

# National Heritage Areas: Evaluating Past Practices as a Foundation for the Future

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## Introduction

The United States National Heritage Areas (NHA) are congressionally designated lived-in landscapes that reflect the nation's significant and diverse landscape. The management of these areas is based on a community-driven approach to heritage conservation and economic development. Beginning in 1984, the movement took root and rapidly grew to its present number of 49 NHAs with dozens of proposed areas under consideration ("National Heritage Areas" National Park Service). The idea was founded in many of same impulses as the early greenway approach. Glenn Eugester traces the evolution the idea to a number of separate, but related ideas to coordinate natural resource conservation, historic preservation, land use and economic development on a regional scale. While there were multiple factors at work, in his opinion what defines the movement is its focus on place and story of place combined with advocacy, civic engagement, inter-disciplinary planning, and action (Eugester 50).

The NHA program was seen as a new and revolutionary way for the National Park Service to engage public/private partnerships in conserving large landscapes such as river corridors, canal systems, industrial complexes, and agricultural regions. When originally conceived the approach was seen as untested and experimental. (Barrett 2003) It was thought that National Park Service funding for a period of 10 to 15 years might be adequate to launch each new heritage area. Over the past decades, congress recognizing the value of the NHA programs, the challenge of finding dollars for regional initiatives, and the program's growing popularity, has provided the earliest NHAs with multiple funding extensions (Barrett 2012).

In 2008 Congress fashioned a legislative solution to the funding issue for nine of the NHAs whose funding authorization expired in 2012. It mandated an evaluation of the accomplishments of the nine areas. Based on these evaluations, recommendations would be made as to the future role of the National Park Service including funding (Public Law 110-229 U.S. Statutes at Large, May 8, 2008). This approach was seen as a possible model for evaluating all the NHAs within the program.

## Background Literature

A literature review to place the evaluation of NHAs in context should start with the National Park Service National Heritage Areas office. They have developed an inventory of resources including guidance on the NHAs planning framework, which is available on the agency's web site ("National Heritage Areas" National Park Service). The information includes preparation a feasibility study to assess the suitability and feasibility of an area for NHA designation. It also includes a management-planning handbook *Components of a Successful National Heritage Area Management Plan* (National Park Service). The management-planning requirement is a key element of the legislation for every NHA and identifies the goals of the NHA and describes implementations steps, partnerships, and funding needs. The Secretary of the Interior must

approve a completed plan within three years of the area's designation. These documents and the examples of feasibility studies and management plans are an important starting point for understanding the NHA process.

Another source are governmental reviews of the NHAs program. The most comprehensive was the 2006 study by the congressionally chartered National Park System Advisory Board, *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas*. Appointed by the Secretary of the Interior, the Advisory Board has 12 members and is charged with offering guidance to the agency. This report, made a number of major recommendations for the improvement of the NHAs program including the need for research to “better understand the process of collaborative conservation” and to better “evaluate the outcomes” of NHA activity at the landscape scale (National Park System Advisory Board 25).

The first effort to evaluate the impact of NHAs was initiated in 2004 by the Conservation Study Institute, an arm of the National Park Service. The institute undertook a series of evaluations on three of the earliest NHA: The Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (Tuxill 2005), The Cane River National Heritage Area (Tuxill 2008) and the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor (Copping 2006). Styled as Technical Assistance studies, the studies reviewed investments and accomplishments in three of the heritage areas to determine progress towards their stated goals and made recommendation on their future sustainability. The studies also interviewed many NHA stakeholders to better understand the NHA partnership process (Tuxill, Tuxill, Copping). An advisory body of experts further reviewed the information from these studies including the multiple partnership interviews conducted in the three areas. This information was used to build a model on the development on NHAs to inform future evaluations (Jewiss 2008).

Daniel Laven and others have used the extensive body of data from these three NHAs evaluations to build a dynamic model of these complex systems that is tied to network theory. The models demonstrate how NHAs activate networks of partners from national, state and local sectors. This work explored the connection between network structures with NHA effectiveness concluded that NHAs could be seen as “venues for partnership”. They provide a strength and resilience in the face of dynamic changes to their landscapes from flooding, immigration, and shifts in governmental funding sources (Laven 2010). In the most recent analysis of this data, Laven and all, place the information in a broader context of the field of evaluation and looks at some of the critical factors that distinguish the effectiveness of NHAs. It emphasizes the importance of the idea of “heritage” as a method of public engagement and a strategy for initiating discourse and the collaborative approach employed in NHA management and the development of intersectoral networks (Laven 2012).

