

## National Heritage Areas: Places on the Land, Places in the Mind

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### Introduction

HERITAGE AREAS ARE NOT A NATIONAL PARK SERVICE DESIGNATION. The development of a heritage area initiative is a locally driven strategy by which a region identifies its common values and its heritage. This strategy is distinguished by its collaborative nature, working across boundaries both political and disciplinary, to create a common vision for a region based on its shared heritage. It gives residents of a region a sense that they can determine the future, and that it will be a more valuable future if it builds on the past and includes the landmarks and stories that gives the place a sense of continuity. Heritage areas may encompass watersheds, regional landscapes with a distinctive culture, and political subdivisions, but whatever the underlying heritage values, they are first understood and mapped in the minds of the people who live there.

Over time, funding, support, and recognition for these special regions have been sought from the national, state, and local level. The National Park Service (NPS) assists a collection of twenty-seven<sup>1</sup> congressionally designated national heritage areas (along with many other areas that have sought NPS aid). While these twenty-seven areas do not represent the full range of possible heritage initiatives, they offer a good starting point to examine the demographic and geographic factors that have served as the cradles of heritage area development.

### Water and waterways

The earliest NPS designations—Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor, John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (Figure 1), and Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor—start-

ed with a working waterway as an organizing principle. The National Park Service, with its conservation mission, its historic preservation program, and the more recent community-based Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program, was a natural partner.<sup>2</sup> These corridors all contain the remains of historic canals and other waterpower systems from an earlier age. These regional resources had already attracted the interest and support of the adjacent communities and affinity groups. Watercourses are also the centerpieces of many of the more recent national heritage areas; for example, Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area, Schuylkill River Valley National Heritage Area (Figure 2), and Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area on the Arizona–California border that features the Colorado River with a story of transportation and irrigation (Figure 3).

River corridors and canals often flow

across jurisdictions and require intergovernmental cooperation. Waterways are powerful attractions as they offer recreational amenities for walking, boating, and contemplation. Through heritage areas, communities are rediscovering waterways in their backyards and turning them from polluted backwaters into focal points for fun and learning.

### **Relict lifeways**

Not every heritage area has a watercourse, but all are working landscapes and

almost all are communities that are under stress. They are places that are losing or have lost their traditional economic base and are facing a loss of population, particularly young people. Many areas have the historic infrastructure of extinct or dying industries or long-outmoded transportation systems, and some still bear the scars of resource extraction. Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley National Corridor has a wealth of textile mills, most still magnificent and most still underutilized. Essex National Heritage Area interprets the long-past age

of sail and the troubled fishing industry of this part of the New England Coast. Several areas are not just working landscapes, but worked-out landscapes, like those areas that tell the heritage of anthracite coal mining in the Lackawanna Valley in Pennsylvania and bituminous coal mining in the southern part of West Virginia. Rivers of Steel focuses on the Pittsburgh steel story and hopes to preserve a few landmark furnaces of what were once miles of mills on the banks of the three rivers' navigational system. Only the Automobile National Heritage Area, represented by the "MotorCities" region in Michigan, and Silos and Smokestacks in northeastern Iowa, still have a strong economic reliance on the traditional industries of the region.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1. Mill in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, along the Blackstone River Valley.**  
*Photo courtesy of Natural Heritage Areas Office, National Park Service*

### **The power of people**

NPS has defined a national heritage area as "a place where natural, cultural, historic, and



**Figure 2.** Kayakers exploring during the Schuylkill River Sojourn, Schuylkill River National Heritage Area. *Photo courtesy of Dan Creighton*

scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make national heritage areas representative of the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that evolve in them.”<sup>24</sup> This definition is poetic and has been very useful, but it does not place enough emphasis on the key ingredient: the people that live there. Most heritage areas are driven by the commitment of local residents, many of whom have deep roots in the region. They are often people who have parents and grandparents with a stake in the traditional industries or lifeways of the region. Many areas still have a few craftsmen and women who carry on traditional trades and professions. Many communities still sponsor traditional regional celebrations

and festivals. Many residents can still read the landscape, whether to identify a coal tippie and a breaker, or to tell the difference between wheat and alfalfa. However, they are not so sure that their children will have this knowledge or be able to participate in this culture, or that the familiar landmarks that define the region will be around in the future.

