

What Would Designation of the BLACK RIVER as a NATIONAL NATURAL LANDMARK Mean?

In November, 2023, Southern Conservation Partners nominated the Black River for National Park Service consideration and evaluation for National Natural Landmark designation.

The National Natural Landmark program has been managed by the National Park Service (U.S. Department of Interior) for 60 years, since its creation in 1962. Designation as a National Natural Landmark (NNL) recognizes and honors places for possessing biological or geological attributes of national significance. The NNL program goals are to encourage the preservation of sites illustrating the ecological and geological character of the United States, to enhance the scientific and educational value of protected sites, to strengthen public appreciation of natural history, and to foster a greater concern for the conservation of the nation's natural heritage.

NNL designation would not initiate public land acquisitions nor impose governmental regulations on private property owners in the area.

Designation of all or parts of the Black River on the National Park Service's National Natural Landmark registry would be simply an "honor roll" recognition and affirmation that the river is one of the nation's most significant natural areas. National Natural Landmark certification would not carry any management requirements or restrictions on private property landowners along the river. Conceivably, NNL designation might dissuade public agencies or utilities in the future from siting incompatible land use alterations along the river or in its immediate vicinity.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) for the past 35 years has been and will continue to be in dialogue with landowners along the entire 60-mile length of the Black River—and additionally along its major tributary streams—to encourage donation or sale of tracts of land (and to enter into conservation easement agreements) to TNC. To date, TNC has successfully preserved over 10,000 acres of land along the river, which either it or its partners now own.

The extraordinary importance of the Black River's biological communities has been recognized by the State of North Carolina's Natural Heritage Program since the 1980s, and the river's high priority on the state's natural heritage protection plan stimulated The Nature Conservancy to make the river one of its top priorities for protective actions. Ownership of several of the protected tracts along the lower sections of the river has been transferred by TNC to the state's Wildlife Commission.

Only 13 places in North Carolina have in the past been designated as National Natural Landmarks. The NNLs closest to the nominated Black River are the Green Swamp in Brunswick

County; Smith (Baldhead) Island natural areas in New Hanover County; and Bear Island (part of Hammocks Beach State Park) in Onslow County.

For more explanation, examine the National Park Service's information about the National Natural Landmarks recognition program: www.nps.gov/nnlandmarks/ .

No NNL consequences or regulations imposed on private property owners—

NNL designation has no effect on land ownership or rights of private property owners. Of the 602 presently designated NNLs across the country, slightly over half are administered by public agencies, more than 30% are entirely privately owned, and the remaining 18% are owned or administered by a mixture of public agencies and private owners. The latter would be the case for the Black River.

There is no formal protection or management agreement between NNL landowners and the National Park Service. The landowner's permission for NNL evaluation is considered an agreement to participate in the program.

The federal action of NNL designation imposes no new land use restrictions that were not in effect before the designation. Basically, NNL designation imposes no restrictions on landowners. However, participation in the NNL program involves a voluntary commitment on the part of the landowner(s) to retain the integrity of their NNL property as it was when designated. If major habitat or landscape destruction is planned by a landowner, participation in the NNL program by that landowner would be disingenuous and meaningless.

Protection of a NNL is achieved primarily through the conservation efforts of the landowners. The National Park Service may also act as an advocate for conservation of the NNL resources, if this is requested by landowners.

NNL designation is not a public lands acquisition program—

NNL designation would not initiate any public land acquisitions. If, in the long-term future, initiatives arise separately to establish a national ecological preserve, national wildlife refuge, or national scenic river on a portion of the Black River, that action would require federal Congressional enabling legislation. Such Congressional legislation would first demand demonstration of widespread public support and endorsements by local communities and governmental bodies.

Process for designating a new National Natural Landmark—

The process for determining and designating a new National Natural Landmark begins with the National Park Service requesting permission by landowners to conduct evaluations on the portions of a study site in their ownership. The evaluation typically takes several years to complete. The process to evaluate candidate sites and designate them as NNLs includes the following steps:

1. Once a candidate site is accepted for NPS evaluation, an inventory of the study area is done to identify the most promising sites.
2. Landowners within the area identified for evaluation are notified and their permission obtained prior to and conditional for evaluation of the site.
3. A detailed site evaluation is conducted by qualified scientists.
4. The evaluation report is peer-reviewed by an additional three qualified scientists to ensure its soundness.
5. The report is reviewed by the National Park Service, and if the site appears to meet the criteria for national significance, the site owners are notified and comment is sought from the public on the proposal to designate the site as an NNL.
6. The National Park System Advisory Board reviews the evaluation report and public comments and makes a recommendation on the proposed designation.
7. All materials and recommendations are sent to the Secretary of the Interior, who may then designate the site as an NNL.
8. Landowners and the public are notified of the NNL designation by letter and publication of a Federal Register Notice.