National Heritage Areas: Learning from 30 Years of Working to Scale

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Now more than ever, the time is right to assess the effectiveness of existing landscape-scale conservation efforts. Issues such as climate change, habitat resilience, energy development and urban sprawl transcend political and disciplinary boundaries. They demand a regional, if not multi-regional, strategy to ensure effective nature conservation. In addition, the definition of what makes up a cultural landscape has also expanded in recent decades to include not just single buildings or neighborhoods, but entire zones of activity and settlement. While exciting, these large landscape approaches have complicated traditional planning and resource protection strategies, necessitating the development of an entirely new skill set.

To add to these difficulties, the finances of both public agencies and nonprofit organizations continue to be stretched thin by ongoing budget cuts and the lingering effects of the Great Recession. Once seen as a creative add-on or novelty, partnerships have now become an essential element of protected area management, serving as a cost-saving mechanism to remedy the decline in resources and as a means to build relationships and trust among diverse groups of stakeholders. Government bodies and private entities are incorporating shared governance into many of their core strategic documents, with the National Park Service (NPS), for example, highlighting the "Scaling Up" initiative, an effort aimed at working collaboratively beyond park boundaries, in its most recent plan, the *Call to Action* (NPS 2011).

Given contemporary conservation challenges, it is not at all surprising that so many practitioners have been drawn to the promise of large landscapes. Yet, can the reality of "going big" match the hopeful rhetoric? Have regional and multi-regional aspirations ever translated into recognizable and measurable achievements? One place to look for an answer is the National Heritage Areas (NHA) Program. This unique initiative, which dates to 1984, offers

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more than three decades of on-the-ground experience in working with multiple partners at a landscape scale. NHAs also have the added benefit of being extensively studied and evaluated, so much so that a rich dataset, capable of revealing the benefits and the challenges of working cooperatively at scale, now exists to be mined by others hoping to initiate or improve large landscape projects.

NHAs in action

The 1980s marked another period of transition not only for conservation policy, but also government action more generally. When Ronald Reagan famously declared that "… government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem," in his first inaugural address, he set the tone for a decade characterized by reductions in discretionary funding and regulatory action. The appointment of James G. Watt, former president and chief legal officer of the Mountain States Legal Foundation, as secretary of the interior sent a strong signal to supporters of NPS and other public lands agencies that the long post-World War II era of expansion, which had witnessed the creation of more than a hundred new park units as well as the passage of the Wilderness Act and the creation of the Land and Water Conservation Fund, had finally come to an end. Retrenchment and austerity would instead become the order of the day, with officials in Washington actively considering how to dispose of—rather than how to add to—the government's portfolio of parks, forests and rangelands.

However, despite the strident tone in the nation's capital, many local communities still expressed a strong desire to secure investment and economic development through the designation of national park units. In the face of opposition from Interior leadership, NPS, along with savvy local partners, fashioned a new and innovative approach to protected area management—one built on lessons learned from national recreation areas, national trails, urban historic districts, greenways, state-level programs in New York and Massachusetts, and even European park planning (Barrett 2003; Eugster 2003a). Though widely divergent in scope and focus, these efforts all emphasized partnerships and included lands managed by multiple owners and zones of highly developed, even industrial uses—characteristics that would come to define the nascent National Heritage Areas Program as well.

In 1984, President Reagan signed legislation creating the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor (IMCNHC), the first national heritage area (Figure 1). At nearly 100 miles long and roughly 6 miles wide, the corridor stretched from Chicago to the Illinois River in LaSalle–Peru. It included rural, urban, industrial, and de-industrialized zones and passed through more than 1,000 units of local government. Right from the start, the IMCNHC displayed both the scale and the multi-jurisdictional approach that would characterize later heritage area designations. In contrast to traditional national park units, the corridor's authorizing legislation limited the financial commitment of the federal government to a set amount of support. Additionally, the legislation required that the federal share of projects and activities be matched with other sources. Most significantly, however, the landscape would not be controlled by NPS in a top-down manner. Instead, a federal commission, representative of multiple viewpoints—local, regional, and national—would be the entity initially given the task of corridor management.[1]

Figure 1. President Ronald Reagan signs legislation creating the Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor in 1984.

