

Heritage Areas: A Policy Perspective

Sally G. Oldham
Scenic America
Washington, D.C.

America's landscape heritage distinguishes one region from another and shapes our national character. A series of grassroots and public-sector efforts to identify and preserve regional landscapes is resulting in new alliances between environmental, conservation, historic preservation, recreation, and business interests. These projects are termed "heritage areas" in this paper.

The "living landscape" is a term used to refer to regional landscapes, including communities and natural areas which have been shaped by human activities as much as by natural processes. They are referred to as "living" landscapes to acknowledge the expectation of change. The desire of citizen activists and public officials to "manage" change in the living landscape has resulted in an exciting burst of conservation, heritage, and economic development activity.

These efforts, which address the conservation of many resource types, now number 50 or 60 projects in various stages of planning and implementation. They are found predominantly in the Midwest and East. They build on citizen interest developed over the past decades in many resource types: scenic byways, trails, wild and scenic rivers, historic buildings and districts, vernacular and designed landscapes, and others.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, a series of federal laws put in place policies to identify and encourage conservation and protection of valuable resources in both public and private ownership. These laws include the Outdoor Recreation Act of 1963, the Land and Water Conservation Act, the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and the National Trails System and National Wild and Scenic Rivers acts, both enacted in 1968. Corollary programs to identify and designate historic resources, trails, and rivers were established by many state legislatures and local jurisdictions, in some cases in advance of federal laws.

Tens of thousands of natural, scenic, cultural, and recreational resources have been inventoried and designated by public entities at local, state, and federal levels. In many cases, nonprofit groups have formed to work hand in hand with public officials to preserve and enhance these resources. Occasionally friction has arisen, but more frequently this combination of public and private interests has resulted in creative programs, wise use of resources, and an enhanced quality of life for those in nearby communities. Some of these efforts have been called "greenways." The term, as defined by Charles E. Little in his book *Greenways for America* (American Society of Landscape Architects, 1990), refers to

a linear open space established along a natural corridor, such as a riverfront, stream valley, or ridgeline, or overland along a railroad right-of-way converted to recreational use, a canal, a scenic road or other route.

In the past decade, what may come to be understood as a new resource type has developed. These projects are generally more complex

in scope than those mentioned above and combine resource types and purposes already mentioned with an added purpose of economic improvement. In this paper, these projects are termed "heritage areas." Many, though not all, are being developed with technical assistance from the U.S. National Park Service.

USNPS staff developed a broad definition of the term "heritage area":

A Heritage Area is a regionally identifiable and significant landscape that is the focus of a cooperative public and private decision-making effort to recognize, organize, and communicate a community's natural, cultural, recreational, and economic attributes to protect important values, stimulate the local economy, and improve the quality of life.

There is no consensus on terminology as of yet. What are referred to here as "heritage areas" are actually called by several labels, such as "heritage corridor" when the resource is linear and "heritage project" if it encompasses a non-contiguous area. The USNPS refers to some of its heritage area involvements as "partnership parks," generally a mixed-ownership park where public and private lands are mingled and management structures vary. A "heritage park" usually refers to an urban park with mixed public and private ownership.

Several elements set heritage areas apart from past efforts: their size, complexity of jurisdictional oversight, and tensions created by their potentially conflicting goals. The purposes and functions of heritage areas are generally the following:

- ◆ Resource protection;
- ◆ Economic development, generally including tourism;
- ◆ Recreation; and

◆ Public education.

Heritage areas vary in size from a single city, to multiple counties, to areas spanning several states. Common characteristics among these projects include:

- ◆ Strong local effort for the heritage area effort.
- ◆ An emphasis on identifying diverse resources as a first step.
- ◆ Evaluation of the resource base within a larger, more complex context than is usually the case, with the potential to yield a sense of significance greater than the sum of the parts.
- ◆ Strong emphasis on education, first of involved citizens, then of a wide range of constituent and public-interest groups, and ultimately of the users through telling the stories (interpretation) of the heritage area.

