



Great Dismal Swamp Stakeholder Collaborative & National Heritage Area (NC/VA)

The Importance of the Great Dismal Swamp

The Great Dismal Swamp is one of the most unique and valuable ecological landscapes on the U.S. East Coast. Sitting along the border of southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, this critical cultural and ecological landscape contains some of the last remains of a massive, swampy forest which once spanned more than 1,000,000 acres - and that is under threat of destruction due to climate change, ecological shifts, and increasing urbanization. The Swamp is also home to an incredibly rich number of cultural and historical sites, including the ancestral lands of the Nansemond Indian Nation, Meherrin Tribe, and Haliwa-Saponi Tribe; the largest known collection of archaeological artifacts from the *maroon colonies* – generational communities of people who escaped a slaving society by living hidden in the swamp; one of the only known water-based stops on the Underground Railroad to Freedom; and a thriving descendant community of Early Colonial Free People of Color whose families survived an increasingly dangerous, enslaving society by retreating toward the Swamp.

Mission Statement

The mission of the Great Dismal Swamp Stakeholder Collaborative is threefold: (i) to strengthen the relationship between cultural, tribal, environmental, and governmental organizations in order (ii) to advance activities that are equitable, inclusive, and mutually beneficial for all stakeholders, while (iii) respecting the Swamp as its own stakeholder, with its interests held in trust by the members of the Collaborative. As a Collaborative, we desire to undertake a series of linked conservation and cultural preservation projects – organized in collaboration with federal, state, and municipal leaders -- that will elevate public knowledge about the complex ecological history and rich cultural legacy of the Swamp.

The Wilderness Society Leads the Great Dismal Swamp Stakeholder Collaborative

In June 2019, the first convening took place of the *Great Dismal Swamp Stakeholder Collaborative*, a stakeholders' group designed to empower communities with cultural and historical links to the area (e.g. local Native American tribes; descendants of African-Americans enslaved in the GDS; and descendants of GDS maroon colonies). Bringing these groups together with staff from local municipalities and regional conservation groups, the Collaborative is working to:

- Coordinate a series of community-led comments and alternatives to the 2021 Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the GDSNWR, designed in collaboration with the Refuge Manager to recommend wilderness designation for at least 18,000 acres.
- Introduce legislation to create a National Heritage Area that will
 - expand the opportunities for local cultural and ecological conservation groups to take restoration actions in the GDS that will mitigate the impacts of climate change and reduce wildlife risk; and
 - provide another opportunity through a new process by which local stakeholders can express their vision for the sustainable future of the Great Dismal Swamp and its surrounds



Past Meetings of the Great Dismal Swamp Stakeholder Collaborative: June 2019 – March 2021

In June 2019, TWS hosted the first meeting of the Collaborative, which was attended by 35 representatives of a variety of organizations and communities, among them the Nansemond Indian Nation; the Association for the Study of African American Life & History (ASALH); the City of Suffolk Parks & Recreation; US Fish & Wildlife Service. The meeting featured presentations from the National Congress of American Indians; Dr. Kathryn Benjamin Golden, a researcher from Stanford University who completed a dissertation on the Great Dismal Swamp; Eric Sheppard, a direct descendant of Moses Grandy, whose narrative of enslavement in the swamp was published in the late 1800s; and Chris Lowie, the Refuge Manager for the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge.

The second meeting of the GDSSC was held in December 2019 at the Suffolk Public Library in Suffolk, VA, and included presentations from a historian in the Nansemond Indian Nation; the National Trust for Historic Preservation; and Christy Hyman, a historian and geographer who has focused her dissertation work on mapping the history of the Great Dismal Swamp. Following a request from the Stakeholder Collaborative, Representative Don McEachin (D-VA) agreed to introduce a bill to mandate a feasibility study for a proposed Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area. This bill was introduced during African-American History Month in February 2020.

The third meeting of the GDSSC was held in July 2020, remote via Zoom, and included updates on the body of work that had taken place in the previous six months.

The fourth meeting of the GDSSC was held in December 2020, remotely via Zoom, and included discussion of the pending reintroduction of the Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area Feasibility Study, as well as of potential opportunities for collaboration with federal government agencies in the new Biden administration.

Future Work of the Stakeholder Collaborative for 2021

- In 2021, the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge expires. The Collaborative will work closely with Chris Lowie, the Refuge Manager, to provide feedback and input to proposed Plan Revisions through the revision process, which may take one to five years to complete.
- The Collaborative will continue to work with local non-profits, local municipal governments, and US Fish & Wildlife Service to form plans to improve the public history of the region (primarily through accurate markers and historically accurate signage); support critical ecological restoration work that improves coastal climate change resilience (particularly around hydrological functioning restoration and tree species repatriation); and provide new public education opportunities for local schools, colleges, and universities proximate to the Swamp.