Today, there are 49 NHAs stretching from Florida to Alaska (Figure 2). Each one is authorized by Congress and, though placed in the portfolio of NPS, operates with a great degree of autonomy. Demand for new designations remains strong, with several bills currently under consideration and dozens more in various stages of development. Although to date there is no legislation authorizing the program, the majority of NHAs show a great degree of similarity in their basic legislative elements. For example, most enabling acts contain a clear statement of the national significance or importance of the cultural, historical, and natural values of the region. And further, the legislation also states that the purpose of designation is to preserve, promote, and interpret natural and cultural resources and, in some cases, make them available for the economic benefit of the included communities. Finally, almost all include a management plan requirement. The secretary of the interior must ultimately approve this keystone document, which lays out the goals and objectives of the NHA and its stakeholders.

NHAs are not typical federal protected areas staffed and funded by the assigned federal agency. The individual NHAs are managed by nonprofits, state and local governments, universities, or federal commissions and operate with a high degree of local control. The direct funding commitment for both program administration and project work is limited and NHAs seek support from other funding sources and partnership arrangements. NHAs encompass a range of resources from urban areas such as Wheeling, West Virginia, and Baltimore, Maryland, to vast rural landscapes in northeastern Iowa or northern New Mexico. Unlike many

Figure 2. There are currently 49 national heritage areas (light grey) stretching from Florida to Alaska.

NPS units and landmark designations that have been criticized for not reflecting the diversity of the nation, NHAs tell stories related to slavery and race, indigenous peoples, and labor and working-class history. While much more work remains to be done in this regard, NHAs have nonetheless begun the process of exploring difficult, yet absolutely vital, aspects of America's past and present.

Deconstructing the NHA model: Does it deliver?

NHAs are lived-in landscapes. Designated areas receive federal support and recognition, but there is no regulatory authority connected to gaining NHA status. This model, so different from other national designations, has caused some to fear that the program will enlarge the scope and scale of government involvement and others to dismiss the idea as re-directing scarce federal dollars from sites in the ownership and control of a public agency. Such debates, though frustrating to practitioners, have nonetheless generated a silver lining of sorts: the development of an impressive number of studies and evaluations of the NHA model. Reports by NPS, professional evaluation consultants, and academic researchers have reviewed the efficacy of NHA management planning, governance structure, and public engagement strategies. This work has helped identify many of the essential elements for large landscape collaboration and, even more importantly, evaluated the outcomes of such ventures over time.

The National Park Service's Conservation Study Institute (now the Stewardship Institute) undertook the first systematic reviews of heritage areas, closely examining three efforts between 2004 and 2008. These included the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (Tuxill et al. 2005), the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor (Copping et al.

2006), and the Cane River National Heritage Area (Tuxill et al. 2008). These studies looked at the NHAs' investments and accomplishments over time to determine progress towards their stated goals. They also made recommendations on future sustainability. Daniel Laven and others went on to use the data from these three evaluations to build a dynamic model of the NHAs that is tied to network theory. The model posited how NHAs activate networks of partners from national, state, and local sectors. This work explored the connection between network structures and the effectiveness of heritage areas and concluded that NHAs could be seen as "venues for partnership" providing resilience in the face of dynamic changes to the surrounding landscapes (Laven et al. 2010).

In 2008, Congress mandated that nine more NHAs undergo evaluation as a condition for renewal of federal funding (Public Law 110-229, US Statutes at Large, May 8, 2008). NPS hired outside consultants to complete the examinations, with an eye towards the development of a standardized approach. This was important as it allowed for the comparison of the data from all 12 NHAs. The similarity of the legislative language establishing each NHA and the use of common NPS management planning guidelines also made the information collected easier to compare across areas. In this way, it was possible to track the NHAs' accomplishments, governance, financial investments, and sustainability. NPS is continuing to use this evaluation model to assess the accomplishments of other NHAs (NPS, n.d.).