Challenges for these projects include:

- ◆ Developing and communicating the vision of the heritage area as that of a living landscape incorporating many resources, where the significance of the whole may be understood as greater than the sum of its parts.
- ◆ Balancing protection strategies within the context of managing these living landscapes and enhancing and conserving resources while allowing for change and economic growth.
- ◆ Securing sustained funding to achieve the goals of these projects: enhancing the quality of life, protecting important values, and stimulating local economies.
- ◆ Strengthening strategies for attracting private-sector investment through understanding and integrating their interests from the start of the planning process.

A policy perspective on heritage areas can be developed by examining their characteristics in five general areas:

- ♦ Jurisdictional oversight;
- ♦ Justification for designation;
- ♦ Competing goals for protection and promotion;
- ♦ Sources of funding; and
- ♦ Education and interpretation.

JURISDICTIONAL OVERSIGHT

There is no uniform national system for evaluating heritage area proposals to determine if they are worthy of recognition and designation. There is no consensus as to whether such a national system should exist or even whether heritage areas constitute a discrete resource type.

Heritage areas are most often designated either by a state agency or Congress. There is no enabling legislation at the federal level, however, so every new area vies for congressional support and independent funding through the USNPS. Both the USNPS and Congress are studying how to create a system to provide some control over new heritage area studies. Such a system might mirror that of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, where the enabling legislation is specifically amended when studies of new rivers are mandated by Congress, providing a framework within which these studies are carried out.

Three national heritage corridors have been designated through acts of Congress. In each case a federal commission has been established to guide development and oversight and technical assistance is provided by the USNPS. Over 30 similar projects are receiving technical assistance from the USNPS, often in anticipation

of Congressional designation, and still others desire such assistance. The USNPS has not sought these projects; rather, Congress has imposed them on USNPS through the appropriations process. Until recent years, additions to USNPS appropriation requests were generally for construction. Last year, Congress doubled the funds that USNPS had requested to study new areas and specified 23 new studies to be undertaken.

Heritage area projects have aroused considerable policy debate within the USNPS. The agency's director, James Ridenour, has been quite direct in his expressions of concern about these projects, which he fears will lead to a dilution of the quality of the U.S. National Park System. He wrote in the November/December 1990 issue of the USNPS newsletter *Courier*:

I have a growing concern that we, as a nation, are "thinning the blood" of our national park system. . . . I am concerned that we are spreading our limited resources over a growing base and that, as a result, we may suffer the possibility of sliding into mediocrity rather than continuing to enjoy the prominence that we have long received.

The perspective from the local level is quite different. There, leaders see the USNPS as a source of funds and expertise for projects they consider worthy. The issue as to what criteria should be used to determine merit for Congressional funding has not been resolved. The USNPS's assistance to these projects is often channeled through its Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Program, which grew out of the old Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and which deals with resources outside USNPS ownership and control.

In contrast to the USNPS's sometimes reluctant participation in plan-

ning, the states which have created heritage area programs have moved aggressively to develop them. Also in contrast, economic development purposes have been a strong motivating factor in state-based programs. An issue for further study is whether non-federally designated heritage areas can achieve their goals as well as those that are, and vice versa.

Lowell, Massachusetts, was first developed as a heritage park in the early 1970s and funded by both the state and federal governments. It led to a State Heritage Park system with urban renewal as an important goal. The Pennsylvania State Heritage Parks program was created in 1989 to preserve the industrial heritage of the state, enhance regional economies through tourism and employment opportunities, and provide new corridors for recreation. Designation is determined by an inter-governmental task group working under the direction of the state's Department of Community Affairs.

In other instances, local citizens have organized nonprofit corporations and created their own designations, as with the Lexington-Frankfort Scenic Corridor. The corridor encompasses 95 square miles and 60,000 acres of rolling countryside—Kentucky's famous bluegrass—crossed by two-lane roads and home of the state's finest thoroughbred horses. This heritage area was initiated by the owners of several horse farms who were concerned about the depressed state of their industry, how to channel tourism interest, and how to encourage support for thoroughbred horse racing. Although not a party to the designation of the scenic corridor, local and state government officials have become important partners in the effort. Three

rural historic districts encompassing some 9,000 acres have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places and an even larger area is under survey now.

