

## ‘It’s magical’: 3,800-acre Jasper County property will be protected for public use



The Slater Tract is home to one of the largest gopher tortoise colonies in South Carolina.

BY: Kacen Bayless

Photos by: Dana Beach

A scenic, 3,800-acre tract of riverfront land in Jasper County will be protected and preserved for public use in one of the largest land conservation agreements in South Carolina.

On Thursday, the South Carolina office of The Open Space Institute purchased the property — known as the Slater Tract — for about \$16 million, said Nate Berry, senior vice president of The Open Space Institute.

Protection of the property, located along the Coosawhatchie River, comes as Jasper and Beaufort counties are facing immense growth and development pressures. By preserving it for recreational use, the property will provide rural residents a great spot for fishing, hunting and outdoor recreation, Berry said.

The Open Space Institute (OSI), a national conservation organization based in New York, will hold the property for up to two years until S.C. raises enough money to purchase it. The organization is hoping to receive funding from the federal Forest Legacy program, the S.C. Conservation Bank and the S.C. Heritage Trust program.

“It’s a magnificent piece of property,” said Dana Beach, founder of The S.C. Coastal Conservation League and the “King of Conservation,” said. “It’s magical really.”

Purchase of the land has been in the works for about a year. It was previously owned by Glover Real Estate LLC.

Its preservation, Berry said, will expand public access in an area where open land is relatively scarce; protect more than a dozen threatened, endangered and “at risk” plants

and animals; and, help curtail climate change by storing hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon in the forest.



The Open Space Institute purchased a 3,800-acre property in Jasper County for \$16 million this week. The land will be preserved and protected for public use.

Notably, the 3,800 acres of pine- and swampland are home to one of the largest gopher tortoise colonies in the state, Berry said.

Gopher tortoises, a federally designated “at risk” species, bury themselves in underground burrows that provide homes for dozens of other animals, he said. This makes them a keystone species on the property.



3,800 acres purchased by The Open Space Institute are home to the largest gopher tortoise colony in the state.

The “charismatic, docile and ancient” reptiles started moving onto the property

from the nearby S.C. Department of Natural Resources Gopher Tortoise Preserve, he said. It’s also one of the northernmost gopher tortoise colonies in the world, he said.

Also on the land are southern hognose snakes, federally protected Rafinesque’s big-eared bats, bald eagles, Florida pine snakes and eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, he said.

The Open Space Institute works with “willing landowners to buy property that we feel will create new public access and recreational opportunities,” said Michelle Sinkler, development and special projects manager for OSI’s S.C. office.



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### **The Open Space Institute**

Founded in 1974, The Open Space Institute has protected nearly 2.3 million acres along eastern North America — from Quebec to Florida. The organization’s South Carolina office, based in Charleston, opened in 2014 and has since protected over 20,000 acres.

Thursday’s massive purchase of open land is vital for the southeast region, Dana Beach said. It’s an important step toward the entire landscape being protected from future development.