Another group of studies has looked at the economic impact of NHAs on local economy. The Alliance of National Heritage Areas has recognized that the goals related to economic sustainability are important to popular and political support for NHA. The alliance worked Michigan State University to adapt their Money Generation model to evaluate the economic impact of NHAs on a region. This model was originally developed by for use by National Park

Service for assessing the economic impact of park units (Stynes and Sun 2004 2005)

As discussed in the introduction, the National Park Service commissioned nine evaluation studies to meet the congressional mandate to evaluate NHAs is of most interest for this paper. These evaluations were not done by a part of the National Service. The agency commissioned the National Park and Conservation Association to undertake the work. The evaluation of the Essex National Heritage Area was conducted by the association's Center for Park Management (November 2011). The National Park and Conservation Association then contracted with Westat, an external evaluation firm, to conduct the following eight evaluations: the Augusta Canal National Heritage Area (Rog, Koenig and Jain May 2011), the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area, (Henderson et al. September 2012), the Ohio and Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor (George et al. July 2012), the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area (Myers et a. September 2012), the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor (Helba, George and Jones August 2011), the Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area (Helba, Jain and Rog March 2011), and the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area (Myers e al. June 2012) and the West Virginia National Coal Heritage Area (Marshall et al. September 2012)

## **Goals and Objectives**

The purpose of this paper is to summarize and provide a high level overview of the common findings from the twelve evaluation studies that have been completed over the last ten years. The paper is focused on assessing the National Heritage Areas management entities progress in accomplishing their legislative purpose and achieving the goals and objectives identified in the area's approved management plan. The primary reason for undertaking this review is to share the major outcomes and findings of the twelve evaluations with policy makers both in the National Park Service and in Congress. The review undertook to categorize the NHAs major accomplishments, consolidate common recommendations, and offer conclusions on how this information can be used in the context of NHA program and within the broader landscape scale initiatives. Taken together these evaluations comprise a significant body of data that document an extensive body of work over very large geographic areas and a time frame of 15-20 years.

The initial overview of the twelve evaluations was prepared at the request of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas National Heritage Areas and was distributed under the title of *National Park Services Evaluations Find National Heritage Areas are achieving their Purpose and Accomplishing their Goals* ("Evaluations" Living Landscape Observer).

## **Methods**

The author prepared a high level overview of the program management and accomplishments of the twelve NHAs by focusing on common qualitative and quantitative data sets presented in these evaluations. The more recent evaluations directed their research to answering the questions posed in the 2008 congressional request. The questions focused on assessing 1) whether the NHAs had made progress in accomplishing the goals identified in their authorizing legislation and management plans 2) analyzing the investments of state, federal and local government and other dollars to determine their impact and 3) reviewing the management structure, partnership relationship and funding of the NHAs for the purpose of identifying the critical components of

sustainability. (Public Law 110-229 U.S. Statutes at Large, May 8, 2008) The data review to develop the overview began with these queries as the largest and most comparable data source. In addition to the using the qualitative data, the author was able in some cases to compare dollar investments in certain categories as another measure to track importance of effort in the areas.

While the information from the evaluations undertaken by the Conservation Study Institute is not completely comparable with the later nine reports, all twelve studies track accomplishments, governance, financial investments and sustainability. All included interviews with partners and stakeholders. All used some form of logic models. These models saw some evolution overtime. The Westat model identified overarching goals and tracked inputs, organizations and partners, strategies and both short term and long term outcomes. The Westat reports noted that their research built on the work of the Conservation Study Institute and on the one evaluation study by the Center for Park Management. Finally, the methodology for the twelve studies was developed with advisory committees that included many of the same experts from National Park Service staff and National Heritage Area leaders.

One challenge in making assumptions about the NHA program has been the lack program legislation setting specific standards and criteria for designation and management. Congress established each NHA with its own individually created legislative designation. While this has allowed the statement significance, partnerships, and over arching goals to be tailored to individual circumstances and geographic area, it also has lead to concerns that the program had no standard framework. However, a review of the twelve NHAs showed a great similarity in their legislative elements. These included a statement of national significance or importance of the cultural, historical and natural values of the region, the purpose of designation usually to preserve, promote, interpret resources and in some cases make them available for economic benefit of the community, and the requirement to develop a management plan to implement the areas goals. The similarity of the legislative templates also extended to the management plans, which also made the data easier to compare between the areas.