What were the overall findings of these evaluations? As a starting point, it should be noted that the reviews of the 12 NHAs were overwhelmingly positive. The evaluations documented that all but one of the NHAs addressed each of the goals identified in the area's legislation and approved management plan. The highest-priority work for all 12 of the NHAs was cultural and natural resource conservation, with approximately a third of the areas' programmatic dollars invested in the restoration of watersheds and river corridors, the preservation of landmark properties, and the documentation of cultural practice and folk traditions. For example, the Rivers of Steel NHA has protected the landmark Carrie Furnaces (Figure 3) and the adjacent Hot Metal Bridge, and restored two other sites of labor history, the Bost Building and the Pump House. In addition, the Homestead Historic District and Carrie Furnaces site are both undergoing a multi-million-dollar restoration for a mixed-use industrial and commercial development using state and federal funds (Myers et al. 2012).

Education and interpretation of both the natural and built environments, including the cultural traditions of residents, proved to be the second-highest funding priority for all 12 areas. For example, the Essex NHA connected its region together with permanent signage and visitor centers. Special events and educational programming, in turn, shared the benefits of these investments. Silos and Smokestacks NHA, which covers a large swath of northeastern Iowa, successfully linked a large geographic area through the creation of its award-winning Camp Silos initiative, which provides online interpretive farm experiences to over 500,000 visitors (Helba et al. 2011: 44).

While resource conservation, education, and recreational development were identified as important in all areas, every NHA tailored its work to meet the needs highlighted in its own management plan. Areas in which community and economic development were identified as part of the mission have made promotional efforts a priority. Working in close partnership

Figure 3. Carrie Furnaces 6 and 7 are rare examples of pre-World War II iron-making technology. Located along the Monongahela River in southwestern Pennsylvania, the furnaces were once part of the giant Homestead Steel Works facility, one of the largest mills in the world for much of its history. Photo © 2015 Adam Piscitelli, used by permission.

with tourism providers, South Carolina NHA developed four regional visitor centers and promoted NHA assets like the Agriculture Tourism Trail (Helba et al. 2012:10).

The evaluations of the NHAs concluded that locally led management entities delivered. The NHAs developed effective board governance structures, retained capable and experienced leadership and staff, and utilized responsible fiscal management systems. The evaluations also documented the use of adaptive management strategies that reflected changing public needs. The reports singled out Hudson River Valley (Henderson et al. 2012: 5–76), Rivers of Steel (Myers et al. 2012: 5–99), and Silos and Smokestacks (Helba et al. 2011: 67) NHAs for their adaptive approaches to changing conditions.

The evaluations demonstrated that NHAs implemented their legislative mandate and management plans through a network of partnerships, and did so with a high level of continued citizen involvement over time. The strength of these networks is well documented. Most manage by developing an extensive web of partnerships. For example, Silos and Smokestacks NHA has 108 formal partners in 37 counties (Helba et al. 2011: 672-63) and South Carolina NHA has 175 community partners (Helba et al. 2012:2-35).

Finally, the findings on NHA financial management were also positive. The reports noted that appropriated federal funding was prudently allocated to carry out the areas' goals. The NHAs met and, in most cases, exceeded the 50% required match for NPS funding. In

addition, the NHAs had a track record of leveraging program funding with other federal, state, local, and private sources to implement resource conservation, recreation, and educational projects at a ratio of up to 4 to 1 (Alliance of National Heritage Areas 2013).

Despite a record of accomplishments, the NHAs struggle for recognition and funding (Barrett 2015). The outside evaluations of NHAs commissioned by NPS found evidence that NPS support is necessary for the long-term sustainability of the program (Alliance of National Heritage Areas 2013). These are challenges that seem to face many large landscape approaches where partnerships require sharing budgetary authority and outcomes are more difficult to directly measure and justify. A recent National Academy of Sciences report on the Department of the Interior's Landscape Conservation Cooperatives documented similar issues (National Academy of Sciences 2015; see pp. 156–157, this issue). The body of research now available on NHAs, an outlier program in the National Park Service, may provide important lessons for the emerging landscape-scale approach.

