

National Heritage Areas – Cultural Resource Greenways

by

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The National Park Service as the “stewards of the nation’s heritage” is charged with the care and management our most significant natural and cultural resources. Originally established to oversee only national parks, during the past eighty-eight years many other special places have been added to the national park system including national monuments, national historic sites, national military parks, national rivers, national preserves and national recreation areas. Generally, all the land comprising these sites is owned by the National Park Service. Although many have private in-holdings, by and large the majority of park land is in fee simple ownership by the federal government. The National Park Service operates and manages these lands with input from neighboring communities, concessionaires, permit groups, and other interested parties. The newest type of national park unit, the national heritage area, represents a departure from the traditional manner in which the U.S. Congress through the National Park Service preserves and protects our nation’s heritage.

A National Heritage Area is defined as “a place designated by the United States Congress, where natural, cultural, historic and recreational resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography” (USDI, NPS 2004). It is important to note that these areas are defined not only by their history and physical features but also by their continuing traditional uses and practices. Currently there are twenty-four such areas within the purview of the National Park Service. For example, the first national heritage area, the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Area, was established in 1984 commemorating the important historic trade role of the canal which follows the portage between the Illinois River and Lake Michigan. A sixty-one mile long recreational trail parallels the canal’s towpath. This heritage area encompasses a land area of 3,672 square miles with over 1,000 communities and a population of just under seven million people.

Selection Criteria

For a place to receive designation as a national heritage area, generally a suitability/feasibility study is conducted to determine how successfully an area satisfies the following “suggested” criteria.

- The area has a collection of natural, historic, or cultural resources that collectively represent distinctive aspects of American heritage worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use, and are best managed as an assemblage through partnerships among public and private entities, and by combining diverse and sometimes noncontiguous resources and active communities;
- The area reflects traditions, customs, beliefs, and folk life that are a valuable part of the national story;
- The area provides outstanding opportunities to conserve natural, cultural, historic, and/or scenic features;
- The area provides outstanding recreational and educational opportunities;
- Resources pertinent to the theme or themes of the area retain a degree of integrity capable of supporting interpretation;

- Residents, business interests, non-profit organizations, and governments within the proposed area that are involved in the planning, have developed a conceptual financial plan that outlines the roles for all participants including the Federal government, and have demonstrated support for designation of the area;
- The proposed management entity and units of government supporting the designation are willing to commit to working in partnership for developing the heritage area;
- The proposal is consistent with continued economic activity in the area;
- A conceptual boundary map is supported by the public; and
- The management entity proposed to plan and implement the project is described (USDI, NPS, 2004).

Cultural Landscapes

National heritage areas are cultural landscapes, and generally greenways, that are facing irrevocable change as a result of neglect or development. They represent an opportunity for communities to preserve the landscapes and ways of life that shaped their heritage, while at the same time creating opportunities to benefit economically through heritage tourism, the arts, folk life, music, and culture as well as outdoor recreation. By establishing common themes and goals for communities, heritage areas become the focus on which to institute community planning objectives while fostering a spirit of cooperation between communities.

For the National Park Service, heritage areas represent another opportunity to further its mission “to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations” (U.S.C., title 16, sec. 1.). National heritage areas are distinct from other National Park units in that the Federal government does not own the land in its entirety. Occasionally a heritage area may contain a number of listed on the National Register of Historic Places or other small recognized sites. In this way, the National Park Service is able to further its goals without the high cost of purchasing and directly managing the land and its resources. With its long history of stewardship, the National Park Service plays an important role of providing assistance and expertise to communities in helping them manage heritage area resources to achieve the goals of preserving cultural landscape integrity and effectively conveying the history and stories of a region so that future generations can benefit from understanding their heritage.

Cooperative Agreements

National heritage areas consist of vast land areas involving the efforts of many people. Coordinating the activities of numerous local, county, and state government and non-governmental entities poses considerable management, preservation and interpretation challenges. In 2003, the twenty-four designated national heritage areas, experienced over 30 million visitors; with 996 formal partnerships contributing to management functions as well as almost 2500 informal partners with interests in the heritage areas. Heritage areas and their partners organized and managed 513 educational programs for over 700,000 participants. So what approaches are utilized to insure the success of heritage areas?

Once a heritage area is established by Congress, National Park Service works to enlist partners from within the local communities to help organize and plan the area. These groups generally enter into an agreement with the National Park Service. Within the agreement is a statement committing the parties to pursue mutually shared goals. The agreement also serves as the legal

vehicle through which federal funds can be passed to non-governmental management entities. Although the National Park Service provides expertise to heritage area managers, its involvement is always advisory in nature. The National Park Service in no way makes management decisions or is involved in implementation of these decisions.

Heritage Area Management

At the heart of each heritage area is a designated entity that assumes the legal responsibility to create an overall management plan for the heritage area and is authorized to receive federal funding on behalf of it. The management plan is intended to describe ways in which the management entity, formal partners and other interested parties can work together in achieving fulfillment of their common vision for the heritage area. Management plans typically include a variety of action items including developing a visitor's guide publication, restoring or rehabilitating an important building or site, developing a wayside exhibit sign plan, or creating a recreational trail through a natural or cultural resource area. Although it the responsibility of the local management entity as established by the cooperative agreement to develop the management plan, only local officials have the authority to implement the management plan. In this way, all actions must be endorsed by local governments.

Heritage Area Funding

The federal government provides funding to heritage areas through the National Park Service's Heritage Partnerships Program as direct appropriation. For most areas to receive their portion of the funds, a 1:1 match is required. This funding is then matched by other federal, state, local, or private dollars generally resulting in much larger match requirements. For example, since the inception of federal funding for heritage areas in 1985, the matching money has been in the ratio of 1:9.

The twenty-four heritage areas comprise The Alliance of National Heritage Areas an organization that promotes the interests, goals and objectives of the National Heritage Program. Among other activities, the Alliance through the Heritage Development Institute sponsors numerous workshops to promote understanding and advocating heritage area development, and to advance the skills, knowledge and abilities needed for organizing, managing, marketing and sustaining heritage areas and heritage programs. It is through their efforts as well as that of concerned citizens, interest groups, and community leaders that the National Heritage Area Program has shown to be an effective way for the Federal government to be a financial and policy catalyst for preserving our threatened natural and cultural resources. Given their success, and diminishing federal funding for domestic programs, heritage areas are a trend for the future.

References

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United States Code, title 16, sec. 1