Other issues addressed by every group that sets out to create a heritage area include multiple forms of land ownership and formats for initial planning and ongoing management. Ownership of land and human-made resources within heritage areas comes in every possible form, often with all levels of government as owners, as well as private and nonprofit organizations. Inventorying lands and resources and profiling this multi-jurisdictional ownership is one of the first tasks for any group interested in establishing a heritage area.

Approaches to initial planning vary widely. They range from grassroots planning, to studies undertaken under federal programs with the USNPS as the lead agency, to detailed studies by commissions authorized and funded by Congress. There is a great emphasis on inter-jurisdictional planning with complex formats for public involvement and review. In many instances, planning seems to move more quickly when the USNPS is involved, no doubt because of staff experience with heritage area planning.

Management also varies depending on local circumstances and the jurisdiction. One of the best models is that of the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, where a nonprofit Canal Corridor Association acts as a catalyst for planning and a federal commission does macro-scale planning and gives advice. The Canal Corridor Association board includes the heads of many of the major industries in the area and is invaluable in providing

advice, funding, and access to assist with the corridor efforts. The commission includes representatives of local and state government as well as nonprofit and business interests. Yet another group, Friends of the Canal, includes the grassroots network that supports the development and enhancement of the corridor.

Massachusetts' State Heritage Parks are managed by the state government, while Pennsylvania's Heritage Parks contemplate a local management entity. An important aspect of the feasibility study for these latter parks is identifying local leadership and recommending the creation or designation of an existing organization to manage the project. In the Kentucky case, management is in the hands of a nonprofit organization. In others, management may rest with a coalition.

Although the USNPS is involved in providing technical assistance to the vast majority of heritage area projects, attitudes toward USNPS involvement vary greatly. In some instances, federal involvement is eagerly sought. In others, local leaders want federal funds and little involvement otherwise. The quality of USNPS technical assistance depends greatly on the skills and enthusiasm of individual USNPS personnel. Where USNPS staff work is strong, as noted above, planning seems to move more quickly than when a group sets out by itself.

JUSTIFICATION FOR DESIGNATION

The determination of whether heritage areas constitute a distinct resource type will not be resolved until a detailed study is made to verify, in relation to existing criteria, whether the significance of the resources in

the living landscape do in fact exceed the sum of their parts. If heritage areas are determined to be a discrete resource type, the merits of a national system should be debated. As a separate issue, it would then be possible to explore how to establish the overall significance of a heritage area, just as the USNPS now has established a framework to evaluate the significance of historic resources.

A policy determination that heritage areas constitute a distinct resource type would then allow discussion about whether a federal designation parallel to that of the National Register of Historic Places, but encompassing the pertinent range of resource types, should be created. Such a designation would allow the federal government to establish standards to recognize the importance of heritage areas without the expectation of federal investment and management. This would provide a mechanism for targeting federal, state, and local protections and incentives as is now done with state enterprise zones.

USNPS judgments regarding heritage areas currently are made in the context of evaluation systems developed to apply to specific resources. Yet a heritage area is a unique grouping of resources with a potential significance greater than the sum of its parts. This greater significance has as much to do with how the resources are perceived as with how they are evaluated within their geographic context. In combination, a bigger picture can be seen. The interpretation of historic sites, for example, is linked with a variety of natural features.

One of the great strengths of heritage area planning from the viewpoint of those interested in conservation is the attention paid to invento-

rying existing resources—natural, ethnographic, historic, and recreational. Surveys are available from many sources. As has been stated, however, there is no model for evaluating holistically the significance of hundreds, or even tens of thousands, of acres. The USNPS, which provides technical assistance from a variety of regional offices and Washington, is reportedly inconsistent in its evaluations of resources in heritage areas. Since there is no USNPS policy acknowledging heritage areas as a resource concept equivalent to a historic district or wildlife preserve, the agency has not attempted to create a holistic means of evaluating these areas.

A system to evaluate the significance of heritage areas would help immensely in developing themes and modes of interpretation. It would also provide a sound basis for establishing protections. Protection is one of the toughest policy issues. As in many other arenas, it is far more acceptable to designate than to protect. Protections depend almost entirely on local government action, although certain federal and state designations (Wild and Scenic Rivers, National Register listings, State Trails) are relevant.