Using the NPS definition, many outstanding cultural landscapes would clearly qualify for national heritage area designation. Examples could include the archetypal landscapes of New England, ranching vistas in the West, the rolling fields and prairie remnants of the Central Plains, and the lush agricultural valleys in the Northwest. But heritage areas don’t come together solely based on the significance of the landscape and its special characteristics.

Heritage areas emerge where people work together to create a strategy to tackle the issues of shifting economies, homogenization, and indifference. While heritage tourism may ultimately be an outcome, heritage areas are primarily focused on addressing the needs of the local community first. Perhaps that is why most heritage areas begin with educational programs about local history and efforts to make the landmarks and landscape accessible to the people who live there. It should be no surprise that some of the most innovative heritage education programs in the nation are found in heritage areas. In the Lackawanna Valley National Heritage Area, for example, children interview grandparents about the past and script radio shows based on these stories. Selected stories are then broadcast on a local commercial radio station.<sup>5</sup> The Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area has a

cultural conservation program that offers apprenticeships in traditional music and crafts, folklorist residencies focusing on contemporary living traditions, and a referral program for folk and traditional artists.<sup>6</sup> To reach across a large geographic area encompassing 37 counties in Iowa, Silos and Smokestacks has developed a web-based program on the region's farming heritage called "Camp Silos." Visitors learn about the agricultural heritage of the region, and can watch the birth of baby piglets, or contemplate a growing cornfield on the "corn cam."<sup>7</sup>

#### **Common questions about heritage areas**

As of early 2005, Congress has designated twenty-seven national heritage areas, placing them in the portfolio of the National Park Service. There are also over a dozen



**Figure 3.** Aerial view of the wetlands, Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area. *Photo courtesy of National Heritage Areas Office, National Park Service*

new proposals still awaiting action by Congress. Overworked NPS and congressional staffers facing yet another heritage area proposal sometimes ask: How did all these communities find out about heritage area designation? Who told them about this idea?<sup>8</sup> How did so many communities come up with the idea to establish a heritage area? And even more importantly, Why did they come up with this idea? And finally, What is the role of NPS?

Let's start with the last question first. What is the role of the NPS in the national heritage areas program? First and foremost, national heritage areas are about partnerships, and in recent years the National Park Service has increasingly recognized the value of a partnership approach to resource management. The days when national parks were scenic wonders carved out of the public estate are long past. From the time when the national park idea migrated back East, the agency worked in partnership with others in a more complex and peopled environment. Concurrently, the NPS mission expanded to include historic birthplaces, battlefields, wild and scenic rivers, places offering outstanding recreational opportunities close to the large centers of population, and partnership parks where the agency owns little or no land. These newer park models, in particular, have brought the agency into closer and closer contact with new neighbors who often have their own ideas on the appropriate goals for a park unit.<sup>9</sup>

Constituent communities demanding that NPS expand its reach to assist in the preservation of resources that the communities deem important is not new. Many of the more recent models of national parks have not come from NPS carefully expanding its "product line," but from congress-

sional action in response to community demands. So on one level the question of how did NPS get into the heritage area business is clear. Congress acted and NPS reacted. The continued interest in national heritage area designation has stimulated both congressional<sup>10</sup> and administration attention. In May 2004, NPS Director Fran Mainella assigned the National Park System Advisory Board responsibility for reviewing the National Heritage Area Program and making recommendations for the appropriate role of NPS.<sup>11</sup>

Although it is clear that NPS needs to provide a clearer definition of its role in assisting national heritage areas, this understanding does not answer the first question posed above, namely, Why have certain regions coalesced around their shared heritage, overcome conventional boundaries, and, against considerable odds, formed working partnerships? And then asked NPS to be a partner, while making it clear they are not turning the responsibility or the resource over to the federal government to manage. Unlike other groups that seek NPS assistance to "save" a significant resource or "provide" a certain natural or recreational experience, the heritage area movement only asks that NPS be a partner in an enterprise that is usually well on its way. The National Park Service's role is to offer assistance in management planning, interpretation, and resource preservation, and, of course, to provide funding.

