

Roots for the National Heritage Area Family Tree

W elcome to Independence National Historical Park, a property of the National Park Service (NPS). The reality behind the brown sign and the arrowhead is more complicated than meets the eye. The city of Philadelphia owns Independence Hall and until recently, when the bonds were finally paid off, the commonwealth of Pennsylvania owned the adjacent mall. From the time the national park idea migrated back East, the agency has had to work in partnership in a more and more complex and peopled environment. Unfortunately, in many cases these partnership arrangements had more the air of an arranged marriage and not that of a more perfect union. Shared ownership and authority over resources was seen as a problem to overcome, not as an opportunity for expanding the scope of conservation.

Today this attitude is changing and NPS recognizes the value in a partnership approach to resource management. But even with this shift, communities across the country and their congressional delegations are asking for more partnership initiatives. They are pushing NPS to become part of the mix in recognizing and preserving special places where people live and work, looking at larger and larger landscapes and providing their expertise and imprimatur to conservation efforts where the people that live there set the agenda. These large landscapes are, of course, the national heritage areas or corridors of which 23 have been designated to date, incorporating almost 45 million people in over 150,000 square miles. With proposals for a dozen new areas before Congress, it is an appropriate time to begin the search for the roots of the heritage area idea.¹ By understanding the context of landscape conservation in the past,

these newer collaborative approaches can be better integrated into the National Park System.

The definition of a national park has always been a dynamic process with the agency expanding its scope from natural wonders to historic landmarks, and then to places offering outstanding recreational opportunities. The expanding definition of the agency's mission and the need to offer park experiences closer to population centers has brought the National Park Service into more complex relationships with certain landscapes. In 1961, Cape Cod National Seashore was authorized with the recognition that ownership of the 43,500 acres within the defined park boundary would always be a mix of federal, state, municipal and private landowners.² The 40-mile strip of Atlantic beaches, dunes, and wetlands included parts of six cape communities and hundreds of owner-occupied buildings. The

authorizing legislation contained a number of innovations to mesh the new park presence with the existing conditions. Under what became known as the “Cape Cod formula,” NPS was prohibited from condemning private improved property if the local governments adopted zoning ordinances that were consistent with the park’s purpose. This had the effect of not just appeasing local property owners concerned about forced resettlement, but preserving the living landscape of fishing villages and summer cottages.³ Another innovation in the Cape Cod legislation was the establishment of a park advisory commission representing the six units of local government, the county, the commonwealth of Massachusetts, and a representative of the secretary of the interior. This gave the local community an ongoing forum for issues that arise in any area where there are multiple owners with varying interests.⁴

Cape Cod National Seashore was not the only new unit that challenged the National Park Service to manage more and more complex landscapes. In the 1960s and 1970s, Cuyahoga National Recreation Area (now National Park) in Ohio, Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area in Pennsylvania, Gateway National Recreation Area in New York and New Jersey, and Golden Gate National Recreation Area in California, to name just a few, were added to the system. All included large land areas with non-federal owners and different visions of how the areas should be managed for the future. But it was the question of how to manage the Santa Monica Mountains as a part of the

National Park System—and how to pay for it with public dollars—that introduced some new thinking on roles and responsibilities.

The Santa Monica Mountains consist of almost 200,000 acres of mountain peaks, valleys, and Pacific coastline adjacent to the heavily urbanized Los Angeles Basin. In the early 1970s, citizens concerned that rapidly spreading residential development would destroy the area’s natural values sought both state and federal assistance. At the request of the secretary of the interior, the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation studied the region and concluded that its designation as a national recreation area was not justified based on considerations of cost and carrying capacity. Furthermore, the bureau thought that designation might stifle local and state land preservation initiatives.⁵