COMPETING GOALS OF PROTECTION AND PROMOTION

Evaluating (1) management plans as a means to encourage the adoption of local policies consistent with protection goals, (2) the success of various protection mechanisms, and (3) methods to generate and assess economic returns, are all fruitful areas for future study.

Inherent in the concept of heritage areas is the desire to both protect and promote them. While the goals of

many of the programs used within heritage areas are protection and enjoyment of resources, the added goal of economic development results in the need to seek a delicate balance between use and abuse of resources. The key issue is whether resources are likely to become degraded, and to what extent, by heavy recreational and tourism uses.

Interest in heritage areas varies widely but most often originates with a group of local citizens. Their primary interests generally determine the focus of efforts in heritage area planning. The importance of economic development as a goal is the greatest variable and the issue most likely to create friction among interest groups. In some instances it is an overriding goal, in some a goal to be balanced, and in yet others something subordinate to conservation interests.

The issue of wise management of resources needs to be explored. With most heritage areas still in their infancy, there is little experience on which to draw regarding models of wise management, but proven concepts for given resource types should be assembled to guide planners.

In certain cases, organizers have found that environmental groups are slower to support planning efforts than are conservation and preservation groups. They are not as likely to have formed alliances with the business interests and are wary of abuses in opening resources to use.

Preservationists have recently strengthened alliances with tourism interests, but working relationships are still often tentative, each group not quite trusting the other's support. Conservation and environmental groups generally have had fewer reasons to develop alliances with tourism interests. Much work needs

to be done to adopt policies that are mutually supportive of promotion and protection goals and to develop more understanding and trusting relationships.

Protection policies regarding the effects of public actions in heritage areas are scarce. The three congressionally created national heritage corridors have language in their statutes to specify that officials responsible for projects carried out by a federal entity "shall consult" with the appropriate federal commission, take into account approved plans for the corridor, and, "to the maximum extent practicable," conduct activities in a manner "which will not have an adverse effect on the corridor." No new federal process or regulations have been created to enforce this requirement, however.

No heritage areas examined for this paper appear to have a review mechanism for state-funded projects. While there is a precedent in some states for protecting certain resources from the effects of publicly supported actions, protection from the effects of private-sector actions is more problematic. A number of heritage areas have developed or intend to develop management plans addressing land-use issues. Organizational leaders can then seek to have these plans adopted by affected jurisdictions to guide decision making in licensing and otherwise approving private actions. Adopting land-use ordinances involves a political process, not just a planning one. This may well be the most difficult task that face heritage area leaders, one which is complicated by these areas being composed of living landscapes. Such landscapes consist not of isolated resources but of a continuity of related features which most people have come to take for

granted, often seeing them as having no special value.

The implementation of far-sighted policies regarding land use of development parcels adjacent to heritage areas is critical to maintaining the quality of their environment. In areas being developed for increased tourism, it is essential that policies and regulations regarding setbacks, design standards, and sign standards be put into effect in advance of development pressures.

Heritage areas are so new that little information is available to evaluate economic return. Surprisingly, at Lowell, the forerunner of heritage areas, economic success came so quickly that a method for evaluating economic impacts was not developed as the project got underway. Massachusetts' boom and bust economy provides important lessons, however. Gardner, site of one of the state's most successful heritage parks, now has the state's highest unemployment. Nevertheless, Gardner's business leaders are vocal about the importance of the park to the community.

A mechanism for tracking economic performance should be part of the design of any proposed heritage area. The USNPS manual *Economic Impacts of Protecting Rivers, Trails, and Greenway Corridors: A Resource Book*, can be a useful guide. A method for assessing economic impacts of aesthetic regulations—currently being developed by Scenic America and the Government Finance Research Center, with funding from the National Trust for Historic Preservation—will also be of assistance when it is published next year.

SOURCES OF FUNDING

There is no consensus on how much federal funding is warranted to

develop heritage areas. Questions also revolve around the proper role for the philanthropic community, which has played a relatively small role in funding.

Funding for initial planning most often comes from a public body. Congressional funding is generally allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. Limited congressional funds, taken together with USNPS attempts to force priority evaluations, however, are likely to result in somewhat more systematic criteria for funding in the near future.

