, river birch and a variety of oaks. Wildlife in this area includes osprey, bald eagle, white-tailed deer, black bear, bobcat, raccoon, manatee, otter, beaver, gopher tortoise, alligator and indigo snake.

Continued on back



Boaters must maneuver around many fallen trees and shallow sandbars, which were formed by swirling currents.



With few river crossings and little development along its banks, the St. Marys River is used primarily for recreational and sightseeing purposes. Canoeing, boating, fishing, camping and water-skiing are just some of the ways the river is enjoyed by the public.

The St. Marys River Management Committee

The St. Marys River Management Committee was formed in 1991 when the river was being studied for inclusion in the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers program. Since that time, the committee has evolved into a group whose primary focus is to audit local management of the river and develop and maintain a management plan to guide the river's future.

The committee consists of volunteers who represent the four counties that border the river and form the dominant portion of the basin: Charlton and Camden counties in Georgia, and Baker and Nassau counties in Florida. (Although a portion of Ware County, Ga., also borders the St. Marys River Basin, it is under the management and jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.)

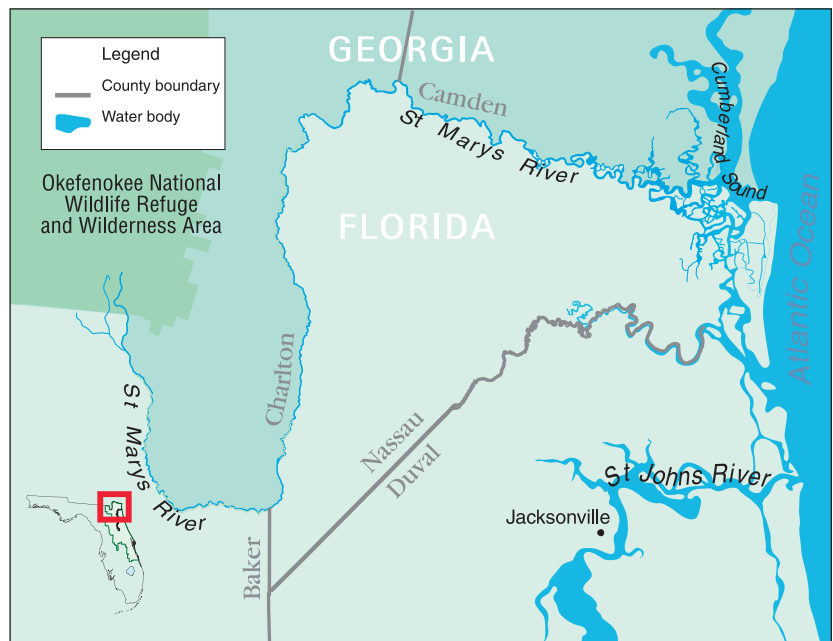
In 1993, the governments of these four counties approved an interlocal and interstate agreement to cooperatively support the committee, prepare a local river management plan and advise the county commissioners on river issues.

As part of its river management planning process, the committee holds monthly public meetings to hear from and discuss issues with representatives of local, regional and state governments from Georgia and Florida. In addition, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the St. Johns River Water Management District and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection are engaged in ongoing water-quality monitoring and assessment efforts in the St. Marys River Basin.

Water quality

The Okefenokee and Pinhook swamps are the two main headwater sources of water feeding the St. Marys River.

Decaying peat and other vegetation from these swamps produce tannin, a naturally occurring, water-soluble organic compound. The tannin stains the waters to the color of coffee, making the St. Marys River a blackwater river.



Though black, the river contains little suspended sediment. Because of its extensive bottomland swamps and marshes, relative lack of urban development and few pollution discharge points, the St. Marys River is considered to have excellent water quality by the Florida and Georgia agencies responsible for monitoring and managing water resources.

While overall water quality is good, there are specific areas of deterioration, causing concern for the river's future. Alligator Creek in Florida and Spanish Creek in Georgia have been degraded by surface water discharges from wastewater treatment plants.

The biggest concern for the water quality of the St. Marys River and other coastal rivers is secondary impacts from development, such as chemical and pesticide runoff from lawns and streets, and leaking septic tanks. A top priority of the St. Marys River Management Committee is to minimize septic tank leakage into the river by working with the four counties to introduce procedures, ordinances, and regulations to implement setback rules, and identify and remediate failing systems.

Contact information

Information about the St. Marys River and the committee, including an online version of the St. Marys River Guide, is available at <http://www.saintmarysriver.org/>. You may also contact the St. Marys River Management Committee by writing to them at P.O. Box 251, Folkston, GA 31537.