Lessons from NHAs

Evaluation of programs that work on a landscape scale is a complex undertaking. It is difficult to identify and then measure outcomes from what are often small inputs over a large geographic region over long periods of time. Collected over several decades, the NHA evaluations provide one of the few datasets available to demonstrate the viability of landscape-scale management. The literature on landscape-scale conservation is only in the early stages of development. Matthew McKinney and Shawn Johnson outlined some of the guiding principles to regional collaboration (2009). This was followed by a publication that proposed a series of strategic recommendations to improve the policy and practice on regional collaborations and landscape-scale conservation (McKinney et al. 2010). In a 2015 publication, Charles Curtin has written on the theory and practice for conserving large landscape systems based on a number of nongovernmental examples that build such conservation from a grassroots base.

Herein lies an opportunity, as the evaluative research on NHAs can be used to ground some of the significant components identified in the landscape-scale conservation literature. In addition, NHAs also demonstrate that this approach can be successful when applied on a variety of scales and in different geographic regions. The following broadly transferable components of large landscape work may be useful as a starting point to build a community of practice.

Adopt a common narrative. Setting boundaries around a large landscape and then engaging the residents and partners in supporting common goals is challenging. Creating a shared regional identity seems to be a key factor for success. Curtin notes the significance of being rooted in a place and the importance of communicating knowledge of place through storytelling (Curtin 2015:10). The NHA approach is built around the idea that a shared narrative is the centerpiece of a community engagement strategy that can bring diverse landholders and stakeholders together to fashion a common vision (Thompson 2016). This can include both the desired future for a region as well as recognition of a region's shared problems (McKinney 2009). In NHAs, the founding legislation identifies the significant historic and natural values and requires that a management plan set agreed-upon goals for the region.

As a resident interviewed for the evaluation of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor stated:

> Heritage defines the region and that is instrumental to our goals. If there is no regional entity, no regional glue, then we are something totally different. The regional goal is bringing us together as a network. That's why our mission is about developing the network and community stewards. And it all goes back to what defines the Blackstone Valley: the national heritage and the natural resources (Tuxill et al. 2005:41).

Develop strategic partnerships. There is general agreement that networked, multidisciplinary partnerships are an essential component of large landscape work (McKinney 2010; Curtin 2015; Tabor 2015). From the beginning, NHAs were built on just such an approach. Their management entities include federal, state, and local officials as well as interested citizens and organizations that could contribute special expertise, such as historic preservation, recreational development, or tourism. It was the NHA's ability to activate a range of sectors that was a significant factor in their regional effectiveness (Laven 2010 et al.).

Finally, the development of strategic partnerships allows the landscape approach to tap into community support and multiple funding streams, which adds resilience to these systems. This is particularly important in times of limited fiscal resources and governmental uncertainty. More partners with a stake in the outcome can provide a foundation of effective project funding and implementation (Alliance of National Heritage Areas 2013).

Use the power of convening. The power to convene partners to work at a large scale cannot be overstated. To develop partnerships or a network requires vision and the ability to think, as one skilled planner has said, "one size larger" (Eugster 2003b). A program or model that is recognized as having the authority or experience to implement this approach can help speed the collaborative process. One with some funding attached is even better. Early implementation dollars from the convening body, such as funding for operations or small grant assistance to targeted goals, helps power the development of regional collaboration. The NPS heritage area grants play an important role in sustaining implementation of the area's management plan (Barrett 2015).

Other federal agencies are stepping up to play the role of convener. The 2015 National Academy of Sciences report identified over 20 federal programs that seek to carry out their missions using a landscape-scale approach. For example, the boundaries of the Landscape Conservation Cooperatives in the Department of Interior encompass all of the United States and parts of Canada and Mexico. However, in some places, governmental programs may not be the best approach for a landscape-scale initiative. In these cases, the other component parts, such as a common narrative, listening to the impacted community, and providing some incentives, may be even more critical.