### **Findings on National Heritage Area Program Management**

Overall the evaluations of the twelve NHAs reported positive findings. Starting at the most elemental level, the evaluations documented that all, but one of the NHAs, addressed each of the goals identified in the areas legislation and approved management plan. (“Evaluation” Living landscape Observer) One of the twelve areas struggled with changes in management, structure and financial uncertainty. The evaluation found that the area stayed true to its mission, but expended limited National Park Service funds and was able to address only half of the program goals (Marshal et al. September 2012 S-2)

From a financial management perspective the results were also positive. The evaluations determined that the NHAs showed responsible fiscal practices. Every NHA had an audited financial statement and met the statutory match requirements. The reports documented that the federal funding and required match were allocated to achieve the NHAs programmatic objectives. NHAs met and in most cases exceed the 50% required match. In addition the NHAs leveraged National Park Service Heritage Area Funding with other Federal, state, local and

private sources to implement planned resource conservation, recreation and economic development projects. On average the NHAs leveraged additional funds for heritage infrastructure at a ratio of up to 4 to 1. For example, the Augusta Canal NHA matched \$5.2 million of Federal funds with \$21 million of other grants and revenues. (Rog May 2011 19)

The areas show effective management practices. The evaluations found that the management structure, partnerships, and current funding levels contributed to the NHA's sustainability. The NHAs developed effective board governance structure, capable and experienced leadership and staff, and responsible fiscal management. The reports noted that in general the leaders of NHA organization have exceptional skills in partnership development, strategic planning and long track record with their organization. Also documented was deployment of adaptive management strategies that reflected changing public needs. The reports singled out Hudson River Valley (Henderson September 2012 5-76), Rivers of Steel (Myers September 2012 5-99) and Silos and Smokestacks (Helba March 2011 67) NHAs for their adaptive approach.

NHA's depend on public participation and partnerships networks to carry out the area's mission. The reports demonstrated that NHAs implement the legislative mandate and management plans through partnerships and with a high level of continued citizen involvement over time. The strength of the areas partnership networks were well documented. Most areas manage by developing an extensive network of partnerships. For example Silos and Smokestacks NHA has 108 formal partners in 37 counties (Helba March 2011 672-63), Tennessee Civil War NHA made 306 consultations (Myers June 2012 3-44), and South Carolina NHA has 175 community partners (Helba August 2012 2-35).

The twelve studies documented the importance of National Park Service support. Although the NHAs demonstrated effective governance and responsible financial management, the evaluations concluded that in every case the loss of NPS funding would reduce the capacity and flexibility of the twelve NHA to achieve the statutory mission of the organization. The more recent evaluations also documented the significant drop in state funding commitments starting with the recession in 2008. These reports found that replacement of federal funds with private sector dollars or other government funds is not a likely outcome. The National Park Service funding was identified as the consistent, flexible seed money in accomplishing the NHAs program goals. In a majority of cases loss of this funding would threaten the area's viability or very existence.

### **Findings on National Heritage Area Programmatic Accomplishments**

Based on NHA's individual legislation and the management plans, the evaluations identified the most important overarching goals for each of the NHAs. Across all twelve studies, there was a broad congruence in the most commonly reported program goals. These goals were cultural and natural resource conservation, education and interpretation and recreational development, also important were marketing and economic development primarily through heritage tourism. Each of the report analyzed programmatic expenditures, defined as federal appropriations and external match, by these broad program categories. Based on expenditure information, the highest priority work for all twelve of the NHAs was cultural and natural resource conservation. The nine recent evaluations documented that an average of 31% of the areas' programmatic dollars

were invested in this type of work, which ranged from restoration of river corridors, preservation of landmark properties, to documentation of historic African American churches and folk traditions. The Rivers of Steel NHA has protected the Carrie Furnace, the adjacent Hot Metal Bridge and restored the two landmarks of labor history the Bost Building and the Pump House. The Homestead Historic District and Carrie Furnace Landmark site are undergoing a multi-million restoration with State and Federal funds for a mixed-use industrial and commercial development (Myers September 2012)

The second highest priority for all twelve areas was to educate residents and visitors about the history of the region and to interpret the special qualities of the man-made and natural landscape, as well as the culture and people. The nine most recent evaluations showed that on average 26% of programmatic dollars went into this activity. Essex NHA connected their region with signage, visitor centers and reinforced the message with special events and educational programming. Silos and Smokestacks NHA overcomes great distances with the award winning Camp Silos providing online experience to over 500,000 visitors. (Helba 44)

Another important investment for many NHA was investment in the region's recreational assets such as long distance trails and water based recreation. For example the towpaths of the Ohio and Erie Canalway National Canalway (87 miles) and the Delaware and Lehigh Canal (160) have been reclaimed as major hiking and biking destinations. The Hudson River Valley NHA added over 200 miles of trail with the assistance of 95,000 volunteer hours (Henderson 6).

While resource conservation, education and recreational development were identified as important in all areas, every NHA tailored its work to meet the needs identified in their individual plans. Those areas where community and economic development is part of the mission have made promotional efforts a priority. Working in close partnership with tourism providers South Carolina NHA has developed four regional visitor centers and promoted NHA assets like the Agriculture Tourism Trail (Helba 10). Although a smaller part of expenditures, marketing and promotional efforts were judged very important to residents in certain NHA. For example experiences offered by the Augusta Canal Heritage Area enhance the regions "eco-tourism" strategies. However, a more direct impact was the acquisition and reuse of the King Mill that preserved jobs for almost 300 mill hands (Rog 50).