Not satisfied with this response, Senator J. Bennett Johnston, chairman of the Subcommittee on Parks and Recreation, reflected that while the National Park Service might have been too successful in bringing parks to “where the people are,” this was not the time to do nothing. He suggested that the escalating cost of land in urban locations, rising administrative costs, and an uncertain economy called for a different approach. To this end he requested assistance from the Congressional Research Service. The innovative answer, authored by Charles Little, was to establish a new kind of park, a “greenline park.”⁶ The concept was modeled after national park practice in England and Wales where land acquisition is kept to a minimum and land is protected by

land development controls. The report defined these new parks as “a resource area containing a mix of public and private land which is comprehensively planned, and regulated by an independent State agency set up specifically to preserve its recreational, aesthetic, ecological, historic and cultural values.”⁷

The report offered a new approach, a compromise by which the Santa Monica Mountains could be saved by setting a boundary that includes both public and private lands, by authorizing federal funding in a defined amount, and by requiring the state of California to prepare a comprehensive plan for land conser-

vation which, if approved by the secretary of the interior, would secure the federal funding for implementation. The new idea was that “a mix” of private and public lands would be planned and controlled in a way that would optimize preservation, not of a series of recreational sites and projects, but of the whole landscape.⁸ This concept is new in that it proposes a strategy for planning, managing, and funding a park unit through partnerships, but not new in that it preserves state governments’ pre-eminence in land use and the federal interest in protecting large, significant recreational landscapes (Figure 1).

In 1978, the new Heritage Conser-



Figure 1. Canoes heading to Philadelphia, Schuylkill River Valley National Heritage Area. Photo provided by National Park Service.

vation and Recreation Service in the Department of Interior expanded on the greenline parks concept with a proposal for a system of national reserves, later called “areas of national concern.”⁹ The development of a reserve concept was in part motivated by a series of legislative proposals that were based on community desire to conserve special places (usually large landscapes) and the agency’s concern that, if approached with the usual buy-and-hold strategy, these proposals would be prohibitively expensive. Under the reserve concept, a process was delineated whereby residents at the local or regional level would initiate a proposal for protection as a potential national reserve or area of special concern. If found appropriate, they would receive assistance in preparing a management plan that would identify a spectrum of supporting and funding partners. If approved by the secretary, Congress would allocate limited funds for implementation.¹⁰

The proposed system of national reserves was to emphasize planning and commitment from many partners, including asking local and state government to tackle land use control and management in lieu of federal land acquisition. The reserves would remain a living landscape, a place for people to reside and carry out compatible economic development. Some of the benefits of the strategy to the Department of Interior would be its cost-effectiveness and proactive nature, its capacity to aid local governments, the additional protection it would afford around existing national parks, and its role in preventing the

dilution of the existing National Park System.¹¹ Finally, the report evaluated a series of high-priority legislative proposals that were before Congress for their potential to be managed under this new approach and analyzed the possible outcomes based on protection, coordination, and cost.¹²

Since four of these park proposals are often referred to as precursors of the heritage area and corridor proposals, it is useful to look at how Congress actually crafted the planning, management and funding for each. Note that all were enacted as part of the Omnibus Park and Recreation Act of 1978.

Pinelands National Reserve (1,000,000 acres; all nonfederal). This was the only proposal that legislatively followed the reserve model outlined above, and to date it is the only example of a reserve as envisioned in the original report. The authorizing legislation for the Pinelands National Reserve stated that the governor of New Jersey would establish a planning entity with representatives of local government, agriculture, and conservation interests, as well as a designee of the secretary of the interior. This body, known as the Pinelands Commission, was responsible for both assessing the environmental, cultural, and recreational resources of the region and preparing a strategy that includes regulatory, educational, and economic tools. It was to do so with maximum public involvement. In addition, grant funding of up to \$23 million was made available for selective land acquisition.¹³

Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (153,700 acres;

21,000 federal). The Santa Monica legislation was a compromise, but not the one suggested in the *Greenline Park* report or in the proposal for a national reserve. The role that the land use authority of the state of California and its local governments could play in protecting the area's resources is recognized, but they were not authorized to step into that role either in return for substantial federal funding or, as in Cape Cod, as a bar to federal condemnation in exchange for appropriate zoning. The approach is more about coordination.¹⁴ As in other parks with multiple stakeholders, the Santa Monica Mountains Advisory Commission was established as a forum for state, county, and local government partners. The amount of funding provided for land acquisition, while limited, far exceeded the \$50 million discussed in the *Greenline Park* report and is subject to annual appropriations, not a fixed allocation.

Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve (20,000 acres; 10,600 federal). The land assembly authority for this unit was very complex, including the 20,000-acre Barataria Marsh, an interpretive location in New Orleans to be selected later, the already-existing Chalmette National Historical Park, and other sites in the delta regions subject to the development of cooperative agreements. Guidelines to preserve environmental values were to be enacted by local governments who could cede their enforcement authority to the secretary of the interior. If they failed to act, the land could be acquired to protect those values. In deference to local culture, the legislation permitted hunt-

ing, fishing, and trapping in the Barataria Marsh. Again an advisory commission was established, representing state and local government, representatives of commercial fishing interests, conservation groups, and a representative from the National Endowment for the Arts. The funding was authorized at an amount not to exceed \$50 million from the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Lowell National Historical Park (137 acres; 28 federal). The legislation establishing a National Park Service presence in the city of Lowell, Massachusetts, included both a park unit, Lowell National Historical Park, and the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, with jurisdiction over a larger 583-acre historic district. The 15-member commission included representatives of local government, state government, and federal agencies. Unlike other commissions from this period, it had authority to undertake direct development projects, offer grant and loan assistance, and review other development projects in the historic district. The funding for the park was authorized at \$18.5 million and for the commission's programs at \$21.5 million.¹⁵ The legislation also set an annual funding limit for the commission based on the aggregate of state, local, and private dollars expended for related purposes in the prior year.

From these four examples some of the key new concepts in park creation can be traced. These ideas include:

- Establishing a boundary based more on the definition of the resource than on the government's ability to acquire the land in ques-

tion;

- Harnessing the power of local land use authorities to preserve resources;
- Embracing other agencies' parks and less-than-fee-simple ownership to preserve resources within the boundaries without federal acquisition;
- Involving the local community and other interest groups through advisory commissions; and
- Limiting funding by setting fixed dollar limits, matching requirements, or both.

Many of these principles are seen in the newest wave of greenline parks, now called partnership parks: Keweenaw National Historical Park (authorized in 1992; 1,870 acres, all nonfederal); Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area (1996; 5 acres federal, 1,477 nonfederal); New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park (1996; 20 acres, all nonfederal); and Rosie the Riveter / World War II Home Front National Historical Park (2000; no fixed boundaries at this time).

Changes in administration and economic climate slowed park creation after 1978 and the National Park Service's next major "alternative" land conservation initiative was one of the most innovative. Citizens up and down the corridor of the Illinois and Michigan Canal sought to involve the agency in the preservation of this nationally important resource. The canal was owned by the state of Illinois, but its length (75 miles) and the deteriorated condition of the infrastructure was a management challenge. To remedy this situation, a

coalition lobbied congress for a new national park unit to bring dollars and recognition to the canal and to the many adjacent historic communities. NPS's response in 1981 was to propose a new approach: a concept plan for stabilizing the canal, developing a recreational trail, interpreting the cultural and natural resources, and revitalizing the adjacent communities under the leadership of a commission composed primarily of citizens living in the corridor.¹⁶ Congress acted on this proposal, establishing the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor in 1984.

The above discussion attempts to trace both the ideas and actions taken to wrap the National Park Service's mission around large living landscapes (Figure 2). Where do national heritage areas fit into this evolutionary model? Are they the logical extension of greenline parks, national reserves, and partnership parks, applied to even larger and more complex landscapes that incorporate whole human ecosystems? The answer seems to be "yes" with one more evolutionary turn. In national heritage areas, the mission of the National Park Service is placed in the hands of the people who live there. This is not a subtle shift—this is a revolution.