### **Opportunities for resource conservation**

From the NPS viewpoint, national heritage areas provide real value. Heritage areas are a cost-effective way to preserve nationally important natural, cultural, historic, and recreational resources through the creation of a working partnership between federal,



state, and local groups.<sup>12</sup> Through partnerships, heritage areas are tackling the conservation of resources that NPS has not been able to address. People in heritage areas are working to preserve large-scale industrial sites such as the Carrie Furnaces in Pittsburgh, all that remain of the once-mighty Homestead Steel works, and the automobile story in the MotorCities region of Michigan.<sup>13</sup> Heritage areas also help to coordinate the efforts of many smaller groups to conserve the components that define a larger landscape. Heritage areas open doors to recreational experiences that were previously unknown or underappreciated. They bring the past alive with educational programs and festivals, and train the next generation of culture bearers. Finally, heritage areas set a stewardship vision that places history and nature in a landscape context, helping people to see both the heritage and the future in their own backyards.

#### **Opportunities for community renewal**

The reasons why certain areas travel this partnership path perhaps may be found by examining the characteristics of these areas. Of the twenty-seven national heritage areas, most are regions in transition, and change is stressful to people and to the communities in which they live. Many designated areas are places where the economic foundation of the area—whether industrial or agricultural—is collapsing. These areas are often depopulating and losing their young people, or repopulating with an influx of new people who have not shared in the heritage of the region. They are communities that are facing an uncertain future.

While more work needs to be done, preliminary analysis of the demographics of national heritage areas seems to confirm that these are areas that are undergoing

change, and not always in a positive way.<sup>14</sup> On average, national heritage areas have experienced lower population growth compared with the states they are located in and with the nation as a whole. National heritage areas have large populations of persons over 65, and all but four (two of which include the younger urban populations in Chicago and Detroit) have an elderly population higher than the national average. National heritage areas have a median household income that is, on average, \$1,530 lower than the state median and \$2,200 less than the national household income.

Since heritage areas coalesce around places of history—particularly places that were once dependent on now obsolete transportation systems, extractive industries, and redundant agricultural and manufacturing economies—the above demographic and economic conditions are not unexpected. As the demand for these outmoded systems and their products decline, and when communities are bound to place by infrastructure, transportation, and power and availability of natural resources, then the economic viability of the area may decline. Unless new opportunities arise, the young people will leave, the birth rate will drop, and the resident population will become older and older. For example, in Pennsylvania, a state once known for its dominance in manufacturing and extractive industries, the number of children under age five has been falling for a decade, and only Florida has an older population.<sup>15</sup> Pennsylvania also has the most national heritage areas (six designations) and strong state heritage regions program (twelve designations).

This correlation with regional change does not conclusively answer the question

of why these regions develop heritage initiatives as a response to the stress of economic or community dislocation. However, one theory first proposed by NPS planners working on the *Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study*<sup>16</sup> is that heritage-based initiatives may be a version of what anthropologists call a “revitalization movement.”

This concept was first described by Anthony Wallace in 1956.<sup>17</sup> He posited that under normal societal conditions the existing institutions meet the needs of the community. However, if a society is placed under stress, for example through domination by a more powerful group, or as in heritage areas by community and economic dislocation, then a revitalization movement may emerge as a response. Revitalization movements are an attempt by the community to construct a more satisfactory cultural environment, often drawing on what is seen as valuable about the past. They propose to revive portions of traditional culture and combine them with new elements to meet the future. While Wallace noted that many revitalization movements are based on religious principles, he also notes that secular revitalization movements seem to be more common in the worldlier twentieth century. He also states that the success of such initiatives depends upon their relative “realism” and the amount of consensus or opposition they encounter.