### **Specific Recommendations for National Heritage Areas**

All of the evaluations made recommendations to improve the management of the NHAs. The most consistent recommendations were as follows:

Foster a closer working relationship with the NPS both with adjacent units and the assigned NPS regional offices. Overall the evaluations portray a lessening of engagement between the NHA and NPS partners. One interesting suggestion was to pair NHAs with sites interpreting similar subject matter even if they are not geographically adjacent.

Increase quality and quantity of data collection on the outcomes of NHA programs. The reports recommended going beyond just counting student in programs to determining educational outcomes, beyond recording volunteer hours to assessing levels of stewardship.

Enhance the fundraising skills and awareness of NHA boards and commissions. This has not always been seen as priority or as part of their position description.

Address succession planning in the leadership of NHA management organizations. The strength of current leaders of NHAs could also be a future weakness if the management of a NHA does not develop the capacity of new leaders for the future.

## **Discussion**

The evaluations show that the benefits for NHAs and the National Park Service flow in both directions. The NHAs receive predictable support, technical assistance, and as mentioned in many of the evaluation's interviews "the good housekeeping seal of approval" from association with the agency. The evaluations also documented that the NHAs were conserving and interpreting cultural and natural resources of national significance. In this way the NHAs extend the reach of the National Park Service's mission to the conservation of iconic landscapes of the Hudson River Valley or preservation the industrial landmarks of the steel industry in Pittsburgh without the cost of acquiring the properties and managing them to more exacting park service standards. Many of the twelve NHAs also have integrated their resource management with a National Park unit as in the Cane River National Heritage Area, which preserves the living cultural traditions for the Cane River National Historic Site and Essex National Heritage, which provides the landscape setting for Salem Maritime National Historic Site and the Saugus Ironwork National Historic Site.

The National Park System Advisory Board in *Charting a Future for National Heritage Areas* found that NHAs provide case studies to the National Park Service in new opportunities for resource stewardship and found the need for more research on the network approach and the ability to leverage resources (2006 20). The services recent strategic vision *Call to Action* reinforces these recommendations in first action # 1 calls for filling the gaps between park units with entities such as the NHAs. In addition the plan in action #22 calls for the agency to be a leader in scaling up the large landscape movement ("Call to Action" National Park Service). The lessons learned in these evaluations are an important first step. However, this data need to be further mined to better understand and implement partnership management. The National Park Service should correlate the results with the in depth research that has been undertaken on the network systems of three on the twelve area (Laven et al. 2010, 2012).

Evaluation of work on a landscape scale is not a simple task. It is a challenge to measure and link outcomes from what are often small inputs on a large geographic scale. However, it is more important than ever, today many of these NHA strategies are being recast as part of the emerging large landscape large landscape movement (McKinney). The NHA idea is becoming more important with the emerging interest in large landscapes as a conservation strategy. A recent study by the Regional Plan Association identified over 160 landscape scale projects in the northeast in the Northeastern United States alone (Regional Plan Association 2011).

## Conclusion

The twelve evaluations concluded that the NHAs have adhered to the individual statutory mission, carried out the goals and objectives in the approved management plans, created new organizations for effective governance, and responsibly used appropriated funding. They have contributed to the sense of place and the economic well being of local communities. Most importantly the NHAs have enriched our shared heritage by interpreting nationally significant stories, preserving historic landmarks in a cost effective manner, offering recreational opportunities for residents and visitors, and enhanced regional economic vitality. Taken together these evaluations document impressive range of accomplishments over very large geographic areas using limited dollars and a complex array of partnerships.

However, it is a very present reality that without sustained federal financial support and assistance this good work will not continue. National Park Service funding and support was seen as essential seed money to make projects and programs happen. The more recent evaluations starkly document the significant drop in state funding commitments starting with the recession in 2008. These reports found that replacement of federal funds with private sector dollars or other government funds is not a likely outcome. The twelve NHAs either will go out of business or grind to a slow halt.

Findings from these evaluations come at a critical time as the United State's National Park Service and congress decide whether to support reauthorization of twelve of the first designated National Heritage Areas. They also offers a playbook for the emerging large landscapes movement to better understand how to successfully manage regional landscapes threatened by shifts in industrial economies, agricultural policy, and climate change. This is clearest evidence to date that a program of recognition, management planning, partnership and a shared commitment can help sustain the essential character of place for the benefit of residents, visitors and the next generations. Let's not lose our nerve now.

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