

Warner & Kaine Applaud Signing Of Legislation To Protect The Great Dismal Swamp

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Senators Mark R. Warner and Tim Kaine applauded President Biden’s signing of the Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area Act, legislation to direct the Secretary of the Interior to assess the suitability and feasibility of designating the Great Dismal Swamp and its associated sites as a National Heritage Area. The Great Dismal Swamp has served as a home of native people and wildlife for thousands of years as well as played an important role in African American history. The late Congressman A. Donald McEachin led the introduction of this bill in the U.S. House of Representatives, and Warner and Kaine introduced its companion in the U.S. Senate.

The bill unanimously passed the Senate in December 2022.

The Great Dismal Swamp

“The Great Dismal Swamp is a natural treasure with a rich cultural history,” said the senators. “We’re thrilled our bill to begin the process of designating the Great Dismal Swamp as a National Heritage Area was signed into law. Once championed by our dear friend and colleague Donald McEachin, this bill will help ensure future generations can learn about the Swamp’s history and contributions of Native and African Americans in Virginia.”

National Heritage Areas are private-public partnerships that support historic preservation, conservation, recreation, tourism, and educational projects. In order for a site to be designated a National Heritage Area, a feasibility study is often conducted. If the Great Dismal Swamp is designated as a National Heritage Area, it would have access to technical assistance and support from the National Park Service (NPS) while also maintaining full ownership, authority over decision-making, and stewardship of the land.

The Great Dismal Swamp, which includes a National Wildlife Refuge, is one of the most unique and valuable cultural and ecological landscapes on the East Coast and offers unique educational opportunities and recreational activities. It is home to the historic and ancestral lands of many indigenous tribes, including the present day lands of the Nansemond Indian Nation. It has the largest known collection of archaeological artifacts from maroon colonies. It was also one of the only known water-based stops on the Underground Railroad and home to a thriving community descending from early colonial Free People of Color whose families resisted American slavery and found refuge in the area.

The Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area Act is championed by numerous organizations committed to safeguarding the Swamp’s unique history and resources, including the Wilderness Society, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Diversity Restoration Solutions, the Nature Conservancy and the Great Dismal Swamp Stakeholder Collaborative (GDSSC), a coalition that includes the Nansemond Indian Nation, the Association for the Study of African American Life & History, the Meherrin Indian Nation, the Haliwa-Saponi Indian Tribe, Preservation Virginia and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

The House version of the bill was cosponsored by Representatives Elaine G. Luria (D-VA-02), Robert C. “Bobby” Scott (D-VA-03), and G.K. Butterfield (D-NC-01). The bill passed the House of Representatives in September 2021.