Some efforts are university-sponsored or supported by membership contributions. Some groups consciously seek funding and support only at the state and local level to avoid a federal presence. Other groups have found their efforts to secure USNPS funds and support thwarted because so many are seeking the agency's assistance.

One group has obtained an Economic Development Administration grant to inventory businesses that can serve as support industries to increased tourism. The America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), a nine-county heritage area in southwestern Pennsylvania, currently receives the most generous federal funding—\$15 million this year alone—for its plans. Of this amount, \$4-5 million is being spent at USNPS sites. The remainder will be used as seed money for a wide variety of projects. The federal funds must be matched by state and local government and private funds. It is unclear whether the AIHP is a model for future funding or a one-of-a-kind undertaking.

Many heritage areas involve management by nonprofit groups. Foundation grants and corporate contributions are important sources of fi-

nance. Most funding to date, however, has been for planning. Many organizers admit they are insecure in their knowledge of private-sector finance mechanisms and in their ability to attract investment, yet long-term success depends heavily on the confidence and participation of private investors.

INTERPRETATION

Education is one of the principal goals and benefits of heritage areas. Generally, initial planning appears to have been tremendously successful in educating those directly involved in it as well as citizens who would be affected by the plan. It is a significant challenge, however, to develop and then communicate a clear rationale for creating a multifaceted heritage area. Attention needs to be paid to developing ways of assessing the success of interpretive efforts and of deciding which interpretive framework works best to achieve various goals. If interpretation is well-defined and clearly articulated, it will be far easier to get public support and cooperation. Just as important, a strong interpretive framework will also make it easier to instill private investor confidence.

It is not now possible to assess interpretive planning in heritage areas. In most, interpretation is not yet fully implemented. Much interpretation is done on a strictly private basis—by galleries and historical museums, for example. Primary interpretive goals are to identify themes, give consistent messages, and establish links that occur naturally among the cultural, natural, and recreational resources. Policies regarding signs are another important area for evaluation.

CONCLUSION

Viewed in the context of the early 1990s, the grassroots response to create heritage areas is both heartening and not surprising. Federal conservation and historic preservation programs have suffered through nearly a decade of retrenchment. The tightening wrench around the federal pipeline has only recently been loosened slightly.

Conservation and environmental causes have strong popular support. The burgeoning popularity of heritage preservation in the 1980s, fueled by the celebration of the nation's Bicentennial, has reinvigorated heritage education and activism. At the same time, the economic base in many regions has changed dramatically over the past two decades, leaving abandoned and underused buildings and structures in hundreds of communities, especially in the Northeast and Midwest.

Changes in the tourism industry make its professionals willing partners in heritage area developments. As competition within the tourism industry has increased, marketing has become more sophisticated, targeting segmented audiences with recreation, environmental, and heritage interests. In addition, recent studies have pointed to tourism as a potential economic development tool in rural areas.

Nonprofit groups, with undiminished zeal but in many cases with diminished resources, have become strong proponents of creative partnerships. Public entities have espoused such partnerships for some years as their federal pass-through resources dried up. And now the private sector, with economic downturn a fact of life in many parts of the U.S., is beginning to appreciate the

potential benefits of becoming partners in heritage area developments.

National policy proposals pending in the 102nd Congress could, if enacted, reinforce heritage area efforts. A new National Scenic and Historic Highways Program is proposed as part of the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1991. Actually, several proposals are pending, some of which provide for designation of scenic roads without establishing minimum criteria; others which do.

The broader policy debate about the design of the federal highway and mass transit programs is in full swing with a strong proposal from a broad coalition of conservation, environmental, and preservation groups to create a better planning process for highway corridors, thus assisting heritage area planning. A National Rural Tourism Foundation is also being proposed in the current Congress.

The 1990s are a ripe time for the development and enjoyment of heritage areas. The determination of whether these areas achieve their many goals will not be apparent for some years. Many policy issues need to be addressed now, however, to ensure that heritage areas reach their full potential and to allow for evaluation of failures and successes.



A version of this paper was originally presented at the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Midwest regional conference on Cultural and Linear Corridors, Toledo, Ohio, April 1991.