Address community needs. Closely related to the importance of identifying a common narrative and developing strategic partnerships is tackling projects that can support a region's need for social and economic vitality. To be successful and sustainable, landscape-scale initiatives must respect and account for the desires of local people (Curtin 2015). This approach

is critical as collaborative conservation approaches are adapted to meet changing stakeholder needs as well as changing environmental and socioeconomic conditions (McKinney 2010). There are positive signs, for example in the Chesapeake Watershed, that the conservation movement is awakening to the need to include the cultural or human dimension in landscape conservation planning (Thompson 2016).

NHAs differ from most cultural and natural landscape conservation efforts by explicitly recognizing the need to benefit local communities, whether through the conservation of locally valued cultural and natural assets, meeting economic development goals, or both. This work can take a variety of forms, from retaining working landscapes to supporting the continuation of cultural practices, as well as growing the region's heritage tourism sector. NHAs that have led the way in this regard include Cane River NHA, the Gullah Geechee National Cultural Corridor, and the Northern Rio Grande NHA (Figure 4). However, like all such initiatives NHAs are challenged to deliver on the promise to help communities that seek to retain their cultural identity in a lived-in landscape.

Conclusion

Telling regional stories and working to protect threatened landscapes on a large scale is hard work. It requires constant effort and advocacy on the part of committed actors, who are ded-

Figure 4. Windmill near Galisteo, New Mexico, in the Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Area, a diverse landscape that includes indigenous homelands (eight northern New Mexico Pueblos and the Jicarilla Apache Nation) and centuries-old Hispano towns, villages, ranches, and farms. Photo courtesy of Eleanor Mahoney.

icated to maintaining a diverse network of partners and allies. The goals of history, culture, ecology, and community revitalization are often pulling in different directions. Interpreting the past, caring for long-standing traditions, and protecting sensitive environmental areas all can, and frequently do, generate controversy. The vagaries of local and national politics only add to the difficulties of large landscape work, as support, especially funding, is often unpredictable.

Yet, even with the challenges outlined above, the future of landscape collaboration has never appeared more promising. Interest in the idea is growing and the range of partners seeking to advance the work is rapidly expanding. A 2011 survey by the Regional Plan Association of New York, for example, identified over 165 projects in the northeastern United States. The recently launched Practitioners' Network for Large Landscape Conservation, an umbrella organization dedicated to improving the process of large landscape conservation by sharing information, policy, and practice, has already identified nearly 300 efforts across the country. And over 20 federal programs have identified large landscape work as part of their mission, most prominently the Department of the Interior's Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (National Academy of Sciences). There are a host of other federal and state programs in various stages of development and all are, or will be, seeking guidance in collaborative conservation.

So what are the next steps? All parties interested in large landscape work should sharpen their focus on the identification of best practices and the development of a robust evaluation model capable of capturing both qualitative and quantitative benefits. Too often, programs centered on partnerships are the first to be cut, making the ability to demonstrate their value all the more important. Additionally, practitioners must increase outreach to and inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives in a manner that is more than mere consultation. Instead, real and respectful engagement may eventually mean the handover of management or even ownership rights. The eventual form such transitions might take would likely vary according to the histories and contemporary challenges of a particular region.

Whether a large transboundary conservation project or the work of a small community land trust, NHAs can help deliver on the promise of landscape-scale partnerships. The model also offers innovative ideas for NPS to implement its "Scaling Up" initiative, blending both cultural resource management and nature conservation. Finally, NHAs provide lessons in how to adapt to the head winds of demographic and economic change. Their work can aid governmental agencies, nonprofits, and community leaders in finding a voice capable of speaking to constituents, partners, and elected officials about the need to scale up in order meet the needs not only of today, but also of the next 100 years.

Perhaps the National Park System Advisory Board said it best when it concluded, "National Heritage Areas are a powerful way for the diverse people of this nation to tell their stories with authenticity and integrity" (National Park System Advisory Board 2006).

Endnote

1. In 2007, management of the IMCNHC transitioned from a federal commission to a

nonprofit organization, the Canal Corridor Association (CCA). The CCA had been a key player in the creation and development of the corridor since before its designation.

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