Now it may be a bit extreme to com-

pare the flourishing heritage area movement across the country to such phenomena as the revival of Ghost Dances of the Plains Indians or the rituals of the Unification Church. People in heritage areas drive late-model cars, go to ball games, and shop in strip malls. In fact, they are very much like us and, in some cases, they are us. Yet how do we explain the emergence of heritage areas as an idea or “phenomenon,” and how so many communities seem to have simultaneously discovered the concept and invented its core principles of partnership and planning around the values of shared heritage. Perhaps it is enough for now to accept it as an outward manifestation of a renewal of the spirit of place with goals of educating the next generation, enlightening visitors, and strengthening the physical and social fabric of the region. However, as the number of areas proposed for designation multiply, the National Park Service and the National Heritage Areas Program are challenged to demonstrate the value of the federal government’s investment and to better define what constitutes success. The upcoming report by the National Park System Advisory Board on the *Future of the National Heritage Areas in the National Park System* may help define how the program fits into the nation’s larger conservation mission, and perhaps will redefine how NPS interacts with the communities that make so many of those conservation stewardship decisions on the ground.

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## Endnotes

1. A list of the twenty-seven National Heritage Areas can be found on the National Park Service website at [www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas](http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas) (retrieved January 5, 2005).

2. The National Historic Preservation Act was passed in 1966, the National Scenic Trails Act in 1968, and the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program was developed in the early 1980s; all expanded the work of NPS outside of the boundaries of national park units.
3. For more information on the twenty-seven National Heritage Areas, their historical themes and resources, see [www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas](http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas).
4. This definition was articulated by Denis P. Galvin, former deputy director of NPS, in testimony before the House Resources Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands on October 26, 1999. This definition and other suggested criteria for national heritage areas can be found at [www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas/) (retrieved February 26, 2004).
5. Information on the educational programs developed by the Lackawanna Valley National Heritage Area is available at [www.lhva.org/MENUeducation.htm](http://www.lhva.org/MENUeducation.htm) (retrieved February 26, 2004).
6. Information on the programs of the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area is available at [www.riversofsteel.com/culturalconservation.asp](http://www.riversofsteel.com/culturalconservation.asp) (retrieved February 26, 2004).
7. Information on the programs of Silos and Smokestacks is available at [www.silosandsmokestacks.org/3fun/index.html](http://www.silosandsmokestacks.org/3fun/index.html) (retrieved February 26, 2004). “Corn cam” refers to a remote camera located in an agricultural field that provides video footage of harvest activities to an interpretive site.
8. By the second session of the 108th Congress, members had introduced designation bills for sixteen new areas and study bills for nine new areas.
9. A discussion of the historical development of the heritage areas idea and the variety of units in the NPS is provided in Brenda Barrett, “Roots for the heritage area family tree,” *The George Wright Forum* 20(2): 41–49 (2003); also see *Branching Out: Approaches in National Park Service Stewardship* (Fort Washington, Pa.: Eastern National, 2003).
10. During the 108th Congress, Senator Craig Thomas, Chair of the Subcommittee on National Parks, convened two oversight hearings on national heritage areas, held a two-day legislative workshop, and ordered the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to review specific program issues. The GAO report, titled *The National Park Service: A More Systematic Process for Establishing National Heritage Areas and Actions to Improve their Accountability is Needed* (GAO-04-593T), is available at [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov) (retrieved January 2, 2005).
11. The chair of the National Park System Advisory Board, Doug Wheeler, asked board member Jerry Hruby to undertake a review of the National Heritage Area Program as part of the work of the Board’s Partnership Committee. A series of meetings have been convened and recommendations will be presented to the Advisory Board at its spring/summer meeting in 2005.
12. A March 2003 survey by the National Park Service estimated that the national heritage areas leverage eight dollars to every dollar allocated by NPS.
13. Constance C. Bodurow, “A vehicle for conserving and interpreting our recent industrial heritage,” *The George Wright Forum* 20(2): 68–88 (2003).
14. The information in the following section is based on an unpublished analysis of 1990



and 2000 census data by Suzanne Copping; see [www.census.gov/population/cen2000/](http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/) for regional population statistics.

15. Brookings Institution Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, *Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2003).
16. National Park Service, *Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study*, Public Review Draft (Atlanta: NPS Southeast Region, 2003).
17. Anthony Wallace, "Revitalization movements," *American Anthropologist*, 58(2): 264–281 (1956).

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