

Testimony to the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands of the Committee on Natural Resources

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Throughout time, the lands that include and surround the Ocmulgee National Monument have served as a place of gathering, governance, and trade and have played a significant role in our development as a culture. In 1933, after decades of development, a group of concerned local citizens sought the assistance from archeologists at the Smithsonian Institute to organize and conduct an archeological excavation in the area with the hope of preserving and protecting the land and artifacts. It was the nation's largest ever archeological expedition. Based on their findings in 1934, a bill was passed by Congress to authorize the establishment of a 2,000-acre Ocmulgee National Park.

President Roosevelt's proclamation in 1936 called upon the National Park Service to preserve and protect the 2,000 acres of land commonly known as the Old Ocmulgee Fields (the study area). Unfortunately due to the economic times, only 678 acres were included in the original designation. Today through several donations, the park contains 702 acres, well short of the 2,000 acres that were originally identified.

From the Paleo-Indian Period to the Muscogean (Creek) Indians, the Ocmulgee National Monument site has been inhabited for over 12,000 years. However, the period between 900 and 1150 AD, when the Macon Plateau was inhabited by a farming group known as the Mississippian culture, is considered to be one of the most significant times of the area's history.

The Mississippians were responsible for the construction of several earthen mounds that are the focal point of the Ocmulgee National Monument today. Later, around 1350-1650 the Lamar Culture, also farmers and mound builders, inhabited this region. The Lamar mounds are located approximately two miles south of the Ocmulgee mounds. So significant is this site that in 1997 the Old Ocmulgee Fields were the first Traditional Cultural Property district east of the Mississippi River to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

In addition to its archeological and historical significance, Ocmulgee National Monument's 702 acres encompass an abundance of natural features including forested uplands, open fields, year-round wetlands and thickly-wooded river floodplain, all of which provide habitat to a diverse selection of birds, plants, animals, and reptiles.

Today, the Ocmulgee National Monument is a significant archaeological, historical, and natural resource for not only the Middle Georgia region, but also the state, nation and world. The park includes a visitor's center with museum exhibits on archaeology, the human settlement of the area, and the formation of the park. There are also picnic areas and five miles of trails that connect major features of the park, most notably the Earth Lodge and Great Temple Mound. The trails do not, however, connect to the Lamar Mounds; these are only accessible certain times of the year on ranger-guided tours.

In 2002, the National Trust for Historic Preservation designated the Ocmulgee National Monument/Ocmulgee Old Fields Traditional Cultural Property as one of the America's most endangered historic places. The National Trust cited the area as one of the nation's richest archeological areas threatened by development. In 2002 and 2003 the Monument was listed by the National Parks Conservation Association as one of America's 10 Most Endangered National Parks because of concerns of lack of funding and protection for the significant artifacts held by the Ocmulgee National Monument.

Valuable agricultural, historical, and cultural resources exist today without the protection of the National Park Service. Recognizing the challenges being faced in these areas Bibb County leaders entered into discussions with the National Park Service about the possible expansion of the park boundary to the adjoining culturally and historically significant lands. The first step in the process for consideration by the National Park Service is the completion of a boundary study and environmental assessment of the lands to definitively determine their eligibility for inclusion in the Ocmulgee National Monument. Once this process is complete, the property will be evaluated by the National Park Service to enhance the status of the National Monument to a National Park (the hierarchy of the National Park Service).

The purpose of the study will be to evaluate lands totaling approximately 1300 – 1400 acres for potential addition to the National Monument. Boundary revisions may be recommended to include significant features or opportunities for public enjoyment related to the purposes of the park, to address operational and management issues such as access and boundary identification along topographic or natural features or roads, or to protect park resources critical to the park's purposes. Boundary studies discuss management options and whether lands will be feasible to administer, considering size, configuration, ownership, costs, and other factors. A boundary study is usually appropriate only when the resources being considered are directly related to the purposes of an existing unit of the National Park System.

The impact of the proposed project extends far beyond the middle Georgia Region. It will preserve, protect, and expand a significant cultural and heritage resource, the Ocmulgee National Monument. At present, the Ocmulgee National Monument attracts an average of 128,000 visitors annually. Visitors to the site travel from all 50 states and from six of the seven continents.

The proposed project will lead to the preservation and protection of historically and culturally significant land through the expansion of the Ocmulgee National Monument. The artifacts contained in the study area will provide an opportunity to expand research and understanding on the early days of civilization and will allow national organizations and institutions the opportunity to undertake new and expanded efforts in their fields.

Inserting the word "Mounds" into the Ocmulgee National Monument's name will clarify the connection of the Monument to the Native American Cultures who inhabited the area and built the mounds located within the Monument's boundaries. We encourage your support of Congressman Marshall's efforts to rename the Monument "Ocmulgee Mounds National Monument" and encourage your support of HR 3603.

*I would like to thank the staff of the Middle Georgia Regional Commission for their assistance in preparing this testimony.*