

## Expanding the Meaning of Heritage: The New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance

Jerry L. Rogers, New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance, 29 Bosque Loop, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87508; jrogers@phronesis.com

I am glad the director of the National Park Service (NPS) advocates having the units of the National Park System work with partners who participate in the larger set of common interests that revolve around, and in many cases have grown out of, the NPS mission. Obviously there are many difficulties in reaching out beyond park boundaries, as it makes others feel entitled to reach in from outside. There is an understandable temptation to adopt a defensive way of thinking, but the trouble with this is that points are not scored—progress is not made and ultimately the parks will not be preserved—by defensive action alone.

There is more than one way to preserve a park. I want to focus on the abilities partners may have to do something the managers of protected areas need done in ways that may not be available to public employees. In an effort to make NPS the historic preservation leader the National Historic Preservation Act says it should be, I spent much of my career trying to enable new ideas about cultural resources to make sense in the context of the National Register of Historic Places. This was natural. The National Register was founded on a new idea—that the American people needed more in the way of historic preservation than could be accomplished by setting aside a handful of nationally significant places as museums, monuments, and memorials. In general, national park units and nationally protected areas are the cultural resource equivalent of the “charismatic megafauna.” They may look great alone, but they have vital interrelationships with other less spectacular resources. It is necessary to preserve the totality of the larger environment.

I grew up in the tutelage of Ernest Connally, Robert Utley, William Murtagh, and Robert Garvey, and absorbed their vision of the National Register, section 106, and the network of federal, state, local, and tribal preservation officers functioning as one great comprehensive program to identify and preserve the national heritage. I am proud of having worked to make the National Register one great tent capable of sheltering all types of cultural resources, and of having helped to keep the National Register at the center of official

historic preservation programs throughout the United States.

But “official” approaches are only one way—not always the best way—of making preservation happen. I want to focus now upon unofficial forces, such as public opinion, and some of the ways that non-governmental organizations such as statewide citizen non-profit heritage organizations can help to shape the forces. I have the honor of being president of one such organization—the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance.

All fifty states have organizations like the alliance. They are loosely affiliated as partners of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and of one another. New Mexico was one of the very last states to organize one of these things, with our corporate charter approved in 1995 and our work only really becoming a meaningful force three or four years later. This has both good and bad aspects to it. One of the bad aspects is that, unlike statewide organizations that have had 20 or more years to build endowments and other financial arrangements, we live pretty much hand-to-mouth, able to pay only one poor overworked staff member and required to raise 100% of our annual budget *de novo* each year. One of the good aspects is that, unlike some statewide organizations that have had many years in which to become stodgy, we have internalized no limits upon our own creativity. The world expects us, as adolescents, to act up a bit; and we, as adolescents, act up in order to get the attention that can make us effective.

By acting up, I really mean the subject of

this paper—expanding the public’s understanding of what historical heritage can mean. Statewide organizations do many things, but virtually all of them release a list each year of what they have dubbed their state’s most endangered historic places. Older and more settled statewides are apt to list a dozen or so buildings or districts—the daring ones throwing in maybe a bridge—or an archeological site or a place significant to a minority. These lists are the organization’s one great chance each year to call attention to their work and their values; the one great chance to have their work and values noticed by a news reporter or remembered by a governor or a legislator or a potential benefactor.

The upstart New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance, however, has developed a marvelous track record of attracting the attention of people who ordinarily might skip over a historically-based article in their newspaper. The reaction we strive for among people who read about us is not so much “aha” as “I never thought of that!”

It started in our very first year of releasing a most endangered list, when in 1999 we declared among our state’s most endangered places a waterworks, a residential district, a ghost town, a bridge, an industrial site, and the New Mexico night sky. “*The New Mexico night sky!*” people said, “*I never thought of that!*” Most people in the United States who can still see the brilliance of stars and the moon at night are vaguely aware that they like seeing them. They may even be regretfully aware that this blessing is gradually being taken from them by light pollution and reduced air quality, but they are probably resigned to its loss as part of the price of “progress.” And the few who actually want to do something about it are apt to think in terms of preserving what we in the National Park Service would probably categorize as a “natural” resource. But an endangered *historic place*? *Holy cow! I never thought of that!* And the justification was not really very hard. All it took was to apply traditional cultural property concepts to the heavens. But the boldness of the concept worked exactly as we had hoped. It received extraordinary and positive attention. The attention

energized a coalition of people who had been working for night sky protection from an astronomer’s perspective and, with a lot of behind-the-scenes guidance from NPS employee Joe Sovick, 90 days later the state had a new law regulating light pollution.

This succeeded so spectacularly that the alliance has since then made it a deliberate practice to introduce at least one innovative concept each year. We have designated, along with the normal array of buildings, structures, and sites, a mountain (now saved), a railroad (now saved), a cultural tradition (now on its way to being saved through enactment of a National Heritage Area), and a river valley (probably not going to be saved). But in 2003 we went further than ever before, designating two vast topographical land forms: the greater Otero Mesa, a scenic, natural, and archeological area in southeast New Mexico; and the La Bajada Escarpment, a long and magnificent bluff that served as the boundary marker between two Spanish administrative jurisdictions during colonial times. But the real blockbuster this year was “The waters of New Mexico.” This was timely because the state has been in extreme drought. I want to read to you selections from the nominating documents by which cultural values were identified in such resources as the night sky and the waters of New Mexico. The point of reading this is to reveal the logic that enabled such unorthodox designations. It is not as “far out” as one might presume.