What had been commissions made up of local interests with an advisory role to an adjacent national park unit have been transmuted into operating commissions of local citizens and stakeholders with full management responsibility for the designated area. In more recently designated national heritage areas, the commissions themselves have been replaced by more



Figure 2. The valley in autumn, John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. Photo provided by National Park Service.

flexible nonprofit management entities. This shift in governance is reflected in the planning and development of the heritage areas. The management plan is an undertaking of the management entity from scoping through identification of alternatives. The federal role is only to provide technical assistance and final approval of the document. Finally, and most importantly, the local entity is responsible for funding and implementation of the plan. NPS provides only limited dollars, and those allocations must be matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis.¹⁷

Another shift in direction is the role that the heritage areas play in land conservation. While earlier greenline parks and reserve models envisioned state and local governments doing the heavy lifting with land use regulations and mandated resource protection, this has not been the path that heritage areas have traveled. In part this is based on a political climate that eschews any regulation of private property. The statement in the 1973 study of the Santa Monica Mountains that "President Nixon has given national land use legislation the highest priority ... and chances of passage are good" was from another time.¹⁸ But in addition to federal land use controls being politically out of favor, heritage areas prefer a cooperative approach to preserving resources. They focus on strong heritage educa-

tion programs to build a stewardship ethic rather than relying on regulation.

A lot of energy has been released in adopting this new way of conserving our nation's landscapes and the number of new congressional proposals demonstrates the high level of community support. However, somewhere along the line the national heritage area idea has become disconnected from its historical antecedents as the logical outcome of an expansive and inclusive approach to conserving the living landscape. The 23 national heritage areas are the not-so-distant relatives of Cape Cod National Seashore, Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, and Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and of course are close cousins of the innovations at Lowell National Historical Park and the later partnership parks of the 1990s. By not recognizing this kinship, the national heritage areas are missing the opportunity to be counted as contributing to the larger mission of the National Park Service and to benefit from association with the nation's premier conservation agency. But the bigger lost opportunity may be to the National Park Service itself, which is not engaging this expanded constituency, learning about partnerships from the ground up, and claiming the preservation of many of the unique living landscapes that define this nation.

Endnotes

- 1 As of spring 2003, Congress has introduced four study bills and eleven designation bills for individual heritage areas.
- 2 Cape Cod National Seashore includes 16,000 acres in nonfederal ownership. National Park Service, *The National Parks: Index 2001-2003* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2001), p. 52.
- 3 The Conservation Foundation, *National Parks for a New Generation: Visions, Realities, Prospects* (Washington, D.C.: The Conservation Foundation, 1985), pp. 160-162.
- 4 The authorization for the Cape Cod Commission was extended beyond the original 10 years and was then reauthorized by legislation in 1998 (P.L. 105-280).

- 5 Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, *Santa Monica Mountains Study* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, 1973), pp. 4-7.
- 6 The term “greenline” was derived from the blue line that the state of New York drew around the Adirondack region when it created a reserve that included both public and private lands. Charles Little, *Greenline Parks: An Approach to Preserving Recreational Landscapes in Urban Areas* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 1975).
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 9 Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, *National Reserves System* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, 1978).
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
- 13 Ebey’s Landing National Historical Reserve in the state of Washington, while titled as a reserve, differs in substantial ways from the Pinelands National Reserve. Ebey’s Landing is designated as a unit of the National Park System and is managed not by a governmental agency, but by a nonprofit organization without regulatory authority.
- 14 *Parks for a New Generation*, p. 230.
- 15 In October of 1987, the park’s authorization was raised to \$19.8 million and the commission’s to \$33.6 million.
- 16 National Park Service, *Illinois and Michigan Canal Heritage Corridor: A Concept Plan and Implementation Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1981).
- 17 More recently the formula for designated areas has been \$10 million over 15 years.
- 18 *Santa Monica Mountains Study*, p. 55.

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