

STATEMENT OF HON. CHARLES E. BENNETT, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM
THE STATE OF FLORIDA

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate this opportunity to appear before the Committee, hearing testimony on legislation to establish a National Scenic Rivers System.

As a long-time supporter and sponsor of conservation legislation, including the Wilderness Preservation System and the Land and Water Conservation Act, I am in complete agreement with the objectives of the scenic rivers proposal. I believe the legislation being discussed today before the Committee is comparable to those two landmark Acts.

Congress should enact a scenic rivers bill at the earliest possible moment. I believe as President Johnson said in 1965 in his message to Congress on Natural Beauty that it was time to "... preserve free flowing stretches of our great scenic rivers ..."

As a life-long Floridian, I have a parochial interest in seeing one particular river in the United States preserved for and enjoyed by future generations in its present state of natural attractiveness. Rich in scenic beauty and archeological and historical values, it is unique in many of its fine qualities, being the most southern of all the rivers under consideration.

This is the Suwannee River, immortalized by Stephen Foster in his famous folk song, "Old Folks At Home." He made the Suwannee famous throughout the world, and more than any other stream in America, it is close to the hearts of all of us.

"The Suwannee River receives its initial flow of water from the Okefenokee Swamp, gains additional water from such strange names as the Alapaha and Withlacoochee Rivers," the Florida Development Commission observes, "and knives its way through beautiful banks of limestone, adds clear, cool water from innumerable springs, takes on more from the Santa Fe River and flows lazily into the Gulf through a swamp area much the same as that which gave it birth."

While I am not the Member of Congress who represents the Suwannee River area at this time and cannot speak for the people who live in that area, I did once represent the counties through which the river flows when I first came to Congress and still have a great interest in that part of Florida. The Suwannee flows through eight counties in Florida, Columbia, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Levy, Madison and Suwannee. Historically, all of these counties have derived their main source of income from agriculture. During the last thirty years the increase in population has not kept pace with Florida as a whole, and from 1940 to 1950 the area actually experienced a population decline.

The Suwannee River valley should become a National Park, for some very basic reasons and should be part of the National Scenic Rivers System.

First, it meets the requirements of a scenic river. It is free-flowing, in an area not over populated and has outstanding beauty, recreational possibilities, and historical richness.

Second, it is the only Florida river being actively considered by the National Park Service and Congress to be included in the scenic rivers legislation. I understand proposals have been made by Florida conservation groups to also include for study the Wacissa River, in Jefferson County in North Florida, and the Oklawaha River in the Ocala National Forest in Central Florida; and some have suggested the source or southerly reaches of the St. Johns River. I support these study proposals, also.

Third, the area is not over developed and there is no indication that it ever will be. There are only two towns of large size on the river's banks, White Springs and Branford, both with populations under 700. The total population of the twelve counties the Suwannee runs through (eight in Florida, four in Georgia) was 123,508 in 1930 and 125,450 in 1960.

Fourth, the Suwannee River area which lies in the middle part of Florida, the nation's first tourist state, is thus not far from the traveling public. As the National Park Service reports in its economic study prepared by the University of Florida: "There are few other areas remaining in the United States, if any, which provide as extensive a river and forest area in the natural state which are also in a location which is readily accessible to a very large proportion of the population of the nation." Almost 90 percent of the tourists coming through Georgia and into Florida move over highways that bring them across or close to the Suwannee River. These tourists and visitors