### The Night Sky

“From the pleistocene to the present the night sky has been an important element in cultural heritage. The combination of what appeared to be eternal order in certain night sky patterns with such changeable things as lunar phases, planetary movements, seasonal angles of declination, and annual meteor showers was one of the early great stimuli to curiosity. The discovery of predictable order among the inconstants was important in the development of belief systems and their attendant cultural values—influencing even the idea of what it means to be human. It remains so today.”

“Mammoth hunters at Clovis and Folsom, ancestral Puebloans at Chaco and Pecos, Vasquez de Coronado in his explorations, Onate and de Vargas in their conquests, cowboys on nightherd duty, and office workers resting from their daily toils all have lived under, admired, and wondered about the same night sky—virtually unchanged in human history.”

“A pristine night sky almost universally stimulates thought. Some are humbled in their insignificance before the visible universe, and some are exhilarated by a sense of identification therewith. Some measure and test the movement of our earthly platform within the solar system, the solar system within the galaxy, and the galaxy within the universe until human understanding is exhausted and calculation at its limit. Some speculate about life elsewhere, and some contemplate that the flesh, blood, and bones of our very bodies—even the energy powering our thoughts—are of the light and substance we see coming down from the spangles above.”

“Without conscious action it will be much more difficult for future generations to have the same experiences, or even to imagine them. As urban areas expand and as change without consideration of the night sky continues, places where it can be experienced grow fewer and more difficult to reach. We risk losing a beauty that has been the backdrop to and motivator of human actions since time immemorial.”<sup>1</sup>

### The Waters of New Mexico

From the first human’s entry into present New Mexico until now and into the infinite future, water has been and will be the primary determinant of where, how, and whether people will live. The earliest known structure in this state is a well made perhaps 10,000 years ago at Blackwater Draw, and is evidence of the profound human drive to take action with regard to water in order to live here. Human recognition of water as giver of life made it a cultural, as well as a natural, resource. Blue Lake, Zuni Salt Lake, and other waters are held sacred by indigenous cultures. Water sources are focal points that both enable and

limit human activity. Acequias—more than mere distribution systems, became human associations, cultural traditions, and the foundations of legal systems. The significance of water is evident in the locations and distribution of ancient habitation sites; road and trail routes; farms and field patterns; greenlines and tree rows; windmills and the cattle they support; and the locations of villages, towns, and cities. Water has become so completely a “cultural” resource that many people now consider its natural sources mere utilities, forgetting their greater roles in shaping human activity and supporting the interlocking systems upon which all life depends.

The famous spring that gave Portales its name has been dried by wells into a crusty rock shelf. The “Hope” that named an Eddy County town is poignantly memorialized in dry ditches and dead orchards. The mighty Rio Grande, fourth longest river in North America, is sometimes dry less than halfway to the sea. Institutions and legal systems that governed water use in earlier times have ceased to be effective, ignoring links between surface sources and aquifers and allowing water rights to exceed actual water. Public officials and private enterprise, focusing on short-term gain rather than sustainable possibilities, have not confronted the facts. Growing profligate uses threaten acequias, small farms, and other uses deeply rooted in heritage. As New Mexico prepares to address these problems, there is danger that a crassly utilitarian approach may reduce her waters to a simple element of economic production or a component of infrastructure. The true value of New Mexico’s waters can only be understood, and humane solutions found, within the context of her history and cultures.

I have not said very much in this paper about reaching out beyond park boundaries and interacting with the vast federal, state, tribal, local, and private-sector historic preservation network that is actually led by the National Park Service because I have made that speech since 1981 and because many park managers have learned its truth—although a few Neanderthals still cower behind park boundaries. I have suggested that

public opinion may be a more effective preserver than legal protections, and that innovative and imaginative concepts can be effective shapers of public opinion. Although I have focused mostly on two very innovative cultural resource concepts, let me say that the mountain we declared endangered (Buffalo Mountain, near Cerrillos) has been saved by recognition that it is important to the county park that has been created near it. The railroad (the Cumbres & Toltec steam railroad) functions essentially as an interstate park run by both Colorado and New Mexico. The cultural tradition (Hispanic heritage of northern New Mexico) leads logically to development of a heritage area that will be led by the National Park Service. The river valley (the Hondo Valley, east of Ruidoso) will probably not be saved because it is essentially an old-fashioned historic preservation controversy involving widening of a highway, but our State Historic Preservation Office has become more cognizant of cultural landscapes as a consequence of the designation. The 1999 designation of the New Mexico night sky enables us in 2003 to help Chaco Culture National Historical Park, a World Heritage site, defend

itself against a coal-fired generating plant whose emissions would diminish Chaco's wonderful archeo-astronomical values. And working to preserve the waters of New Mexico will set conceptual precedents important to parks all over the world—as one not too distant example, the ecosystem in Big Bend National Park that depends upon the water and the aquatic life of the Rio Grande, not to mention the importance of New Mexican waters to Chamizal National Memorial, Amistad National Recreation Area, and Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site.

So if you still think the State Historic Preservation Officer, section 106, and the National Register are burdens to be endured or obstacles to be evaded; and if you think your statewide heritage preservation organization is some sort of remote ally of questionable value—wake up and get involved. It ain't so.

### Endnote

1. Jerry L. Rogers, and Joseph E. Sovick, "The Ultimate Cultural Resource?" *The George Wright Society Forum* (Vol. 18, No. 4, 2001), 25–28.

